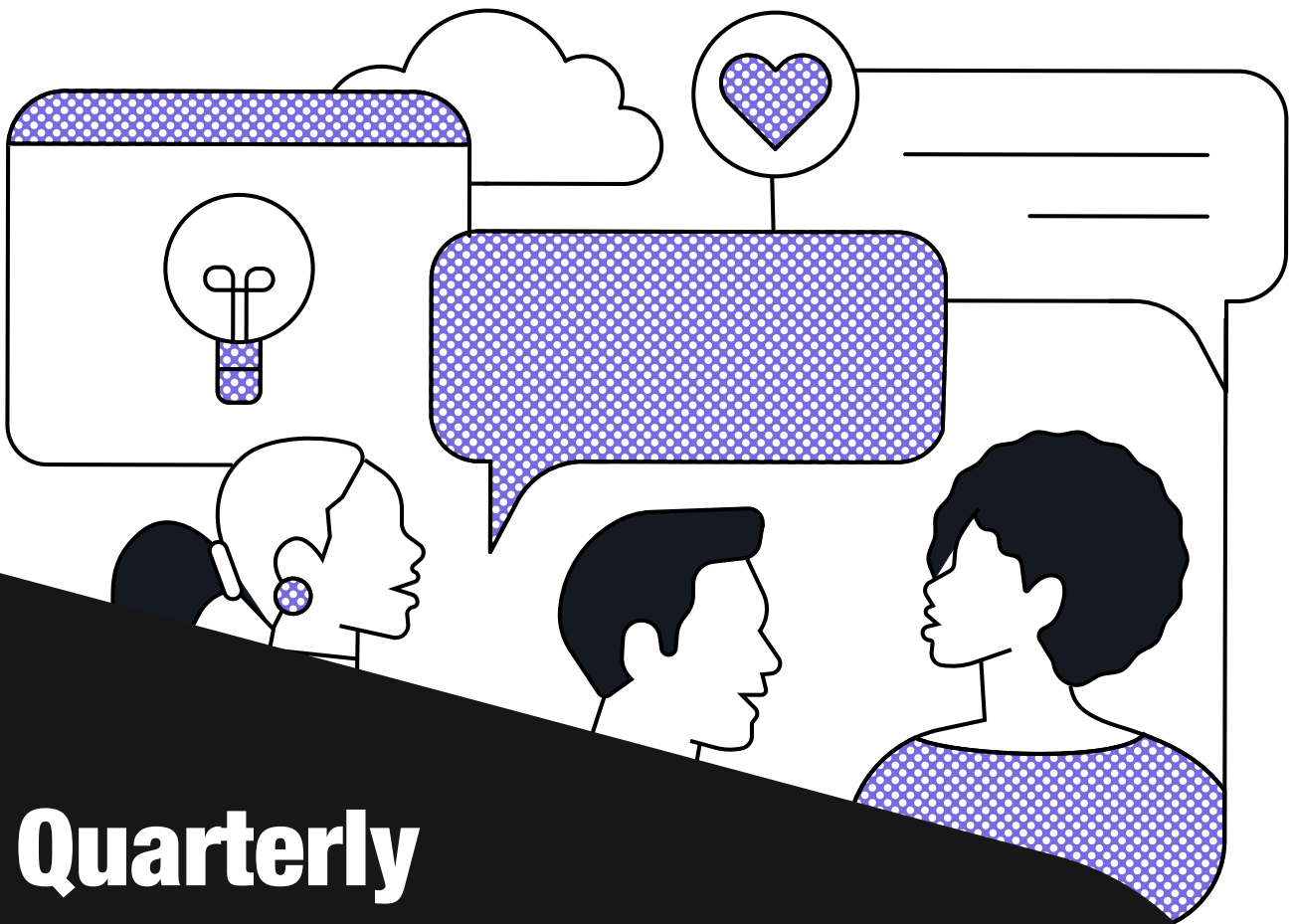


apolitical

• June 2024

Learning at speed and scale

A transformational tool for governments



Quarterly Global Insights

Sharing trends, data and research from Apolitical's global community of 250,000 public servants

At a glance

➤ Public servants' knowledge and skills are a critical resource for governments.

