

# Digital Transformation Antecedents: The Role of Capacity and Pressure in Flemish Local Public Administrations

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## Abstract

Despite the growing importance of digital transformation (DT) in public administration literature, certain phases of DT remain largely underexplored and warrant a more profound and in-depth examination. Particularly at the local level, when initiating DT, the focus is merely placed on the reasons behind why local governments engage in DT. However, currently too little is known about what enables local governments to even engage in DT in the first place. Drawing upon institutional theory and literature on organizational capacity, this study aims to address this notable gap by conceptualizing antecedents of local DT, namely motivational pressures and digital capacity. By analyzing these two antecedents, simultaneously and tailored to a local digital context, the authors explore which one has greater explanatory significance influencing local DM. A quantitative research approach was used, gathering data through a survey targeting managing directors and employees focused on service delivery and/or digitalization in Flemish local governments. This study presents quantitative findings from over 200 Flemish municipalities, and aims to enrich the theoretical discourse on DT and provide practical insights for (Flemish) municipalities navigating the DT journey.

## Keywords

Digital transformation antecedents, digital maturity, local government, survey research, Flanders.

## 1. Introduction and background

### 1.1. The importance of digital transformation

Digital transformation has been extensively researched in a private sector context, but has, in recent years, also been rapidly changing the public sector landscape. DT in a governmental setting is understood by scholars as a continuous process of using technology to improve public service delivery, make organizational changes on a cultural and relational level, make processes more efficient, be more transparent, and increase citizen satisfaction [1][2][3]. DT thus entails an ongoing necessity to adapt (internally) in order to effectively respond to external disruptions, such as new technologies, new expectations, and new

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entrants [4]. Tackling this change of functioning requires making a holistic, technology-driven effort on a strategic, organizational, relational, and cultural level [1][4][5].

## **1.2. Local digital transformation challenges**

Despite the growing importance of DT in public administration literature, a profound and deep understanding of DT is still rather scarce, particularly at the local government level [6][7][8]. Comparing different levels of government, research about DT in the public sector is merely focused on the regional and national level, indicating the need for increased local attention [3][5][9][10]. This lack of focus at the local level is problematic as municipalities play a crucial role in directly and significantly impacting the relationship with citizens (meeting higher expectations and enhancing citizens' satisfaction), organizational change, service delivery, and public value creation [8]. Without being aware of opportunities and challenges at the local level, a greater risk exists of failing to leverage the potential of DT.

Local governments are considered the most important and most-trusted actor when it comes to providing effective and qualitative public services [9][10]. Nevertheless, their effectiveness and quality largely depend on the capacity they possess to face additional challenges when it comes to digitally transforming their processes and services [9]. As the level closest to citizens, a high variability of public services is requested, and local governments hereby often miss a strategic DT approach. Working towards interoperability while quickly designing new services that address the changing needs of citizens demands considerable strategic effort and the necessary capacity [5][9][11]. In terms of capacity, local governments often lack resources, human as well as financial, making them dependent on higher levels of government and limiting their investment capabilities [5]. The challenges highlighted above complicate DT efforts in local governments, making them more intricate than those experienced at any other governmental level [5][9].

## **1.3. Lack of focus on antecedents**

Noteworthy is that literature on DT within public administration is fragmented, meaning that while scholars focus intensively on certain (parts of) DT phases, some of them remain largely underexplored and warrant a more profound and in-depth examination [6][7][8]. Specifically, when initiating DT, the focus is largely placed on why local governments engage in DT [1][2][3][5][9]. Scholars have explored this particular research stream by identifying internal and external drivers (success factors, priorities) and challenges (barriers, hurdles, obstacles) that enhance or hinder successful DT initiatives [6][8][9][10][12]. However, currently too little is known about what enables local governments to even engage in DT in the first place.

Looking at previous studies examining DT in a governmental setting, both motivational pressure and capacity have been conceptualized as critical in influencing DT [1][3]. Do local governments engage in DT because they can (proactive reasoning) or because they have to (reactive reasoning)? Capacity refers to as a set of qualities or abilities that enable an organization to successfully achieve its predefined mission and goals [3]. Motivational

pressure, on the other hand, refers to forces exerted by the environment in which an organization operates that influence its behaviors, practices, and structures [13].

