

Dear government - the system is not offline, it's out of line

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"I'm sorry. The system is offline". It's every South African's pet peeve when engaging with a government entity. What if I told you the system being offline is only the tip of the technology failure iceberg when it comes to South Africa's public sector digital infrastructure?



Source: [Unsplash](#)

The system is not only offline. It's disparate. It's disconnected. It's clunky. It's ageing. And it's even non-existent in some cases. It's all of these things and more because the truth is there isn't just one system... there are many different systems servicing many different departments in many different ways. Few, if any, of these systems talk to each other the way they should and the only people that truly lose out are us, the South African citizens.

With the recent unrest still painfully fresh in our minds, you have to wonder, what if our police force was properly digitised? What if all of our security forces were digitally interconnected?

Would the situation have escalated to the degree that it did?

Walk into your local police station right now and you probably won't find a laptop behind the counter. What you will find is a police officer waiting with pen and form in hand. Almost every activity from a citizen's point of view in a police station is painstakingly done with pen and paper. Does that fill you with sufficient confidence? At this point, it fills too many of us with indifference as this is sadly seen as the way of things. But it doesn't have to be.

Our digital society dictates that we should be far beyond this, especially when the safety and security of South African citizens are at stake.

From the police force to home affairs to the department of water and sanitation, so many of our government departments are either stuck in a bygone era or operate in isolation with their own system in place. You would think that one government would have one integrated, interconnected system. Yet here we are – bandied from pillar to post or stand in excessively long queues just to get a license renewed, or an affidavit signed, or a business license applied for. Surely, with the right technology, these things could be reduced from hours to minutes, days and weeks to hours. There are live examples of where this has already been achieved.

We live in an era where almost every organisational process and movement can be optimised to the nth degree. Our police force could benefit from increased digitisation. Imagine applying for your ID or passport and it taking two to three days to be completed and returned to you. Imagine applying to have your company registered and completed in a few hours. There are examples where these improvements have been done.

For example, the South Africa Police Service, with thousands of vehicles on patrol across the country, does not have a system in place that can monitor or control how, where, and when these vehicles are used, or for that matter, abused. With the right system in place, they could monitor petrol consumption, area travelled, service history, and much more. For instance, the head office in Gauteng should know if a patrol vehicle is filled up in Polokwane. They should know how much petrol is put in and how far the car travelled between top-ups. Multiply this by every vehicle in the department, let alone all of government – through an integrated, connected system, and I can guarantee you would have some interesting data to work with.

Everything that can be measured should be measured, so we can analyse, understand and optimise to create a more efficient government. It's the least a citizen of this country deserves considering it is the citizens who are funding these operations.

Not all doom and gloom

There are, of course, areas of excellence to praise. The best example of this from a National Department perspective, the South African Revenue Services (Sars), for instance, can compete with the very best as a world-class organisation. You may find e-filing a frustrating experience, but in truth, it should be praised for what it is – a system that does everything you want it to, from wherever you are in the world. It is absolutely world-class.

You may have heard of businesses embarking on various transformation efforts to attain the elusive 'single view of their customer', but they are doing this for a very good reason – to gain maximum insights on their customer behaviours and actions to help provide those same customers with a product that offers maximum value.

When Sars needs to talk to Home Affairs or the Department of Social Services – we need a system that will allow any department to get a unified view of our citizens. That unified view can even be done from the time a pregnant mother walks into a state hospital when social services can be flagged as to what her current or future needs might be, where a child is injured and might need specialised treatment and it is flagged within the healthcare system what those future needs will be. Imagine the time saving, the budget efficiencies, the ease of being in a system where the state is providing for the citizen's needs.

To do this, our government needs to take all its disparate, disconnected, and dissimilar systems and bind them together. But

that can be merely a dream to behold and an absolute nightmare to implement, without the right planning and partners. Unbundling all the megaprojects that our public sector has already invested tens of millions of Rands implementing is simply not possible, nor is it practical.

So much can be done if all of our public silos knew what each other were doing. Not only will it make for a more efficient state, but with the right training regimen in place, it can also be serviced by an army of SMMEs, who can be empowered to provide the professional services needed to keep this system up and running.

An efficient system will create an effective government and an engaged citizen. This is one country, not 15 departments. Let us usher South Africa into a connected future we can all be proud of.

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