

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND URBAN PUBLIC SERVICE QUALITY: AN INTEGRATED ASSESSMENT OF ORGANISATIONAL AND USER PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Digital transformation has become a strategic priority for urban local governments seeking to improve the quality, accessibility and efficiency of public service delivery. While existing research has extensively examined digital government from either an organisational or a citizen perspective, relatively few studies integrate these complementary viewpoints within the same empirical framework. This article addresses this gap by analysing the relationship between digital transformation and urban public service quality through the combined perspectives of public employees and citizens in a Romanian municipality.

The study adopts a quantitative case study design based on two complementary questionnaire surveys administered in the Sector 4 of Bucharest. Rather than analysing the two datasets independently, the study compares organisational and user perceptions across common analytical dimensions, including digital maturity, urban public service quality, perceived benefits and remaining barriers associated with digital transformation.

The findings indicate that both public employees and citizens perceive digital transformation as having a positive contribution to urban public service quality, although public employees consistently report more favourable evaluations. Despite these differences, the results reveal a substantial degree of convergence between the two perspectives, suggesting that organisational improvements associated with digital transformation are increasingly reflected in citizens' experiences of municipal public services. At the same time, the analysis identifies several areas requiring further improvement, particularly regarding usability, accessibility and the continuous development of digital public services.

The study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated analytical approach that combines organisational and user perspectives to evaluate digital transformation in urban local government. The findings also provide practical insights for municipalities seeking to design citizen-centred digital transformation strategies that simultaneously improve administrative performance and service quality.

Keywords: digital transformation; urban public service quality; public administration; local government; citizen perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become one of the defining processes shaping contemporary urban governance. As cities face increasing demographic pressures, rising citizen expectations and growing demands for efficiency, transparency and sustainability, local governments are increasingly relying on

digital technologies to redesign administrative processes and improve public service delivery. Beyond the simple digitisation of administrative procedures, digital transformation involves organisational change, the redesign of public services and the development of new forms of interaction between public institutions and citizens (Lips, 2020; Cordella & Iannacci, 2010). Consequently, digital transformation is no longer viewed primarily as a technological innovation, but as a strategic instrument for improving the performance and responsiveness of urban public administration.

The Romanian context illustrates both the opportunities and the challenges of this transformation. In recent years, substantial investments supported through national reforms and European funding have accelerated the digitalisation of public administration, including the development of government cloud infrastructure, interoperability frameworks and online public services (European Commission, 2024). Nevertheless, Romania continues to lag behind the European Union average in several key indicators. According to the European Commission (2024), more than 72% of the Romanian population still lacks basic digital skills, while the digitalisation of public services remains below the EU average despite recent progress. Earlier assessments also showed that only 24% of Romanian internet users accessed e-government services, compared with the EU average of 74%, and Romania scored considerably below the European average in the availability of digital public services for both citizens and businesses (European Commission, 2023). Although more recent reports indicate gradual improvements, they also emphasise that the benefits of digital transformation have yet to be fully translated into better quality, transparency and user experience in public service delivery (European Commission, 2024; Culiță, 2024; Voinea, 2024). These developments highlight the need for empirical research examining not only the implementation of digital technologies but also their perceived contribution to improving public service quality at the local level.

The quality of urban public services has become a central dimension of this transformation. Municipalities are expected not only to provide services more efficiently, but also to ensure that digital solutions remain accessible, user-oriented and capable of responding to increasingly diverse societal needs. Previous research has shown that digital technologies can reduce administrative burdens, shorten service delivery times, improve access to public information and strengthen transparency and accountability within public organisations (West, 2004; Janssen & Estevez, 2013; Fischer et al., 2021; Androniceanu et. al., 2022, Mina-Raiu & Melenciuc, 2022). At the same time, the benefits of digitalisation depend not only on technological infrastructure, but also on organisational capacity, employees' digital competencies and citizens' willingness and ability to use digital public services.

Despite the rapid expansion of research on digital government, important gaps remain in understanding how digital transformation influences the quality of urban public services. Existing studies have

predominantly examined this relationship from a single perspective. Some have focused on organisational change, administrative performance and employees' adoption of digital technologies, while others have investigated citizens' satisfaction, service accessibility or trust in digital public services. Comparatively fewer studies have analysed these two perspectives simultaneously within the same local government, although organisational improvements and citizen experience represent complementary dimensions of public service quality. Evaluating only one of these perspectives provides an incomplete understanding of the outcomes of digital transformation.

This limitation is particularly relevant in the context of urban local governments, where digital transformation directly affects both internal administrative processes and citizens' daily interactions with public institutions. Improvements in organisational efficiency do not necessarily translate automatically into better user experiences, while positive citizen perceptions may sometimes conceal organisational challenges that remain invisible to service users. A comprehensive assessment of digital transformation therefore requires integrating organisational and user perspectives rather than considering them independently.

Against this background, the present study examines the relationship between digital transformation and urban public service quality through a comparative assessment of employees' and citizens' perceptions within the same Romanian local government. The research is based on two complementary questionnaire surveys conducted in Sector 4 Bucharest, one addressed to public employees of the Sector 4 Municipality and the other to Sector 4 citizens using digital public services. Bringing together these two datasets made it possible to examine how organisational changes associated with digitalisation are reflected in citizens' experiences of urban public services.