The aim of this study is to conceptualize digital capacity and motivational pressure as two significant antecedents of local DT, and examine them collectively to explore which one has more explanatory power in influencing the digital maturity (DM) of Flemish local governments. DM is chosen as the dependent variable in this research as this is an important measure for evaluating the status of DT [14]. In addition to collectively exploring digital capacity and motivational pressure, a notable gap in current research is the lack of integration of these antecedents within existing theory. Consequently, this paper defines motivational pressure within the framework of institutional theory and aligns digital capacity with current literature on organizational capacity. This approach provides an in-depth exploration of these antecedents, grounding them in a theoretical foundation and critically assessing their role in impacting local DM.

This research stands out as it conceptualizes local DT antecedents and positions them alongside each other. In particular, this study seeks to answer the following research question: *To what extent do motivational pressures and digital capacity influence DM in local public administrations?* In the following, we describe the theoretical foundation that forms the basis for this research. Additionally, the methodology in use is outlined, concluding with a synthesis of preliminary descriptive findings.

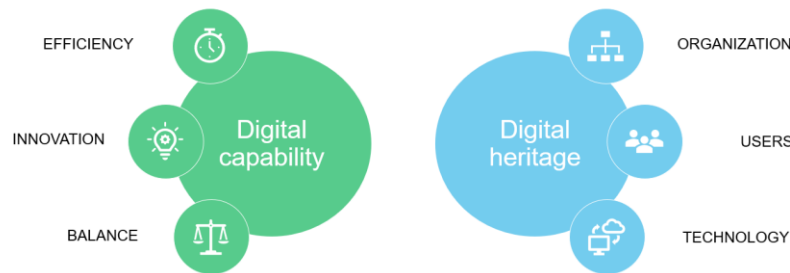
## **2. Theoretical foundation: the role of motivational pressures and capacity in local DT**

In this section, we elaborate on the important distinction between DT and DM. Both concepts play a significant role in understanding the goal of this research. Additionally, this section explains how both antecedents were conceptualized by integrating them within robust theoretical underpinnings instead of examining these on a more explanatory basis.

### **2.1. Digital transformation vs. digital maturity**

In public administration literature, DT and DM are closely related concepts who are often used interchangeably [15] due to the lack of conceptual clarity leading to confusion between the two concepts [16]. While DT focuses on the strategic imperative of adapting the rate of change inside an organization with the always evolving rate of change on the outside, DM refers to the systematic process of undergoing and managing this DT change process [14]. Particularly, DM signifies the ability of an organization to leverage the benefits of tackling DT, and serves as a useful measure for evaluating the status of DT [17][15]. In this research-in-progress, the aim is to explore which antecedent of DT (independent variables) - namely motivational pressure or digital capacity - has greater explanatory significance in impacting the DM (dependent variable) of Flemish local governments. Examining DM as a dependent variable in relation to the antecedents of DT provides critical insights into what enables DT efforts in local public administrations. Throughout this paper, both DT and DM will thus be used as important but distinct concepts.

DM is often characterized through maturity models comprising various dimensions such as technology, digital skills, organizational structure, and many others [15]. Despite being conceptualized in this wide-range matter, maturity models tailored to the public sector context, and more specifically to the local government context, are scarce. In this study, the authors base their conceptualization of DM upon valuable research done by [17] and [18], who designed a maturity model specifically for local public administrations, and adapt it to the Flemish local government context. The model relies on two significant assumptions when measuring DM. Firstly, it states that DM is influenced by previous digital investments and initiatives impacting technology, the organization and its users (digital heritage). Secondly, it indicates that DM is determined by activities related to exploitation (efficiency), exploration (innovation), and finding a balance between these two (digital capability). Both dimensions (heritage and capability) exist of several categories which are in turn measured by different factors (see Figure 1 for operationalization). DM is being measured on a general municipal level (digital capability) and also specifically within the IT department (digital heritage). This ensures both a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the DM within Flemish local governments.



**Figure 1:** Operationalization of the DiMiOS-model: A model for Government Digital Maturity developed by [17] and [18] where the conceptualization of DM in this study is based upon.

## 2.2. Antecedents of local DT

In addition to collectively exploring digital capacity and motivational pressure, a notable gap in current research is the lack of integration of these antecedents within existing theory. Consequently, this research-in-progress defines pressure within the framework of institutional theory and aligns capacity with current literature on organizational capacity.

