

DOCTORAL CONSORTIUM

**UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGICAL
CONTRACTS IN THE CONTEXT OF
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE PROCESSES
RELATED TO DIGITAL GOVERNMENT
TRANSFORMATION**

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Digital transformation has revolutionized public sector organizations, bringing both opportunities and challenges. This research proposal suggests an exploration of the impact of Digital transformation on public sector employees' psychological contracts and the challenges faced by civil servants in response to this change. The study proposes a study consisting of four parts. The research methodology combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture the dynamic nature of psychological contracts and psychological contract breach in the public sector. The research aims to explore the distinct characteristics of civil servants' dynamic psychological contracts in the context of digital government transformation and how they experience psychological contract breaches during continuous organizational change processes. The study highlights the need for understanding employees' tactics to manage psychological contract breaches and improve sustainable employability during digital transformation related change. The implications of the study will contribute to the effective implementation of digital transformation in the public sector and enhances our understanding of employee perspectives on managing psychological contracts.

Keywords:
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1 Introduction

The rapid pace of technological, economic, and social developments in the last decade has resulted in a digital transformation (DT) affecting activities and processes in the Dutch economy and society (EZK, 2021 p.6; Digitale Overheid, 2021). Digital technologies have become vital (Keijzer, 2021), not only for our society (Digitale Overheid, 2021), but also for the development and the execution of governmental processes and services (FreedomLab, 2021). For the Dutch Government, the ambition is to embrace innovations as set out in their plan: “Towards a safe, people-oriented, transparent, effective digital future”, (Digitale Overheid, 2021).

While digitization offers opportunities to make public administration more effective, efficient, transparent and fair, it also increases the risk of rigid enforcement, with an excessive focus on measurable and controllable matters (Freedomlab, 2021), as seen for example in the challenges the Dutch Tax Authorities faces. Examples of other challenges faced during digitalization are the air traffic control project (iCAS), the complexity of the Environmental Act software, and the new communication system C2000 of the Dutch police departments.

More generally, the constantly evolving public sector and its employees are facing many new challenges in response to digitization (Groeneveld, Kuipers & Van der Voet, 2022; Van der Wal, 2017a; 2017b). Traditionally, public values such as legality, equal treatment, and efficiency have been critical within public administration, with processes and formal hierarchy determining accountability and political legitimacy. However, with the accelerated change caused by digital transformation, values such as responsiveness, resilience, and innovation are becoming increasingly important in response to the VUCA environment (Groeneveld et al., 2022).

Nowadays, civil servants are expected to balance the contradicting bureaucratic values and innovation values, (Figure 1), placing them in a difficult and ambiguous position especially since political and societal tolerance for error and experimentation with taxpayers' money is minimal (Van der Wal, 2017a).

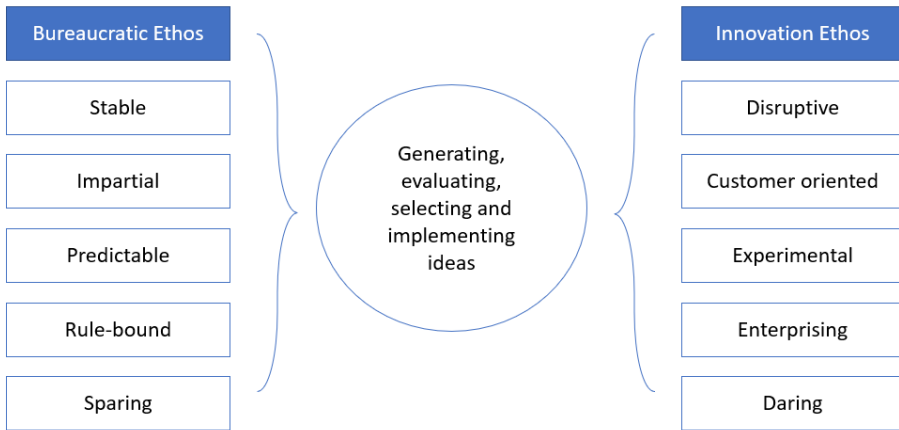


Figure 1: Position of civil servants, source: Van der Wal (2017a)

Since most public sector employees are intrinsically motivated to work for the government (BKZ, OCW & CBS, 2022), the conflicting values caused by DT (FreedomLab 2021) deeply affect civil servants and their psychological contracts (PCs). Although the importance of an individual’s ability to adapt to (the digital) changes is underscored, (BKZ, OCW & CBS, 2022) there is a need to understand how to align the motivation of people working in the public sector with these changes associated with DT and how to manage the impact. It is this need that has triggered this research.