The study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it integrates organisational and user perspectives to provide a more comprehensive assessment of digital transformation within an urban local government. Second, it offers empirical evidence from a Romanian municipality, a context that remains relatively underrepresented in the international literature on digital government. Third, it identifies practical implications for local governments seeking to balance organisational efficiency with citizen-centred service delivery when designing and implementing digital transformation strategies.

The paper is organised in six sections. The next section reviews the literature on digital transformation in urban public administration, urban public service quality and the complementary roles of organisational and user perspectives in evaluating digital reforms. The research methodology is then presented, followed by the comparative analysis of the two surveys. The final sections discuss the implications of the findings for urban public administration and outline the study's main conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Digital transformation in urban public administration*

Digital transformation in local government extends beyond the introduction of electronic documents, online forms or mobile applications. While early e-government initiatives mainly focused on providing public services through electronic channels, contemporary digital transformation involves broader organisational and institutional changes that reshape the way public organisations operate and interact with citizens (Vrabie, 2016; Lips, 2020).

It concerns the way public organisations redesign procedures, allocate responsibilities, manage information and interact with the communities they serve. This distinction is particularly important in cities, where local authorities must respond to a large and diverse population while coordinating services connected with taxation, urban planning, mobility, parking, social assistance, public information and neighbourhood management.

The literature uses several related concepts to describe technology-enabled government services, including electronic government services (Jansen et al., 2010), electronic services (Boyer et al., 2002; Kaisara & Pather, 2011), electronic public services (Karlsson et al., 2012), website channels (Ebberts et al., 2008) and digital services (Re, 2010). Lindgren and Jansson (2013) argue that these services should be understood through three interconnected dimensions: they are services because they are expected to create value for citizens and businesses; electronic because technology mediates the relationship between institutions and users; and public because they remain subject to public responsibility and should be accessible to different social groups. This last dimension is especially relevant in an urban setting, where digital systems must accommodate considerable variation in age, education, income, digital skills and frequency of interaction with public institutions.

A further distinction is required between digitisation, digitalisation and digital transformation. Digitisation refers to converting analogue information into digital form, such as scanning and electronically storing a document (Picard, 2011). Digitalisation involves the broader use of information technologies to improve existing processes and services (Imgrund et al., 2018). Digital transformation goes further because it changes organisational structures, procedures, professional roles, staff competencies and relationships with citizens (Fischer et al., 2021). It is therefore possible for a municipality to digitise documents without fundamentally transforming the way it works. Moving an inefficient procedure online may reduce paper use, but preserve fragmentation, duplication and unnecessary administrative steps.

This conceptual difference places digital transformation within the wider field of organisational change. Janssen and Estevez (2013) describe digitalisation as the movement from traditional, paper-based and bureaucratic procedures towards digital platforms. Arnold and Wade (2015) associate it with greater efficiency, accessibility and sustainability, while Afonasyova et al. (2019) identify effects at three levels: inside public organisations, between institutions and in the relationship between government, citizens and businesses. Digital technologies may therefore improve internal workflows while simultaneously creating new channels for service delivery, communication and public participation.

These expected outcomes are not produced by technology alone. Public organisations operate through established rules, administrative routines and hierarchical arrangements that shape the way digital systems are selected and used. Technology may facilitate institutional change, but it may also reproduce existing procedural weaknesses when implementation is not accompanied by organisational redesign (Fountain, 2004; Cordella and Iannacci, 2010). For urban local governments, digital maturity should consequently be assessed not only by counting available platforms, but also by examining whether those platforms improve coordination, reduce administrative burdens and generate visible benefits for users.

The urban character of digital transformation also raises questions of scale and diversity. Municipal administrations often process high volumes of requests, provide services to heterogeneous populations and operate through multiple specialised departments. Digital technologies can support coordination and speed, but the same system may be experienced differently by trained employees and occasional users. From this perspective, urban digital transformation is a socio-technical process whose outcomes depend on the interaction between institutional capacity, professional practice and citizen behaviour.

2.2. *Digital transformation and urban public service quality*

The ultimate objective of digital transformation in public administration is not simply the introduction of new technologies but the creation of greater public value through better public services. Urban local governments play an increasingly important role in implementing integrated policies that support sustainable urban development and improve the quality of public services. Within the European Union, digital transformation has become a strategic priority for strengthening administrative capacity, improving service accessibility and increasing citizens' trust in public institutions. Although Romania has made significant progress in recent years, the European Commission (2024) highlights that further efforts are needed to improve the digitalisation of public services and strengthen citizens' digital interactions with public administration. In this context, municipalities are expected to translate these digitalisation strategies into tangible improvements in citizens' everyday experiences.

Public services represent activities carried out in the public interest to satisfy essential community needs and are characterised by principles such as continuity, accessibility, equity and responsiveness (Matei, 2001; Dincă, 2018). Consequently, assessing service quality requires considering not only administrative efficiency, but also the extent to which public services effectively respond to citizens' expectations and improve their interactions with public institutions. From a broader governance perspective, the quality of public services represents one of the core dimensions through which good governance is operationalised and evaluated. As argued by Raiu (2015), good governance extends beyond institutional performance and encompasses principles such as effectiveness, accountability and responsiveness, which are directly reflected in the way public services are designed and delivered.