We are witnessing a new era of ambition, scale and speed in public sector learning. Governments recognise the need to be able to develop new capabilities to deliver transformation and remain agile in an unpredictable world.

➤ Governments need dynamic capabilities more than ever.

Dynamic capabilities define how well an organisation is able to adapt its resources and competencies to a changing environment. In the face of shocks and systemic change, learning is a vitally important dynamic capability for government.

➤ Leading governments are betting big on strategic learning initiatives to deliver transformational change.

Online learning is enabling governments to deliver workforce-level capability building initiatives. Nine notable government learning programmes (completed, announced or in progress – see page 07) will provide training to over 6 million public servants, led by France's commitment to train its entire public sector on climate.

➤ Learning at scale requires evaluation at scale.

Governments are relying on digital portals to track capabilities, deliver learning interventions and measure the impact of learning more efficiently. AI could help learners engage more critically with content.

At a glance

➤ Most learning happens informally; 'contextualisation' is critical.

New research from Apolitical shows that most learning in government happens informally. There are potentially hundreds-of-thousands of learning hours happening every month which governments can harness. Communities of Practice and generative AI will help public servants understand important ideas in their national or departmental context.

➤ All leaders should be learning leaders.

Governments which are effective at learning are more effective overall and better at retaining talent. All leaders can work to create a culture of learning in their organisations, involve their capability building teams in strategic decision-making and protect their people's time for learning.

➤ **Look out for the upcoming Public Servants' Learning and Skills Trends survey**

Apolitical will soon publish data from our Learning and Skills Trends survey. More than 1,800 public servants from around the world participated in a dedicated survey to understand their learning and development in government. Apolitical will publish the data as an open resource for governments and researchers to use.

[Sign up for updates](#)



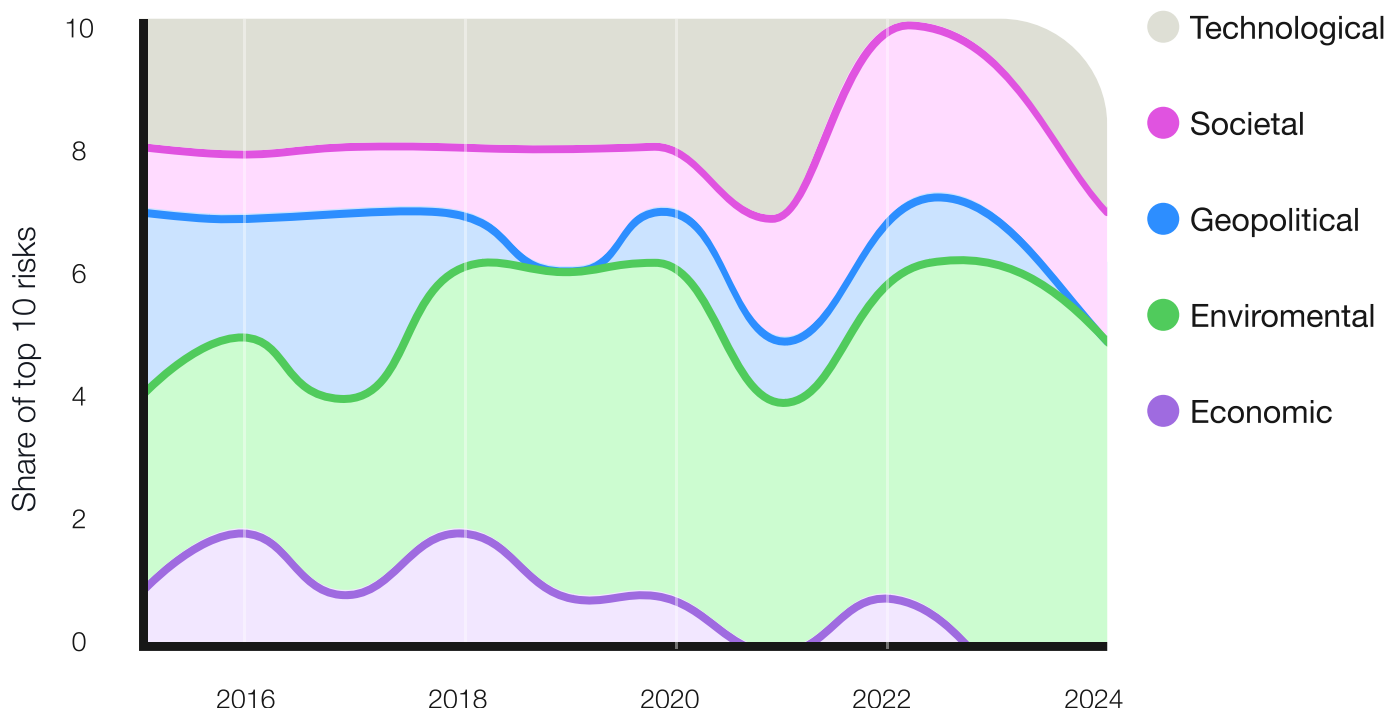
Public servants' capabilities are key to making government more flexible and agile