### 2.2.1. Motivational pressures

The notion of ‘motivation’ is extensively defined in academic literature, with various motivational theories offering distinct perspectives on how it is conceptualized and understood [19]. Often, motivational theories primarily focus on the *individual level*, and are centered around understanding what drives individual behavior, preferences, and actions within various contexts [20][21]. When exploring motivation on an *organizational level*, which is the focus of this research-in-progress, institutional theory provides valuable insights into how institutional environments have an impact on organizational decisions

and behaviors [22][23]. A fundamental aspect of institutional theory examines how organizations respond to institutional pressures. These pressures refer to forces exerted by the environment in which an organization operates that influence its behaviors, practices, and structures [13]. Three kinds of pressures were identified: coercive, normative and mimetic pressures [13][22][24]. Coercive pressure stems from legal or regulatory requirements, or from powerful organizations by which these organizations are dependent upon. Organizations adapt to these external demands to maintain legitimacy and support. Normative pressure, on the other hand, focuses on conforming standards and norms associated with professionalization, also in order to gain legitimacy and respect in their field. Finally, mimetic pressure occurs when organizations imitate or model themselves after successful and legitimate organizations in their field [13][24].

Institutional theory is a useful theoretical lens that is adopted by numerous studies to examine the process through which technology-driven changes become institutionalized [25][26]. This theory, also often used in government settings, recognizes the importance of the wider context in which ICTs are embedded, and offers insights into how different factors influence the selection, design, implementation and use of technologies [23] [27][28]. A significant contribution examining motivational pressures on an organizational level and in a government setting is Mergel, Edelman and Haug’s (2019) study where they developed a conceptual framework exploring internal and external reasons for DT. The authors conceptualize external reasons for change among which pressure from citizens, businesses, technology and politics play a pivotal role [1]. We argue that these external reasons for change implicitly align with the above-mentioned institutional pressures. Mergel et al. (2019) do not explicitly address this alignment, indicating a gap for further research.

Therefore, in this research-in-progress, we operationalize motivational pressures as an antecedent of DT, namely pressure from citizens, businesses and politics, defined by Mergel et al. (2019) within the framework of institutional theory (as detailed in Figure 2). By grounding these in existing theory, we aim to understand how coercive, normative and mimetic pressures influence DM at the local level. Coercive pressure correlates with political influences, considering local governments frequently rely on directives from higher governmental levels [5]. Normative pressure is connected to the growing expectations of citizens and businesses. Furthermore, mimetic pressures are associated with local governments observing and imitating others that have effectively implemented DT.

<b>MOTIVATIONAL PRESSURES</b>	
<b>Coercive pressure</b>	From politics
	From citizens
<b>Normative pressure</b>	From businesses
	From technology
<b>Mimetic pressure</b>	From other local governments

**Figure 2:** Motivational pressures in local public administrations.

### **2.3. Digital capacity**

In addition to motivational pressures as a key factor influencing DT, scholars state that DT is also closely linked to organizational capacity to drive change, allocate investments and achieve progress [3]. In addition, they emphasize the essential role of adequate organizational capacity in determining the direction and success of DT in local government settings [3]. Organizational capacity, a key topic in organizational theory, has been broadly defined in academic literature [3][29]. Fundamentally, this concept has been conceptualized as a set of qualities or abilities that enable an organization to successfully achieve its predefined mission and goals [3][30]. In a public administration context, scholars mostly define organizational capacity as the necessary allocation and utilization of resources, notably financial and human, at critical moments in time [3][31]. As these definitions demonstrate, the concept of organizational capacity remains rather vague, and no true consensus can be found.

Existing literature highlights the significance of organizational capacity in local public administrations [30][32][33][34] and explores its crucial role in fostering DT [3]. While all levels of government benefit from adequate organizational capacity, it is more common for local governments to be identified as the level lacking sufficient capacity to perform their tasks. This is particularly apparent in DT contexts where adequate resources are an important incentive [3][35]. Organizational capacity is often too narrowly defined by a single factor, whereas capacity should be approached as the result of the interplay among a diverse and detailed, multidimensional set of factors [36]. In terms of DT, organizational capacity is highly determined by context, meaning that different DT initiatives may require different combinations of dimensions [3].

Therefore, in this study, we propose a new set of factors that challenges the broad existing conceptualization of organizational capacity. Our objective is to refine and more precisely define this concept and adapt it to a local digital context, introducing 'digital capacity' as a specific term for organizational capacity that influences DM. Digital capacity at the local level can be understood through a combination of the following specific dimensions: digital leadership (both executive and political), knowledge and development, human resources and financial resources. Each of these dimensions includes a variety of components evaluating the particular dimension as detailed in Figure 3.