Recent research has increasingly recognised digital transformation as an important determinant of urban public service quality. Digitalisation has been shown to improve the quality of urban public services by facilitating access to municipal services, reducing administrative burden and strengthening interactions between citizens and local government. These benefits extend beyond operational efficiency, contributing to more positive perceptions of municipal service quality and citizens' overall experience of public service delivery (Mina-Raiu & Melenciuc, 2022).

Urban digital transformation also requires attention to inclusiveness. Digital services create public value only when they are accessible to diverse categories of users with different levels of digital competence and different patterns of interaction with public institutions. Studies examining Romanian municipalities have shown that website usability, accessibility and the quality of digital interfaces significantly influence citizens' experience of public services (Urs & Spoaller, 2022). Similarly, research on digital public administration highlights that digital technologies should support not only administrative efficiency, but also transparency, citizen orientation and sustainable public value creation (Burlacu et al., 2022).

Although a substantial body of research reports positive effects of digital transformation on public service quality, the literature also suggests that these benefits are not always perceived uniformly across stakeholder groups or organisational contexts. While many studies emphasise improvements in administrative efficiency, service accessibility and organisational performance, others argue that the outcomes of digital transformation depend on factors such as institutional arrangements, implementation processes and citizens' actual experience of using digital public services (Lips, 2020; Matheus et al., 2020; Tangi et al., 2021). Consequently, evaluating digital transformation remains challenging because improvements in organisational performance do not necessarily correspond to improvements perceived by citizens. Municipal administrations often measure digital progress through the number of online services or technological investments, whereas citizens evaluate digital transformation through their actual experience of accessing and using public services. This distinction suggests that understanding

the relationship between digital transformation and urban public service quality requires considering both organisational outcomes and citizens' perceptions rather than relying on a single perspective.

2.3. *The organisational perspective on digital transformation*

Digital transformation is ultimately implemented by public organisations and, more specifically, by the employees responsible for delivering public services. While citizens experience the outcomes of digital transformation through their interactions with municipal services, public employees experience it as an organisational process that reshapes administrative procedures, work routines and professional responsibilities. Their perspective is therefore essential for understanding how digital transformation is implemented within public administration.

The literature increasingly recognises that successful digital transformation depends not only on technological investments, but also on the organisational capacity to redesign administrative processes and integrate digital technologies into everyday practice. Digital systems create public value only when they become embedded in organisational routines and support more efficient, coordinated and responsive service delivery (Fountain, 2004; Cordella & Iannacci, 2010). Consequently, evaluating digital transformation requires examining how public employees perceive these organisational changes.

Professional competencies constitute another critical dimension of organisational transformation. Digital technologies continuously modify the knowledge and skills required from civil servants, making lifelong learning and professional adaptation essential components of public sector modernisation. Recent research indicates that digitalisation can facilitate access to digital learning resources, support continuous competence development and strengthen organisational adaptability, highlighting the importance of investing simultaneously in technological infrastructure and human capital (Mina-Raiu et al., 2024).

At the organisational level, digital transformation also affects communication, collaboration and decision-making. Digital platforms facilitate information sharing across administrative departments, improve coordination and support more integrated public service delivery (Luna-Reyes & Gil-Garcia, 2014). However, these organisational benefits depend on employees' willingness and ability to incorporate digital tools into their daily activities, highlighting the importance of institutional learning and continuous organisational development (Lips, 2020).

Despite its importance, the organisational perspective has often been examined independently from citizens' experiences. Studies focusing on public employees provide valuable insights into institutional readiness, organisational capacity and internal administrative change, but they offer only a partial understanding of the overall impact of digital transformation. Assessing organisational change alone cannot determine whether improvements achieved within public administration are also reflected in the

quality of services experienced by citizens. This limitation underlines the need to complement the organisational perspective with the user perspective developed in the following section.

2.4. *The user perspective and the need for an integrated assessment*

Digital transformation ultimately creates public value only if organisational improvements are reflected in citizens' experiences of public services. For this reason, evaluating digital transformation requires considering both the internal capacity of public organisations to implement digital change and the way these changes are perceived by service users. While these two perspectives are closely interconnected, the existing literature has generally examined organisational change and citizens' experiences separately, resulting in fragmented assessments of digital transformation.

Research focusing on public organisations has primarily explored institutional change, administrative modernisation, digital capabilities and organisational performance (Fountain, 2004; Lips, 2020). In contrast, studies centred on citizens have mainly investigated service accessibility, usability, trust and satisfaction with digital public services (West, 2004; Urs & Spoaller, 2022; Tangi et al., 2021). Although both approaches provide valuable insights, each captures only part of the digital transformation process and therefore provides only a partial understanding of its overall impact.

Recent studies conducted in the Romanian context illustrate this distinction. Digitalisation has been shown to contribute to improving the quality of urban public services by facilitating access to municipal services and enhancing citizens' interactions with local government (Mina-Raiu & Melenciuc, 2022). At the same time, research has highlighted its contribution to strengthening the professional development of civil servants through continuous competence development and organisational learning (Mina-Raiu et al., 2024). Taken together, these studies indicate that digital transformation generates benefits both for public organisations and for service delivery. However, organisational change and citizens' experiences have generally been analysed independently rather than within a common analytical framework.

