New development: Covid 19 and changes in public administration—what do we know to date?

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IMPACT

Experiences with changes caused by the Covid 19 pandemic clearly show that making changes in public administration is about the dynamic interaction of various organizational elements. To cope with the pandemic, public administrations had to deal rapidly with technological adoption and solution implementation. Due to Covid 19, digitalization accelerated, but the literature review suggests that, to be transforming, changes in technologies must be accompanied by changes in other organizational elements (like people or processes), because the pandemic challenged leadership styles and working models, as well as internal and external collaboration.

ABSTRACT

The pandemic disrupted previous operational models and led to changes in public administration. The academic literature on the impacts of the pandemic on public administration and management is growing. To date, no literature review outlining the findings of the published research has been made available, to our knowledge. This article summarises the findings of a systematic literature review outlining changes in public administration that can be attributed to the pandemic. It also points out gaps that should receive attention in future research (for example the longevity of changes).

Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic has put pressure on public services (Switzer et al., 2020) and is considered to be one of the defining policy and public administration challenges of this era (Dunlop et al., 2020). The continuity of services during Covid 19 became challenging across the public sector (Raghavan et al., 2021). The pandemic exacerbated many of the problems of public service provision in countries where austerity, decentralization and shifts in governance (for example a greater involvement of the private and third sectors in public services) had been guiding public administration reforms prior to the pandemic (for the UK—see Hernandez, 2021). Weber et al. (2021) suggest that, in some countries, the crisis was used to introduce reforms to deepen New Public Management (NPM) policies and practices.

Research looking at the beginning of the pandemic has generally concluded that most countries, regions, and cities were not well prepared for it (for example OECD, 2020; Joyce et al., 2020). Countries need resilient public administrations to be prepared for future waves of Covid and similar situations (Rajala & Jalonen, 2022).

The pandemic disrupted previous operational models and led to changes, such as teleworking, that may potentially last beyond the pandemic (Raghavan et al., 2021). Likewise, the length, intensity, and implications of the pandemic offer significant opportunities for organizations and employees to reform. Nagel (2020), for instance, argued that Covid 19 forced many organizations to undergo significant transformation—rethinking key elements of their business processes and using technology to maintain operations.

The academic literature on the impacts of the pandemic on public administration and management is growing. But to date, to our knowledge, no literature review outlining

the findings of published research is available. This article summarises the findings of a systematic literature review outlining the changes made in public administrations that can be attributed to the pandemic.

Research method

The literature review was not restricted to articles published in a selected sample of journals (i.e. to those in the public administration or public management fields); all research outputs mentioned in the Web of Science (WoS) were examined. Research outputs registered in the WoS database by the end of June 2022 were included in the literature review.

The PRISMA, 2020 flow diagram (PRISMA, 2020), as outlined in Figure 1, was followed to identify studies and select them for literature review.

The search focused on keywords used in titles and abstracts and used the following queries: TI = ('public services' AND 'COVID') OR TI = ('public administration' AND 'COVID') OR TI = ('public management' AND 'COVID'). In this manner, 355 records were identified. In the next step, the data were cleaned, excluding publications that were not in English or were not articles. A database of 272 articles was created and these were subjected to screening and further cleaning. In this phase, two researchers were required to independently screen the titles and the abstracts of the articles (and their content, if necessary) and decide on eligibility of individual articles. In cases where the two researchers were still not sure, a third researcher was consulted. The final list of 123 articles was based on consensus among all three researchers.

The extended Leavitt's organizational model, and elements suggested by Nograšek and Vintar (2014), were used for the analysis. The model was not used for explanatory purposes,
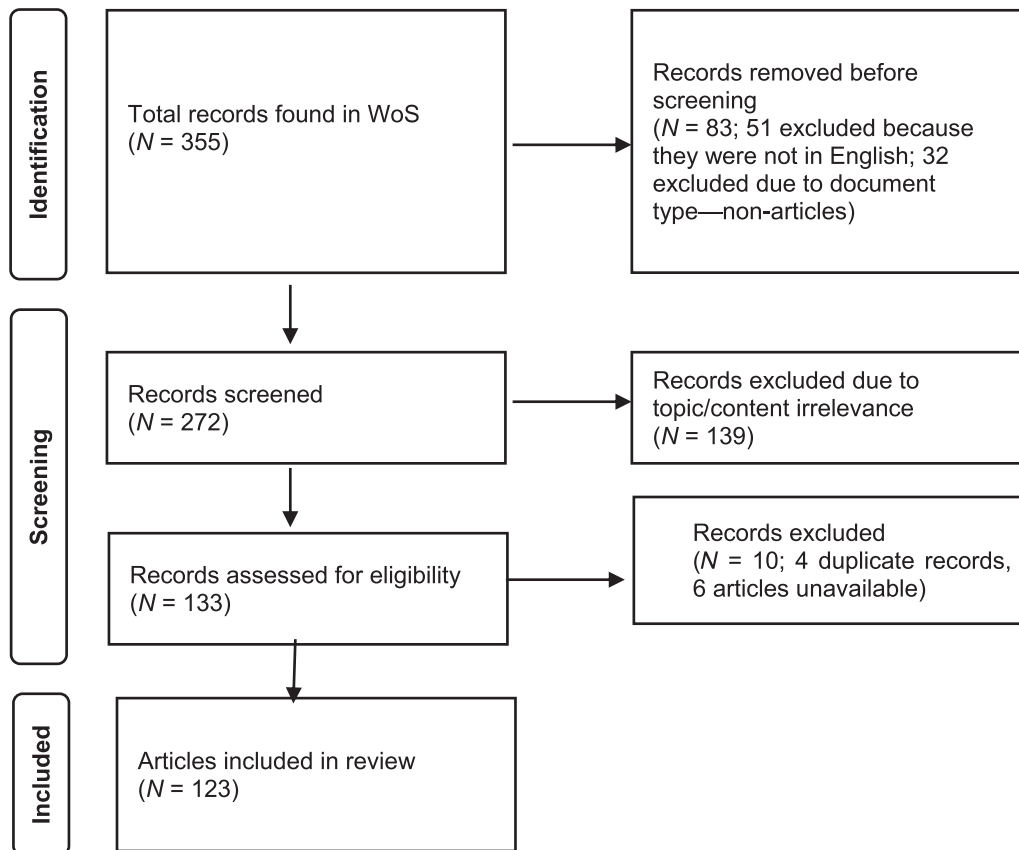
Figure 1. PRISMA diagram presenting the identification and selection process.