This research aims to contribute to the academic and societal debate on PCs in the context of change by exploring the distinct characteristics of civil servants’ dynamic PCs in the context of digital transformation in public sector organizations. More specifically, the focus is on how civil servants’ experience PC breaches during continuous organizational change processes related to digital transformation and what repair tactics are used to prevent and repair PC breaches. Subsequently, the practical goal is to research concrete managerial and employees’ tactics to prevent and repair PC breaches in public sector organizations adopting new ways of working supported by digital technology. This can improve sustainable employability and enhance work engagement and performance.

We thus postulate the following research question:

How do organizational change processes caused by digital government transformation impact psychological contracts of employees?

To answer this question the following sub-research questions are formulated:

SRQ1: What is known in existing literature from an employee's perspective on characteristics of the public sector, digital transformation, and psychological contracts?

SRQ2: How do civil servants perceive the dynamics in their psychological contract in the context of digital transformation?

SRQ3: To what extent does digital transformation influence the psychological contracts of civil servants?

SRQ4: What tactics can public sector employees employ to manage psychological contracts breaches during digital transformation?

The structure of this research proposal is as follows: In section 2 the proposed methodology is described. In section 3, the theoretical background of the research is presented. The 4th section provides a description of the aimed results.

2 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology proposed to investigate the impact of digital transformation on psychological contracts of public sector employees.

Several authors have suggested that a combination of qualitative and quantitative research is required to capture how PC and PC breach develop in dynamic environments (Achnak & Hansen, 2019; Weinhardt et al., 2019 ; Wiechers et al., 2022). Therefore, this proposed research begins with a systematic literature review

(study 1) to further explore the existing research, followed by a qualitative multiple-case study (study 2) and a quantitative daily diary study (study 3). The research is concluded by a design study focused on repair tactics of public employees (study 4), with the aim to support public managers in managing the dynamic PCs of civil servants in the context of DT. Figure 2 visualizes the research questions and research designs.

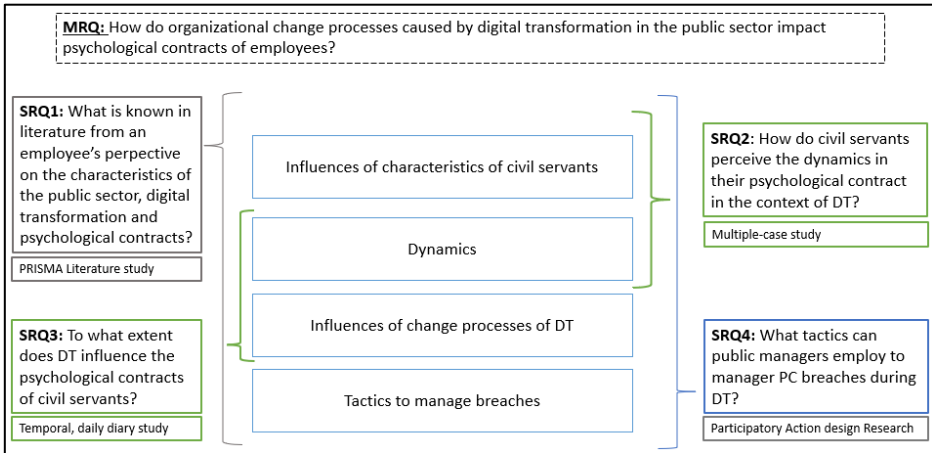


Figure 2: Research design

Study 1

The first study is a systematic literature study that utilizes the PRISMA-approach (Page et al., 2020), resulting in a transparent research process visual in a flowchart of the research process as well as a literature synthesis as results. Inclusion criteria for the review will be based on relevance to the research question, date of publication and quality of the research (Page et al., 2020). Aim is to create an assessable overview of existing literature from an employee's perspective on characteristics of the public sector, digital transformation, and psychological contracts.

Study 2

In a qualitative research design, the understanding of experiences requires open or semi-structured interviews with room to elaborate on concepts (Verhoeven, 2014). Study 2 adopts a qualitative design and comprises of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of how civil servants experience their PC dynamics in the context of DT (SRQ2).