This study addresses that gap by integrating the perspectives of public employees and citizens within the same municipality. Rather than analysing the two groups separately, the research compares their perceptions across shared analytical dimensions related to digital transformation and urban public service quality. This approach makes it possible to examine whether organisational improvements identified by public employees are also reflected in citizens' experiences and evaluations of municipal services. By combining organisational and user perspectives, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of digital transformation in urban local government. It also responds to recent calls for broader evaluation frameworks that consider not only technological implementation or administrative performance but also the public value generated through citizens' interactions with digital public services

(Matheus et al., 2020; Lips, 2020; Profiroiu et al., 2024). Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question: How do public employees and citizens perceive the contribution of digital transformation to urban public service quality, and to what extent do their perspectives converge or diverge within the same local government?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. *Research design and case selection*

This study adopts a quantitative case study design to examine the relationship between digital transformation and urban public service quality through the integrated perspectives of public employees and citizens. A case study approach is appropriate for investigating contemporary organisational phenomena within their real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its institutional setting are closely interconnected (Yin, 2018). Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the study aims to generate analytical insights into how digital modernization is perceived by the main stakeholder groups involved in the provision and use of urban public services. Consequently, the sampling strategy was designed to obtain informed perspectives from both public employees and citizens rather than to produce statistically representative estimates for the entire population.

The empirical research focuses on Sector 4 Municipality of Bucharest, one of the six administrative districts of Romania's capital city. The municipality was selected through purposive case selection as an information-rich case because, over the past decade, it has pursued an extensive digital transformation programme covering a wide range of municipal services and administrative processes. The objective of this transformation has extended beyond the digitalisation of individual procedures, aiming instead to develop an integrated digital ecosystem that supports more efficient, accessible and citizen-oriented public services.

Sector 4 Municipality has implemented numerous digital initiatives that illustrate this broader transformation (Sector 4 Municipality, 2021, 2022, 2023). Citizens can access a wide range of municipal services through the integrated START PS4 digital platform, which enables online submission of administrative requests, electronic document management, digital appointments, online tax payments and access to services related to urban planning, social assistance, public utilities and local administration (Sector 4 Municipality, 2024). The municipality has also expanded the use of electronic document management systems, digital communication channels and interoperable administrative applications designed to reduce paperwork, shorten processing times and improve interactions between municipal departments and citizens. These initiatives have been complemented by organisational reforms aimed at

integrating digital technologies into everyday administrative practice, moving beyond the simple computerisation of procedures towards a more comprehensive model of digital governance.

The selection of Sector 4 Municipality was therefore purposive rather than random. As one of the Romanian municipalities that has made sustained investments in digital public services and organisational modernisation, it provides an information-rich setting for examining how digital transformation is perceived by both public employees and citizens. Studying a municipality with an advanced level of digitalisation makes it possible to explore not only whether digital tools have been implemented, but also whether organisational changes are reflected in citizens' experiences and perceived improvements in public service quality. This corresponds to recent research emphasising that digital transformation should be understood as an organisational and governance process rather than merely the introduction of new technologies (Lips, 2020), and that the value of digital government ultimately depends on its capacity to improve citizens' interactions with public services (Meijer and Bolivar, 2016).

3.2. Data collection

The empirical research is based on two complementary questionnaire surveys designed to examine digital transformation from both the organisational and the user perspectives within the same urban local government. While each questionnaire was tailored to the specific experiences of the respective respondent group, both followed a common conceptual framework that enabled a systematic comparison between organisational and citizen perceptions of digital transformation and urban public service quality.

The questionnaires were developed to reflect the main themes identified in the literature on digital transformation and urban public service quality, while taking into account the specific context of Sector 4 Municipality. Before data collection, the draft questionnaires were reviewed by several colleagues with expertise in public administration and survey research. Their comments helped improve the clarity and wording of the questions and ensured that the organisational and citizen versions addressed comparable dimensions of digital transformation from their respective perspectives.

The first questionnaire was addressed to public employees working within Sector 4 Municipality who were directly involved in administrative activities and the provision of urban public services. The survey investigated respondents' perceptions of digital transformation within the municipal administration, with particular attention to organisational changes, administrative efficiency, accessibility of digital solutions, perceived service quality, digital competencies, and the main benefits and challenges associated with the implementation of digital technologies.

The second questionnaire targeted citizens who had used one or more digital public services provided by the municipality. It examined perceptions regarding the municipality's level of digitalisation, accessibility

and ease of use of digital services, perceived quality of urban public services, overall satisfaction with digital interactions, and the main benefits and barriers encountered when using municipal digital services.

To facilitate comparison between the two respondent groups, both questionnaires explored a common set of analytical dimensions, including perceptions of digital transformation, urban public service quality, accessibility, perceived benefits and remaining barriers. At the same time, each questionnaire included items reflecting the specific roles and experiences of the respective respondents. This design made it possible to integrate the findings within a common analytical framework while preserving the distinct perspectives of public employees and citizens.

The employee questionnaire was distributed through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The initial invitations were sent to employees from the Legal Department, the Human Resources Department and the Urban Mobility Directorate of Sector 4 Municipality. These participants were subsequently asked to share the questionnaire with colleagues from other municipal departments who were interested in participating in the study.

The citizens' questionnaire was distributed using a similar approach. Initial invitations were sent to residents of Sector 4 who had experience using one or more digital public services provided by the municipality. Participants were then encouraged to forward the questionnaire to other residents meeting the same criterion.