but solely for the identification and categorization of changes. During the analysis of the 123 articles, the following organizational elements were identified and linked: people, processes, technologies, structure and culture.

Findings

Most of the articles (96 out of 123 articles) were published in 2021 or 2022. Their geographical focus was rather heterogeneous: 24 articles did not specify the country of focus, China was the country researched most frequently (10 articles), followed by research on Brazil (nine articles, including a comparative study), the USA (eight articles, including comparative studies), Italy (seven, including comparative studies), the UK (five), Poland (five) and Sweden (three). Ten countries were represented by two articles each (in alphabetical order: Australia, Canada, Croatia, India, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Ukraine, Vietnam), and 22 by only one article (Burundi, Ecuador, England, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Ghana, Iran, Israel, Hong Kong, Mexico, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Slovenia, South Korea, Scotland, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan). Some articles focused on a specific region—for example the EU (one article), central and eastern Europe (two articles), and the Baltics (one article).

The greatest number of articles dealt with public administration/government in general (48 articles) or the national level of government (42, including 14 focusing on the federal level). A relatively low number of articles focused on the local (18) or the regional level (3).

Fifty two articles were based on qualitative research methodology and 39 were theoretical; quantitative approaches were used in 28 articles.

The thematic focus of the majority of the articles was quite heterogenous. This was evidenced by the keywords—besides Covid 19, more than 200 keywords were used. As outlined in Table 1, changes in 'processes', 'technology' and 'people' appeared frequently in the articles.

The articles often dealt with changes in more than one organizational element. Changes in processes were often accompanied by changes in the use of technology (for example some processes were newly digitalized or simplified using ICT due to the Covid 19 pandemic) or, as another example, changes impacting people led to changes in processes (for example new duties of employees related to testing were linked with recording and controlling processes and co-ordination tasks).

Processes

With regard to processes, the articles usually dealt with changes related to switching to digital (ICT-enabled) channels in public service delivery (face-to-face public services were replaced by non-face-to-face public services where possible), as well as to preventing the virus spreading among employees. The pandemic also led to improvements of crisis management; public authorities needed to improve their crisis continuity planning, which allows organizations to prevent, plan for, and operate resiliently during exigencies and crises (Datta & Nwankpa, 2021).

Other changes identified included the impact of the pandemic on administrative procedures and amendments of related laws (for example those facilitating new forms of communication, relaxing some duties and prolonging deadlines of administrative proceedings, or suspending

Table 1. Organizational elements affected by the pandemic.

Organizational element	N
Processes	31
Technology	26
People	11
Structure	3
Culture	4

procedures) in selected central and eastern European countries (Horvat et al., 2021).

There were articles pointing to changes in accountability procedures and decision-making, usually when experts were involved in policy-making or decision-making processes or where processes were adapted to be more collaborative and citizen-centred (for example Boin et al., 2020; Zaki & George, 2021). Some articles found that collaboration strategies and practices changed, and co-production was used more (for example Miao et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022; Yeo & Lee, 2020). Collaborative activities were sometimes co-ordinated by private actors at the beginning of the pandemic (Wang et al., 2022) and coping with the pandemic led to improved intergovernmental co-operation and co-ordination (Shen et al., 2022; Hu & Liu, 2022).