To capture the dynamic narrative of PC breaches and responding employees' actions, the so-called Critical Incident Technique will be applied. In this approach, the interview starts with a specific incident, which forms the starting point for the reconstruction of a chronological and meaningful narrative over time for the respondent (Langley & Meziani, 2020). This technique is well suited to capturing recollections of vivid PC breaches and the responses to these by both parties to the employment contract (Conway & Briner, 2005).

Through collaboration with the iPoort and iPartnership networks as well as via part-time students of Master of Informatics, suitable case studies (i.e. finished projects) will be selected from the government's digital transformation programs. Organizations and participants will be selected through a purposive sampling (Yin, 2017). The focus will be on public organizations of different sizes with civil servants closely situated to civilians.

Study 3

The third study is a deductive quantitative study (Verhoeven, 2014) and aims to measure relationships between the key factors of DT and the PCs of civil servants in answering SRQ3. A temporal daily diary study will be conducted as it has the capability to study processes over time, assess day-to-day experiences and enable repeated measurements. This design increases the validity and reliability of the study's outcomes and captures the dynamic nature of PCs. Additionally, its benefit over a cross-sectional questionnaire method is the possibility of examining immediate affective responses, limiting the risks of poor recall of events (Conway & Briner, 2005). To capture the nested within-person processes, the study will be set up in two different public sector organizations undergoing a technology

implementation process as part of a larger digitalization program. This provides the researchers the possibility to integrate a prospective view as a factor influencing the sense-making process after the PC breaches experienced by respondents.

The daily survey is administered online and uses push messages to initiate response. Including daily mood ratings, validated measures of PC, organizational change, and digital transformation, as well as demographic questions. The data will be analyzed using multi-level mediation modelling, with the key variables examined within-person for their impact on employee's PCs over the process of the technology implementation.

Study 4

To answer SRQ4 a Participatory Action Design Research (PADR) is performed with a focus on possible tactics of public employees facing and recovering from PC breach in the context of DT. PADR is an especially relevant research design when the research is conducted based on local needs of multiple public organizations (Venable et al., 2017). This study builds on the outcomes of all previous studies, and uses participative activities that are distinct in the PADR methodology, which allow to validate previous studies and lead to actionable organizational interventions.

3 Theoretical Background

Preliminary research has been conducted in writing this research proposal. These results are described in this chapter.

DT has a significant impact on society and is an important cause of today's VUCA-environment. According to Van der Wal (2017b), this is especially true in public sector organizations, making the work of a 21st century public sector employee more challenging. Specifically, digital technologies profoundly reshape working arrangements in the public sector, and digitization may trigger a depersonalization of workplaces, impacting the social organizational climate (Dunleavy et al., 2005; Palumbo, 2021). Digital transformation requires a rethinking of employees' skills, responsibilities, and competencies, as well as the overall structure of organizations and working values, culture in government (Tangi et al., 2021; Vial, 2019). Despite these challenges, research on digital transformation in the public sector, also known

as ‘digital government transformation’, is still scarce, particularly from an employee perspective (Mergel et al., 2019; Tangi et al., 2021).

An important perspective when studying organizational changes from an employee perspective is that of the psychological contract (PC) (Rousseau et al., 2018; Wiechers et al., 2022). One of the key concepts in the PC is reciprocity, which refers to the principle that if one party fulfills their (implicit) obligations, the other party will respond in kind. This is in accordance with Adam’s (1965) need for equity theory in public administration (literature on the public sector). Psychological contract theory is based on Social Exchange Theory, which postulates that employees and employers engage in exchanges whereby each party to the exchange reciprocates the other’s contribution (Blau, 1964). Rousseau (1995) argued that perceived employer obligations motivate to engage in positive attitudes and work behaviors as expected reciprocity in the exchange relationship causes employees to attempt to restore balance if an imbalance is perceived. This reciprocity can operate at three levels of the exchange, at the same time:

- Transactional contracts involve highly specific exchanges of narrow scope which take place over finite periods (e.g., provide labour for pay);
- Relational contracts are broader, more amorphous, open-ended, and more subjectively understood by parties (e.g., extra work effort in exchange for promotion opportunities);
- Ideological contracts, defined as an espousal to a cause, whereby employee contributions are dependent on the belief that their organization serves a higher purpose (e.g., public sector organizations serving the public) (Blau, 1964; Rousseau, 1995).