In 2023, the World Economic Forum declared the world on the brink of a 'polycrisis'.¹

Since 2010, the landscape of risk has become more multifaceted and the pace of change has increased. In that time, leaders' concerns about climate change, technological disruption and societal fracture have grown, according to data from the World Economic Forum's annual global leaders survey. Recent months have also shown how quickly geopolitical instability can flare up too, with knock-on effects around the world.

The changing landscape of global risk

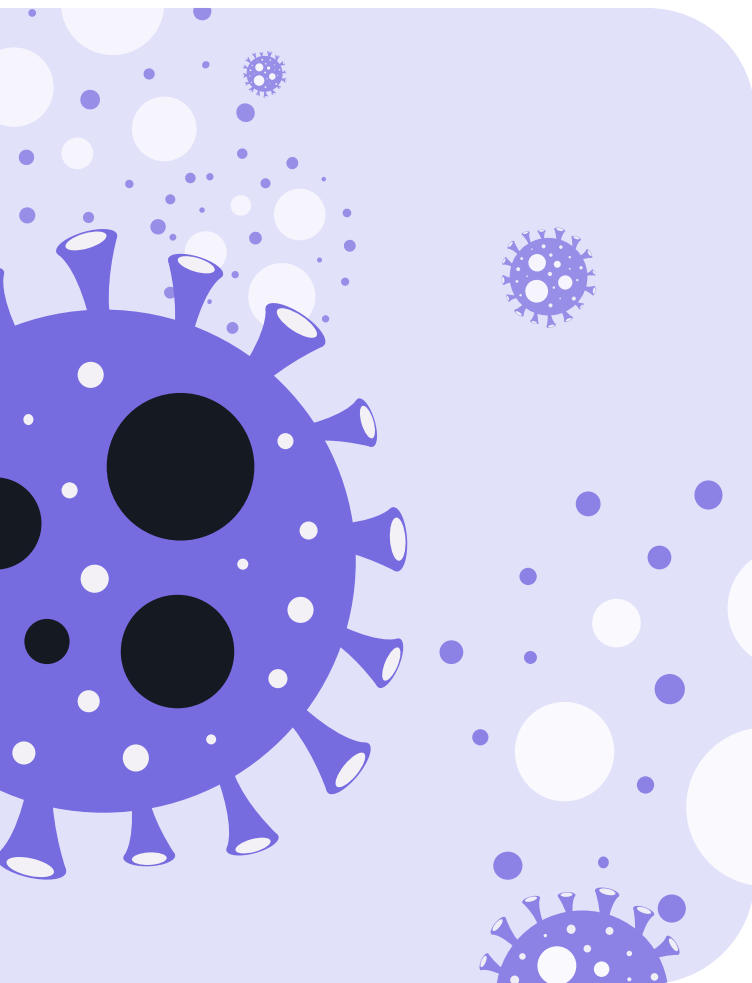
Apolitical analysis of World Economic Forum risk surveys (2015-2024)