As both questionnaires were disseminated through participant networks rather than a predefined sampling frame, it was not possible to determine the total number of individuals who received the invitation to participate or to calculate response rates. The final dataset comprised 113 valid questionnaires completed by public employees and 126 valid questionnaires completed by citizens. Given the exploratory nature of this case study, the objective was not statistical representativeness but to obtain complementary organisational and user perspectives on digital transformation within the same local government. Rather than analysing the two surveys independently, the study integrates both datasets to identify areas of convergence and divergence between organisational and citizen perceptions of digital transformation.

Most attitudinal variables were measured using five-point Likert scales, allowing respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements concerning digital transformation and the quality of urban public services. In addition, the questionnaires included multiple-choice questions designed to identify the principal benefits, remaining barriers and patterns of interaction with municipal digital services. Socio-demographic questions were also incorporated to characterise the two respondent groups and support the interpretation of the empirical findings presented in the following sections.

Participation in both surveys was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the research, and all collected data were processed exclusively for scientific purposes in accordance with the principles of confidentiality, anonymity and personal data protection.

3.3. *Analytical framework and research dimensions*

To compare organisational and user perspectives in a coherent manner, the empirical analysis was structured around a common analytical framework rather than around the individual questions included in the two questionnaires. Although the surveys were specifically designed for two different categories of respondents, they investigated comparable aspects of digital transformation and urban public service quality. Organising the analysis around shared analytical dimensions therefore made it possible to integrate the two datasets while preserving the specific perspectives of each respondent group.

The analytical framework was developed by grouping conceptually related questionnaire items into broader research dimensions reflecting the principal components of digital transformation in urban public administration. This approach acknowledges that employees and citizens experience digital transformation differently. Public employees primarily evaluate changes in internal administrative processes, organisational efficiency and everyday professional activities, whereas citizens assess digital transformation through their experiences of accessing and using municipal digital services. Consequently, the comparison focuses on equivalent analytical constructs rather than identical questionnaire items.

Based on the conceptual framework developed in the literature review and the structure of the two questionnaires, four analytical dimensions were identified to guide the empirical analysis.

The first dimension, perceived digital maturity, examines respondents' overall assessment of digital transformation within the municipality. It captures perceptions regarding the extent to which digital technologies have become integrated into municipal activities and public service delivery.

The second dimension, urban public service quality, explores the perceived impact of digital transformation on the accessibility, efficiency and overall quality of municipal services. Particular attention is paid to whether digitalisation has improved citizens' access to public services and whether organisational changes have contributed to more efficient administrative processes.

The third dimension, perceived benefits and remaining barriers, investigates the principal advantages associated with digital transformation together with the organisational and user-related challenges that continue to influence the effectiveness of municipal digital services.

Finally, the fourth dimension, integrated organisational and user perspectives, represents the core analytical contribution of this study. Rather than interpreting the two surveys independently, the findings

are synthesised in order to examine areas of convergence and divergence between public employees' and citizens' perceptions. This integrated perspective makes it possible to assess whether improvements recognised within the municipal administration are also reflected in citizens' experiences of urban public services.

3.4. Data analysis

The analysis combined descriptive statistical techniques with a comparative interpretation of the two datasets. Given the exploratory nature of the study and its objective of integrating organisational and user perspectives, the analysis focused primarily on descriptive statistics rather than inferential methods. Frequencies, percentages and comparative distributions were calculated to identify patterns of convergence and divergence between public employees' and citizens' perceptions across the main analytical dimensions.

To facilitate comparison, conceptually equivalent questionnaire items were grouped into common analytical dimensions reflecting key aspects of digital transformation and urban public service quality, including perceived digital maturity, service accessibility, administrative efficiency, transparency, communication, trust and overall service quality. For Likert-scale items, the analysis reports the percentage of respondents selecting the two highest response categories, thereby highlighting the proportion of respondents expressing positive evaluations. Categorical questions were analysed using frequency distributions and percentage shares based on valid responses.

In addition to the descriptive analysis of closed-ended questionnaire items, the responses to open-ended questions were examined using a thematic analysis approach. Similar responses were grouped into common categories that were subsequently synthesised to identify the principal perceived benefits, remaining barriers and future priorities associated with digital transformation. Rather than treating these qualitative responses as an independent dataset, the thematic findings were used to complement and contextualise the quantitative results, providing a richer understanding of how digital transformation is experienced by both public employees and citizens.

The comparative interpretation was guided by the analytical framework presented in Section 3.3, allowing the findings from the two surveys to be integrated around common conceptual dimensions rather than analysed as two separate datasets. This approach supports a more comprehensive assessment of digital transformation by linking organisational perceptions with citizens' experiences of urban public services.

4. COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN URBAN PUBLIC SERVICES

4.1. Profile of the study participants

The comparative analysis is based on the two complementary groups of respondents, including 113 public employees and 126 citizens, who provided distinct and complementary viewpoints on the relationship between digital transformation and urban public service quality. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the two respondent groups.

TABLE 1 - PROFILE OF THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Characteristic	Public employees (n = 113)	Citizens (n = 126)
Female	61.6%	65.9%
Male	38.4%	34.1%
Predominant age group	36–45 years	36–45 years

Source: Own processing based on the employee and citizen surveys, 2026

The demographic characteristics of the two samples indicate a balanced composition that supports the comparative objectives of the research. Women constitute the majority of respondents in both groups, representing 61.6% of public employees and 65.9% of citizens. The largest proportion of respondents belongs to the 36–55-year age categories, corresponding to the segment that most frequently participates in the provision and use of municipal public services.