Guest (2004) found that organizational change is a predictor of PC breach, something Conway, Kiefer, Hartley and Briner (2014) confirmed for public organizations. A breach indicates a change of the mutual obligations, which affects the employee’s attitudes (Rousseau, 1995), and may be reciprocated by employees through disengagement (Zhao et al., 2007), reduced work effort, or even leaving the company (Bal et al., 2008; Conway & Briner, 2002). After a perceived breach there is a period of ‘sense-making’ in which the employee goes through a rationalization process, after which the employee can experience the negative feelings of a PC violation. Given that DT is a source of continuous, and often less predictable,

change process (Vial, 2019), it can be argued that DT affects PC over time and may lead to breaches on a weekly or even daily interval (Griep & Van Tilborgh, 2018; Wiechers et al, 2022). Subsequently, this can lead to the above-mentioned employee attitudes which can result in unsuccessful implementation of digitalization. However, it is yet unclear how the dynamic nature of the PC and the sense-making process of an employee is affected by a continuous change.

After a perceived PC breach, the importance of timely and adequate feedback of the organization for the PC's recovery is essential (Rousseau et al., 2018; Van der Schaft et al., 2020). However, it is noteworthy that there is a lack of understanding about managerial tactics in this regard (De Ruiter et al., 2016). To enable adequate response, it is necessary to expand our understanding of appropriate tactics (behaviours) of public employees after a perceived breach.

The consideration of public sector context is essential to understanding employee behavior (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler 2003). It is therefore, necessary to take the characteristics of the public sector into account when studying PC dynamics, as the public sector differs fundamentally from the private sector (Meijer et al., 2022; Pandey & Wright, 2006). Even though the destabilizing impact of organizational change on employment relationships have been studied in both private and public sectors (Conway et al., 2014), literature on PC in the public sector is showing a considerable knowledge gap. Perry and Wise (1990) provide some insights as they found that even after a breach of perceived obligations, employees with a strong commitment to the public sector choose to remain engaged, because not to do so would be conflicting with their personal values. Moreover, Bunderson (2001) indicated that ideologies can shape PC and influence subsequent reactions to breach. This incorporation of ideology into the PC helps to explain why some employees may remain loyal to an organization after breaches in the transactional and ideological levels of the PC (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). While public sector motivation (Perry & Wise, 1990) is commonly known in public administration, the notion of this motivation in the public sector is overlooked in the PC literature.

4 Expected results

This research aims to contribute to both practical and scientific fields. The expected results are outlined in this chapter.

The field of DT is currently emerging, while that of PCs is a well-established academic field. However, there is limited research on the combination of PC and DT, particularly with respect to the public sector. This study aims to address PC in the public sector as the consideration of context is essential to the understanding of employees' attitude and behaviors. Furthermore, it provides insight into contextual considerations in understanding how employees manage PCs.

Moreover, the phenomenon of DT in relation to organizational change is distinct from past IT-related organizational changes and cannot be fully explained using existing theoretical models (Markus & Rowe, 2018). To leverage and extend current knowledge, it is necessary to evaluate the compatibility between DT and established theoretical models in the field of organizational change (Hanelt et al., 2021). In response to the current VUCA environment with DT as driver for organizational changes, the need arises to understand the PC theory in the context of DT. This context of continuous change will enhance our understanding of the management of dynamics of PC, for which scientific attention has been growing (Rousseau et al., 2018; Griep & Cooper, 2019). Additionally, the context of continuous change poses the possibility to take the effect of prospectively expecting more PC breaches into account as a variable in employees' sense-making process, this will be innovative as this is an academic field that traditionally has been researched retrospective.

Dunleavy et al. (2005) emphasize the importance of effectively guiding technology-centered changes in government. Different managerial skills are needed to govern change related to DT, as it often involves disruption of the status quo (Tangi et al., 2021). Even though DT could predict PC breaches, there is still a noteworthy lack of understanding of managerial actions suitable in managing breaches in PC (De Ruyter, 2017). This research addresses the knowledge gap on tactics used by employees (Henderson et al., 2020; Rousseau et al., 2018) by developing an artifact that takes the complexity of DT, the dynamics of PC and characteristics of the public sector into account.

the practical contributions we aim to achieve are:

1. Improving the sustainable employability of civil servants by reducing the occurrence and impact of PC breaches;
2. developing managerial tactics tailored to the unique challenges of digital technology implementation;
3. Improving our understanding, from an employee perspective, how DT projects can be better organized to prevent unwanted outcomes as mentioned above.

Ultimately, this research will enhance our understanding of how public sector organizations and employees can manage PCs during times of change related to DT.

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