The literature also suggests that, during the pandemic, some real-time procedures differed from those required in legislation, for either purely practical reasons (to provide a service or to deal with a problem quickly), or because instructions from the top lacked clarity (Prusty & Mahapatra, 2021). As a result, differences between professional roles were sometimes reduced (Eriksson et al., 2021). In addition, changes in communication (its simplification, including the use of short and clear information) helped in coping with the pandemic (Tung, 2021). On the other hand, rigid lockdowns and large-scale disinfections and protective measures were also implemented, and were in some cases accompanied by close and strict monitoring of compliance with anti-epidemic measures and punishing those spreading fake news (Tung, 2021).

The articles also suggest that changes in formal strategic planning systems occurred in some countries (Vasiliev, 2022).

Technology

The literature clearly shows the role of technologies and digitalization and suggests that, due to Covid 19, digitalization or even digital transformation of public administration accelerated (Gabryelczyk, 2020). To cope with the pandemic, public administrations had to deal rapidly with technological adoption and solution implementation. A range of digital strategies, techniques, and communication channels were introduced during Covid 19 to continue delivering regular public services efficiently (Aristovnik et al., 2021), to collaborate externally (Criado & Guevara-Gómez, 2021) and to protect the community (Klich, 2021) and public sector employees from the virus.

According Boin et al. (2020), two intertwined impacts of Covid 19 stand out for consideration with respect to digitization and its impacts on the public sector: pandemic support assistance and digital service channels; and health-related surveillance and pandemic-tracking via new mobile phone apps. This, according to Boin et al. (2020), may lead to concerns around the absence of sufficient oversight in

terms of both digital-service performance and overarching policy and financing decisions; and to a potential reversion to centralized digital service design at the expense of service innovation predicated on user engagement and collaborative design.

Based on developments during the first wave of the pandemic in Canada, Boin et al. (2020) questioned whether the pandemic would create conditions for a reversion to more traditional forms of public administration (more centralized, controlling and less open) or, instead, whether new forms of more shared and networked governance models predicated on systemic openness would develop. Although the role of digitalization during the pandemic is clear, some articles suggest that administrative digitalization practices might be relatively modest and non-transforming (Aristovnik et al., 2021; Gabryelczyk, 2020). In addition, broader use of some new digital services could be hindered by concerns about the misuse of data, digital literacy and existing ICT infrastructure, and data and digitalization management (for example Fernandes, 2021).

People

In terms of the people element, the changes identified in the articles often responded to the challenges that Covid 19 posed to the public sector workforce—for example keeping employees safe and organizations functional (splitting up employees into teams or shifts, use of cross-trained employees, use of staff mobility) (Switzer et al., 2020), as well as complying with mobility restrictions (Raghavan et al., 2021; Giauque et al., 2022). In some countries, recruitment freezes were implemented (Colley et al., 2022) or the use of freelance workers was reduced (Dos Santos et al., 2020). Employees of public authorities were also often required to work from home and often believed that they were performing more tasks than before the pandemic (for example Raghavan et al., 2021; Giauque et al., 2022). This challenged leadership styles (Susilawati et al., 2021) and the working models used before the pandemic; the literature suggests that they were not appropriate for teleworking, because the telework adoption was not widespread before the Covid 19 pandemic (Raghavan et al., 2021; Giauque et al., 2022). Teleworking was one of the most frequently studied changes in the articles analysed.

The literature also suggests that the pandemic impacted managers and lower-level staff differently (Colley et al., 2022). The impact of the pandemic on street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) was investigated by Gofen and Lotta (2021), who found that a crisis situation intensifies the need for, and the dependency upon, public services provided by SLBs—disrupting their day-to-day practices. Also, the moral dilemmas contained in some new measures have been discussed (for example Dos Santos et al., 2020), as well as changes in accountability mechanisms and toleration of decision errors (Wang et al., 2022). In addition, changes in public service ethos have been identified (Shand et al., 2022), which may impact organizational culture.

Conclusions

In this article we summarized findings of our literature review on changes made in public administration in response to Covid 19. No literature review on this subject was

previously available and the article therefore helps to link together fragmented literature.

The literature review identified various changes in processes, technologies and people. Its findings clearly confirm that making changes in organizations is about the dynamic interaction of various organizational elements that may facilitate or hinder them. Available literature clearly suggests that, due to Covid 19, digitalization of public administration accelerated, but, as some authors suggest, digitalization might be relatively modest, involving quick fixes, and non-transforming.

Although the articles pointed to a large number of changes in public administration, they did not significantly examine the continuity or sustainability of these changes, so we do not know how transformative Covid 19 has been (Shen et al., 2022). The continuity of changes in public administration and the durability of their effects clearly warrant further research.

The literature suggests that the need for quick solutions led to the simplification and relaxation of procedures in public administration. Moreover, collaboration between different government entities and with external stakeholders was found to have intensified in some countries. However, in some areas, very strict top-down approaches were found to have led to conflicts and reversions of major reforms (Mauro & Giancotti, 2021; Malandrino & Demichelis, 2020) or the re-emergence of strong administrative states (Jha, 2022). Further research on this aspect would be particularly useful.

The impacts of the pandemic on the public administration culture were rarely examined in the articles and more research on this is also needed.

Acknowledgement

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