The organisational sample is composed predominantly of public employees occupying executive positions, while managerial staff represent approximately one-fifth of the respondents. This distribution provides a broad representation of employees directly involved in administrative processes and the delivery of municipal public services, offering a reliable basis for assessing the organisational implications of digital transformation.

The citizens' sample is characterised by a relatively high educational level, with more than half of the respondents holding university or postgraduate qualifications. This profile reflects a group of service users who are generally familiar with digital environments while encompassing diverse experiences regarding the accessibility and quality of municipal digital services.

4.2. Assessing digital transformation from organisational and user perspectives

The first stage of the comparative analysis examines how digital transformation is perceived by public employees and citizens. Table 2 presents the comparative results for the principal indicators describing the overall perception of digital transformation. Although public employees consistently reported more

favourable evaluations than citizens, both groups recognised the municipality's substantial progress in digitalising public services.

TABLE 2 - ASSESSING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FROM ORGANISATIONAL AND USER PERSPECTIVES

Indicator	Public employees (%)	Citizens (%)
Municipality perceived as highly/completely digitalised	71.4	54.0
Public service quality perceived as improved after digital transformation	71.4	66.7

Source: Own processing based on the employee and citizen surveys, 2026

The comparison indicates that public employees tend to evaluate digital transformation more positively, reflecting their direct involvement in the implementation of digital technologies and their familiarity with the organisational changes associated with this process. Citizens also expressed predominantly favourable opinions regarding the municipality's digital development, although their assessments were generally more moderate, reflecting their evaluation of digital transformation through everyday interactions with municipal services.

Despite these differences, the findings reveal a considerable degree of convergence between the two perspectives. Both public employees and citizens acknowledge that the municipality has made significant progress in expanding digital public services and integrating digital technologies into administrative activities. The observed differences relate primarily to the intensity of positive evaluations rather than to fundamentally different perceptions of the municipality's digital transformation.

These findings provide the context for the subsequent analysis, which examines whether the positive perceptions of digital transformation are accompanied by corresponding improvements in the quality of urban public services.

4.3. *Digital transformation and urban public service quality*

While the previous section examined the overall perception of digital transformation, this section focuses on its perceived contribution to the quality of urban public services. The comparative analysis considers those service dimensions that are directly influenced by digitalisation, including accessibility, efficiency, transparency, communication and overall service quality. Table 3 summarises the perceptions of public employees and citizens regarding the principal effects of digital transformation on municipal public services.

The findings indicate that both public employees and citizens perceive digital transformation as having a generally positive influence on the quality of urban public services. Across all comparable indicators, the

majority of respondents from both groups reported improvements associated with the municipality's digital initiatives, although public employees consistently expressed more favourable evaluations.

TABLE 3 - DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND URBAN PUBLIC SERVICE QUALITY

Dimension of urban public service quality	Public employees (%)	Citizens (%)	Difference
Improved access to information	65.2	62.7	+2,5
Reduced time required to obtain public services	86.6	58.7	+27,9
Greater clarity and ease of administrative procedures	85.7	57.1	+28,6
Greater transparency of administrative processes	59.8	49.2	+10,6
Improved communication with the municipality	89.3	48.4	+40,9
Greater opportunities for citizen participation	83.0	65.9	+17,1
Improved accessibility of municipal services	84.8	65.1	+19,7
Increased trust in the municipality	50.9	50.0	+0,9

Source: Own processing based on the employee and citizen surveys, 2026

The greatest levels of agreement were observed for indicators related to accessibility and administrative efficiency. Both respondent groups recognised that digital technologies have facilitated access to municipal services and information while contributing to more efficient administrative processes. Positive evaluations were also recorded for improvements in communication and the overall quality of municipal public services.

Although public employees consistently assessed these improvements more positively than citizens, differences between the two groups were evident across several service dimensions. These differences may reflect the distinct positions occupied by the two stakeholder groups within the process of digital transformation. Public employees are directly involved in implementing digital technologies and may therefore be more aware of improvements in internal workflows, administrative efficiency and organisational change. Citizens, by contrast, evaluate digital transformation primarily through their direct experience of accessing and using public services, placing greater emphasis on usability, responsiveness and the quality of interactions with the municipality. Consequently, improvements perceived within the organisation are not always experienced to the same extent by service users. Nevertheless, the generally positive assessments reported by both groups suggest that many organisational improvements are increasingly reflected in citizens' experiences of municipal public services. Overall, the results indicate a substantial degree of convergence between the organisational and user perspectives regarding the contribution of digital transformation to urban public service quality. These findings provide the basis for

the subsequent analysis of the specific benefits and remaining challenges associated with municipal digital transformation.

4.4. *Perceived benefits and remaining barriers to digital transformation*

Beyond the overall assessment of digital transformation and its perceived contribution to urban public service quality, the surveys explored the principal benefits associated with municipal digitalisation together with the challenges that continue to influence the effectiveness of digital public services. Comparing these perceptions provides additional insight into the practical implications of digital transformation for both the municipal administration and service users. Table 4 summarises the principal benefits and remaining barriers identified by public employees and citizens including implications for urban local government.