1. We're on the brink of a 'polycrisis' – how worried should we be? ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#))

Governments have neither the resources nor the bandwidth to prepare for every possible eventuality. Instead, they need to be more agile and flexible; more able to respond quickly and effectively.

In recent years, the concept of “dynamic capabilities” has been gaining more attention and application to government, led by academics like Professors Mariana Mazzucato and Rainer Kattel at University College London’s Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose. **Dynamic capabilities are specific abilities that enable an organisation to adapt its resources and competencies to respond to a changing environment.** Institutional and individual learning is a dynamic capability.²



As Professor Kattel points out, the idea is essential to the most foundational conceptions of state capacity. “[P]art of the capacity is also its ability to renew and adapt according to the changing environment.” Public servants, he says, “have a key role in this.”³

Sometimes, the environment changes with shocking speed and governments need to expand their capacity in emergency mode. The Covid-19 pandemic was an extreme example of this. The tip of the iceberg was a health crisis. Beneath the surface, however, it was an extraordinary stress test for the whole of government, requiring increased capabilities in data, communications, supply chain management and more.

At other times, the change is less urgent but arguably more profound. Climate change and digitalisation are two such examples of transformative change which demand governments develop and sustain new capabilities.

Visionary governments are seizing the opportunity to use learning and capability building as a critical tool to address their biggest challenges and adapt to the changing world around them.

2. Public sector capacity matters, but what is it? (Kattel, et al., 2024)

3. Dynamic capabilities of the public sector: Towards a new synthesis (Kattel, 2022)

TREND 1

Online learning at scale is unlocking transformational change

Online learning means governments can upskill their entire workforce quickly and continuously

Transformational change requires governments to build new capabilities across its workforce, not just specialists. Cyber security and the digitalisation of government provides a clear example of this.

Public services and the machinery of government increasingly depend on digital infrastructure, including cloud-based data storage. The benefit is faster, more frictionless services and more efficient delivery. The downside is the risk and disruption of cyber attacks.

Every government laptop, mobile phone or desktop computer becomes a potential point of vulnerability. This means every user of those devices is a potential source of human error. Now it's not just IT professionals that need cyber security competencies; in effect, it's every public servant.

Digital transformation is much more expansive than new technologies and technical skills. Government in the digital era necessitates new ways of working, organisational culture, mindsets and attitudes. These changes don't just affect specialist digital staff, they affect everyone — from policymaking to implementation roles as well as some on the operational and delivery end. That means it's not just hundreds or thousands of staff that require training, it's tens or potentially hundreds of thousands.

76%



The proportion of public servants who do most of their formal learning online

The same trend is emerging in climate action. According to Apolitical's October 2023 Global Government Green Skills survey, public servants in a wide range of departments and ministries are dealing with the impacts of climate change in their work. Our evidence shows that public servants across government want to contribute to climate action, but also want specific training to do so effectively.

Online learning is the only mode of delivery that can achieve the scale required efficiently and cost-effectively, which is why it is so central to Apolitical's learning programmes and why governments around the world are using this approach.

CASE STUDY

Singapore got 90,000 public officers to take an AI course. Here's how.



Singapore is widely recognised as a global leader in digital government. Building the digital capabilities of its workforce has been an important part of that success. Since 2019, 60% of the entire workforce have completed the online Data&AI Literacy Primer course, developed by the Government Technology Agency of Singapore. These are four key lessons from their experience about learning at scale.