CAPACITY	
<b>Digital leadership (both political and executive)</b>	IT-administrator represented in management
	Alderman for IT/digitalization
	Digital focus on a political level
	Digital focus on an executive level
	Digital strategy
<b>Knowledge &amp; development</b>	Training and development possibilities
	Lessons learned
	Clear communication regarding digital initiatives
	Inter-service collaboration
	Intermunicipal collaboration
<b>Human resources</b>	Sufficient number of employees
	Necessary competences
	Dependent on intermunicipal collaborations
	Dependent on consultants for guiding digital services
<b>Financial resources</b>	Digitalization budget
	Financial capacity to invest in innovation

**Figure 3:** Digital capacity in local public administrations.

### 3. Hypotheses

The aim of this research-in-progress is to explore which antecedent (pressure or capacity – independent variables) has more explanatory significance in influencing DM (dependent variable). Accordingly, the following hypotheses will be tested (up to further elaboration):

(H1): Digital capacity (digital leadership, knowledge and development, financial and human resources) positively impacts the level of DM in Flemish local public administrations.

(H2): Motivational pressure (coercive, normative and mimetic) positively impacts the level of DM in Flemish local public administration.

(H3): The positive impact of capacity on DM is greater than the positive impact of pressure. The authors plan to conduct a multiple regression analysis (potentially preceded by a correlation analysis), and will ensure that the model meets key assumptions (e.g., linearity, ...). Regression analysis is an appropriate method as it allows the authors to examine the impact of several independent variables on one dependent variable [37]. Control variables (e.g., size of Flemish municipality, ...) will be taken into account as factors possibly influencing DM. This section provides a very brief description of the statistical analysis that is still up to further elaboration.

### 4. Methodology

A quantitative research approach, in particular survey research, was used to examine these two antecedents of DT. Survey methodology is an appropriate research method “to gather information from (a sample) of entities for the purposes of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members” [38]. Drawing upon insights from qualitative studies [1][3][32], this quantitative approach can help to confirm and quantify previous findings in a more objective and generalized way [39]. In line with our theoretical foundation, we measured motivational pressures by asking respondents to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale ('strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') whether or not their decision to engage in DT was because of (a) 'the government expects local governments to do so' (coercive pressure), (b) 'other local governments do so' (mimetic pressure), (c) citizens and businesses expect local governments to do so'

(normative pressure). In addition, we measured digital capacity by asking respondents to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale ('strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') whether their engagement in DT is facilitated or not by the level of (a) digital leadership, (b) knowledge and development, (c) human resources, and (d) financial resources in their local government (Figure 2 and 3 illustrate a detailed overview of both these measured variables).

The survey was conducted from December 2023 until January 2024 and targeted expert respondents from Flemish local governments, in particular managing directors and employees focused on service delivery and/or digitalization. The choice for Flanders as the study's focus is grounded in several factors: with 300 municipalities, Flanders represents a wide variety in size, which can lead to different DT approaches. Moreover, the majority of these municipalities are relatively small, which frequently results in a dependency on the regional government and limited available capacity. As this research focuses on motivational pressures and digital capacity, this makes Flanders a representative and interesting context to conduct research on. The survey was pretested by using a pilot test to ensure its reliability and usability before being administered [39]. Ultimately, 584 managing directors and employees of Flemish local governments were contacted<sup>2</sup>. Managing directors have extensive knowledge of how their local governments function and hold the organizational overview that is required for answering questions related to DT [11][40]. If managing directors would not be familiar with every aspect of their municipality's DT journey, that also shows how far their DT is institutionalized [11]. The combination of questioning both managing directors and employees provides a holistic understanding of the DT process going on in the local government.

To increase the response rate, two reminders were sent out on the 18th of December 2023 and the 3rd of January 2024. Out of the 584 targeted managing directors and employees of local governments in Flanders, 355 responses were generated. After discarding 47 incomplete responses, our final sample existed of 308 responses achieving an overall response rate of 53%. Among these respondents, 205 local governments are represented, covering 68% of the 300 Flemish municipalities in this survey. As detailed in Table 3, this sample illustrates diversity in terms of size and reveals a fairly balanced distribution between managing directors and employees, reflecting its representativeness.

**Table 1**

Descriptive characteristics of the sample.