TABLE 4 - MAIN BENEFITS, REMAINING CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PRIORITIES OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: INTEGRATED ORGANISATIONAL AND USER PERSPECTIVES

Analytical dimension	Public employees	Citizens	Implications for urban local government
Main benefits	Faster administrative processes; improved internal workflow; reduced paperwork; better access to institutional information	Easier access to municipal services; time savings; increased convenience; easier access to information	Digital transformation generates benefits for both organisational performance and service delivery, although each group emphasises different aspects.
Remaining barriers	Need for continuous staff training; resistance to organisational change; further integration of digital systems; continuous technological upgrades	Platform usability; technical issues; need for clearer guidance; preference for simplifying administrative procedures	Future digital transformation strategies should combine technological development with organisational change management and user-centred service design.
Future priorities	Strengthen interoperability; expand digital services; continuous professional training; simplify internal procedures	Improve user experience; expand online services; increase responsiveness; strengthen communication with citizens	Digital transformation should evolve towards integrated, accessible and citizen-centred urban public services.

Source: Own processing based on the quantitative results and thematic analysis of the open-ended responses, 2026

Overall, both respondent groups recognised a broad range of benefits associated with digital transformation. Public employees primarily emphasised improvements related to administrative efficiency, workflow optimisation and organisational performance, whereas citizens highlighted easier access to municipal services, greater convenience and improved communication with the municipality. Despite these differences in emphasis, the findings demonstrate substantial agreement regarding the positive contribution of digital technologies to everyday interactions between the municipality and its users.

At the same time, the results indicate that digital transformation remains an ongoing process rather than a completed reform. Both public employees and citizens identified several areas requiring further improvement, including the continued development of digital platforms, the simplification of administrative procedures and enhanced support for service users. Although the specific challenges differed between the two respondent groups, the overall findings suggest that future digital transformation efforts should combine continued technological development with measures aimed at improving usability, accessibility and organisational capacity.

These findings provide the basis for the integrated discussion presented in the following section, where organisational and user perspectives are examined together in order to identify the broader implications of digital transformation for urban public service quality.

5. DISCUSSION: INTEGRATING ORGANISATIONAL AND USER PERSPECTIVES ON DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The findings of this study contribute to the growing literature on digital transformation in urban public administration by demonstrating the importance of integrating organisational and user perspectives when evaluating the outcomes of digital government initiatives. While previous studies have frequently focused either on the internal effects of digital transformation within public organisations or on citizens' evaluations of digital public services, comparatively fewer studies have examined these two perspectives simultaneously within the same municipal context. By combining evidence from public employees and citizens, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of how digital transformation is perceived and how it relates to the quality of urban public services.

The comparative analysis reveals an important pattern. Public employees consistently reported more favourable evaluations than citizens across several dimensions of digital transformation, particularly regarding communication with the municipality, the simplification of administrative procedures and the reduction of the time required to obtain public services. These differences may reflect the distinct roles occupied by the two stakeholder groups within the process of digital transformation. Public employees are directly involved in implementing digital technologies and organisational changes and are therefore more likely to perceive improvements in internal workflows and administrative efficiency. Citizens, in contrast, evaluate digital transformation primarily through their direct experience of accessing and using municipal services, placing greater emphasis on usability, responsiveness and the quality of service delivery. Consequently, organisational improvements do not necessarily translate into equally positive user experiences across all service dimensions.

Despite these differences, both groups recognised the municipality's substantial progress in digitalisation and acknowledged its positive contribution to public service delivery. This finding suggests that organisational investments in digital technologies are increasingly reflected in citizens' experiences, although users continue to evaluate some aspects of service delivery more cautiously than public employees. These differences underline the importance of evaluating digital transformation from multiple stakeholder perspectives, an approach that is consistent with Fountain's (2001) view that technological change and institutional change are closely interconnected. Assessing digital transformation solely through organisational performance may overestimate its success, while relying exclusively on citizens' perceptions may overlook important organisational improvements that remain less visible to service users. A comprehensive evaluation therefore requires the integration of both perspectives to capture the full range of outcomes associated with digital transformation.

These findings can also be interpreted through the theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review. First, they are consistent with Fountain's (2001) institutional theory, which argues that digital technologies do not transform public organisations automatically, but through their interaction with organisational structures, administrative routines and institutional arrangements. The more favourable assessments reported by public employees suggest that organisational changes associated with digital transformation may become visible within the administration before they are fully reflected in citizens' experiences of public services.

Second, the results reinforce Lips' (2020) argument that digital transformation should be understood as a process of organisational change rather than simply the adoption of new technologies. The differences observed between employees and citizens indicate that organisational improvements and improvements in user experience do not necessarily evolve at the same pace.

Finally, the findings support Meijer and Bolívar's (2016) view that the success of digital government should ultimately be evaluated through its capacity to create public value by improving citizens' interactions with public services. The relatively small differences observed for access to information and trust suggest that digital transformation can strengthen the relationship between municipalities and citizens, whereas the larger differences regarding communication and administrative procedures indicate that further efforts are needed to ensure that organisational improvements are translated into tangible benefits for service users. Table 5 synthesises the principal areas of convergence and divergence identified through the integrated analysis of organisational and user perspectives.