<b>Respondents Flemish municipalities</b>	<b>Frequency (N)</b>	<b>Total population (in %)</b>
Managing Directors	128	58.4
Employees focusing on service delivery and/or digitalization	180	41.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>2</sup> Prior to this research, a short survey was sent to managing directors via an existing mailing list. They could indicate if one or more employees from their local government, including themselves, would like to participate in this research and provided the researchers with contact details. As a result, this sample includes a minimum of one and a maximum of four respondents per municipality.



<b>Size Flemish municipalities</b>		
0 – 9999	41	20.0
10 000 – 19 999	82	40.0
20 000 – 29 999	41	20.0
30 000 – 49 999	30	14.6
>50 000	11	5.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>100</b>

## 5. Preliminary results and analysis

This section provides a preliminary overview of our survey results<sup>3</sup>, concentrating on descriptive observations regarding both antecedents. Moving forward, we will subject both concepts to a regression analysis to examine the explanatory significance in influencing DM of Flemish local public administrations. Both capacity and pressure were conceptualized fitting the specific (Flemish) local government context and were grounded in existing theory. Motivational pressure is assessed by the pressure municipalities feel from other governmental levels (coercive), from citizens, businesses and technological advancements (normative), and from other successful local governments (mimetic).

Concerning motivational pressure Flemish municipalities feel to digitally transform, the most significant results are connected to normative pressure. Respondents indicate that technological advancements (92.5%) and citizens (78.6%) are important influencing factors. Pressure from businesses (44.3%) seems to be less influential. While not as impactful as normative pressures, coercive (49.2%) and mimetic pressures (39.5%) still exert a notable influence.

Examining the descriptive observations related to digital capacity, the digital leadership dimension reveals that nearly all Flemish local governments have an alderman focused on IT/digitalization (only 8% do not), showing a strong political representation. However, on the executive level, only about a third of respondents indicate having an IT-representative in their management team (35%). This indicates a contradiction between the extent to which DT is being displayed as an external focus and the degree of internal investment in DT. In addition, while most respondents recognize that DT is becoming an internal focus with a supportive management team (74%) and mayor (65%), only half of the respondents indicate having a clear digital strategy (49%). Furthermore, less positive results are found concerning the dimension of human resources. Over half of respondents (55%) report vulnerability due to an insufficient number of employees and inadequate access to the necessary competences (45%). Additionally, 28% of respondents report that their local government has to rely on consultants for steering digital service delivery, whereas 31% reports to dependent upon intermunicipal collaborations. However, investment in digital training and development opportunities is high (72%). 70% of respondents indicate

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<sup>3</sup> In the survey, a 5-point Likert scale was used ('strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') asking respondents about both independent variables. All percentages mentioned in this section are the sum of 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. In addition, Each construct (coercive pressure; normative pressure; mimetic pressure; digital leadership; knowledge and development; human resources; financial resources) is measured by individual items, as illustrated in Figure 2 and 3, and correspond to a single survey question.

collaboration between different teams within the municipality, and 60% experiencing clear communication about digital initiatives. There is still room for improvement in learning from past projects (50%) and enhancing intermunicipal collaboration (51% see the need). Finally, regarding the dimension of financial resources, most local governments allocate adequate budgets for DT (83%), but fewer indicate an investment in innovation (61%).

## 6. Conclusion

The main objective of this research is to examine to what extent digital capacity and motivational pressures influence DM at the local level. Moving forward, it will give insight into the explanatory significance of these two crucial antecedents. In this research-in-progress we only report on the descriptive findings. The preliminary results presented in this study were derived from a survey the authors conducted questioning managing directors and employees focused on service delivery and/or digitalization. The findings on motivational pressure indicate that the most significant results are connected to normative pressure. The findings on digital capacity show that while the majority of respondents indicate the growing importance of DT within their municipality, really engaging in this process is rather difficult mainly due to lacking sufficient employees, necessary competences and having a clear digital strategy. Although examining motivational pressures and digital capacity influencing DM is by no means exhaustive, we believe that these two concepts play an important role in understanding DT at the local government level.

However, this research is not without limitations. The findings are reliant on a self-assessment, which may result in a selection bias and individual biases of some of the respondents' answers. In addition, it is important to highlight that digital capacity can differ due to the size of different municipalities, which needs further exploration. Next steps also include regression analysis to examine the significance of these key concepts. Further research can build upon this attempt to compare the significance of capacity and motivation and develop a more comprehensive understanding of DT antecedents and DM in local public administrations.

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