TABLE 5 - INTEGRATED ASSESSMENT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FROM ORGANISATIONAL AND USER PERSPECTIVES

Analytical dimension	Public employees	Citizens	Overall interpretation
Digital transformation	Viewed primarily as an organisational modernisation process	Viewed mainly through service accessibility and user experience	Strong convergence regarding the overall progress of digital transformation, with differences in the intensity of positive evaluations.
Urban public service quality	Emphasis on administrative efficiency and internal performance	Emphasis on accessibility, responsiveness and service quality	Digital transformation is associated with improvements in both organisational performance and citizens' experiences, although user expectations remain higher.
Main benefits	Workflow optimisation, faster administrative processes, improved information management	Easier access to services, time savings, greater convenience	Both groups recognise clear benefits, but emphasise different dimensions of public value.
Remaining challenges	Staff training, interoperability, organisational adaptation	Platform usability, communication, simplification of procedures	Future digital transformation should combine organisational capacity building with citizen-centred service design.
Future priorities	Continuous digital innovation and process optimisation	Better user experience and more accessible digital services	Sustainable urban digital transformation requires balancing organisational efficiency with citizens' expectations.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on the comparative analysis of quantitative findings and thematic analysis of open-ended responses, 2026

The thematic analysis of the open-ended responses further enriches the quantitative findings by highlighting the practical priorities identified by both respondent groups. Public employees primarily emphasised organisational issues, including continuous staff training, interoperability between digital systems and the optimisation of internal administrative processes. Citizens, in contrast, focused on the quality of their interaction with the municipality, particularly the usability of digital platforms, the simplification of procedures, clearer communication and faster responses to service requests. Rather than representing contradictory expectations, these priorities appear complementary and indicate that future digital transformation strategies should simultaneously address organisational capacity and citizen experience.

From a practical perspective, the study suggests that municipalities should adopt a balanced approach to digital transformation. Investments in digital infrastructure remain essential, but they should be accompanied by organisational learning, continuous staff development and user-centred service design. The results indicate that the success of municipal digital transformation should not be measured solely by the number of digital services implemented or by internal administrative efficiency. Instead, evaluation frameworks should also consider citizens' perceptions of accessibility, transparency, usability and overall service quality.

More broadly, the study illustrates the value of combining organisational and user perspectives within a single analytical framework. Evaluating digital transformation exclusively from one perspective provides only a partial understanding of its outcomes. By integrating evidence from both groups, the proposed approach captures not only how digital transformation changes administrative processes but also how these changes are experienced by those who ultimately use public services. One of the principal contributions of this study is therefore methodological: it demonstrates that integrating employee and citizen perspectives offers a more comprehensive framework for assessing the relationship between digital transformation and urban public service quality. This integrated perspective may also inform future comparative research on digital transformation in urban local government.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Digital transformation has become a central component of contemporary urban governance, requiring local governments not only to introduce digital technologies but also to ensure that these technologies contribute to the quality of public services experienced by citizens. Against this background, the present study examined the relationship between digital transformation and urban public service quality by integrating the perspectives of public employees and citizens within the same Romanian municipality.

The findings indicate that both respondent groups perceive digital transformation as having a generally positive influence on municipal public services. Public employees consistently reported more favourable assessments than citizens, particularly regarding organisational efficiency and administrative performance. Nevertheless, the two groups showed a considerable degree of convergence across the principal analytical dimensions, suggesting that organisational improvements associated with digital transformation are increasingly reflected in citizens' experiences of municipal public services. Rather than identifying conflicting perspectives, the study demonstrates that organisational and user evaluations are complementary and together provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital transformation in urban local government.

One of the principal contributions of this research is methodological. Unlike many previous studies that analyse digital transformation either from the perspective of public employees or from that of citizens, the present study integrates both viewpoints within a common analytical framework. This approach enables a more comprehensive assessment of digital transformation by connecting internal organisational change with citizens' perceptions of service quality. The study therefore contributes to the growing literature on digital government by demonstrating the value of combining organisational and user perspectives when evaluating digital transformation in urban public administration.

The study also makes an empirical contribution by providing evidence from a Romanian municipality, a context that remains underrepresented in the international literature on digital transformation and urban public administration. The comparative analysis highlights that the success of digital transformation should not be assessed solely through organisational indicators or the number of digital services implemented. Equally important is the extent to which these organisational changes are perceived by citizens as improvements in accessibility, efficiency and the overall quality of public services.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that urban local governments should adopt a balanced approach to digital transformation. Investments in digital infrastructure and administrative modernisation should be accompanied by continuous efforts to improve the usability, accessibility and inclusiveness of digital public services. At the same time, strengthening digital competencies among both public employees and citizens remains essential for ensuring that technological innovation generates tangible public value.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the empirical analysis is based on a single municipality, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other administrative contexts. Second, the research relies on cross-sectional survey data and therefore captures perceptions at a specific point in time rather than changes occurring throughout the digital transformation process. Finally, the analysis focuses on perceived rather than objectively measured service performance.

Overall, this study demonstrates that assessing digital transformation through the combined perspectives of public employees and citizens provides a more comprehensive understanding of its contribution to urban public service quality than analysing either perspective independently. By linking organisational change with citizens' experiences, the proposed framework contributes to the evaluation of digital transformation not only as a process of technological modernisation, but also as a mechanism for creating public value through more efficient, accessible and citizen-centred urban public services.

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