- 1. Provide different pathways for learner needs:** The training is designed around a tiered competency framework, which ranges from basic up to expert knowledge.
- 2. Work flexibly from the centre with different agencies:** Instead of a one-size-fits-all, top-down mandate, the course comes with central resources that agencies can customise to their needs.
- 3. Support continuous learning and community building:** There are advanced courses for learners who want to continue their learning journey and a virtual community of practice.
- 4. Take a shared approach to monitoring impact:** GovTech Singapore monitors outputs like course enrolment and completion rates while encouraging departments to track outcomes, with success stories shared to illustrate the impact of the programme.

Big ambition: Notable examples of governments learning at scale

COUNTRY	AREA	COUNTRY	SCALE AND SPEED
 Singapore		GovTech Singapore launched its Data&AI Literacy Primer course in 2019. Designed as a wide-scale capacity building initiative, it includes tailored learning pathways for different types of users.	90,000 public servants over 4 years
 France		France is rolling out essential climate training to all of its public servants. The training is designed to help officials understand, imagine and act on climate, natural resources and biodiversity. The delivery plan includes in-person and virtual training, including a mobile app and freely accessible online courses.	5.6 million public servants by 2027 25,000 leaders in 2024
 UAE		The UAE has mandated essential climate training for all of its federal employees.	65,000 public servants
Sub-Saharan Africa		Initiative led by Columbia University delivered an emergency Covid-19 training programme for frontline healthcare workers in 11 African countries between June and October 2020.	9,000 health workers in 5 months
 Canada		In September 2023, Canada published three foundational climate literacy courses for all public servants, connecting public servants to how their work affects the climate and how the climate affects their work.	8,000 public servants in 8 months



Australia



Thousands of Australian public servants across 50 agencies are currently participating in a 6-month trial with generative AI tools in their work. As part of the programme, participants are required to complete learning modules and knowledge assessments. The experiment concludes in June 2024.

7,000 public servants in 6 months



United States



There is a bipartisan effort to build the U.S. federal government's AI capacity. There is legislation requiring federal agencies to provide wide-scale AI training for workers. The Office of Management and Budget has started to translate this to executive orders and programme delivery.

Each of the 438 federal agencies will appoint an AI Talent Lead to lead upskilling



United Kingdom



The UK Civil Service piloted its 'One Big Thing' training initiative in late 2023. Nearly 50% of the workforce took part in data training, with more than 700,000 hours of learning completed in just 3 months. It's a delivery model the UK Civil Service will use to promote future reform priorities.

212,000 civil servants in 3 months



Argentina



After 27-year old Micaela Garcia was the victim of femicide in 2017, "Ley Micaela" was passed, requiring public servants from the judiciary, executive and legislature to receive training on gender-related topics and gender-based violence.

105,000 public servants in 2 years

TREND 2

Digital tools are helping governments track capabilities and evaluate the impact of learning

Governments need an efficient way to know which capabilities they have, where they are located and how they're being developed.

Government workforces are large and dispersed. That makes it difficult to track capabilities, monitor learning and measure the impact of that learning. At the best of times, that is a frustratingly inefficient. When crisis strikes, however, it can become a major blindspot. Digitalisation is helping some governments address this challenge.

During the pandemic, for example, many public servants needed to be re-deployed to more urgent areas of work.



Countries like Estonia, Ireland, Denmark and Belgium were able to use their digital platforms to match workforce supply and demand and deliver essential training to help rapidly reskill public servants for new roles.⁴

The case study on the following page explores the United Kingdom's ambitious long-term strategy to use its Government Campus, a digital hub for learning, to significantly improve the way it tracks learning interventions across its civil service. The Australian Public Service is also implementing a multi-year strategy (2021-2024) to adopt a government-wide learning technology platform that can ensure all their public servants are able to access high quality learning experiences and knowledge sharing anywhere and at anytime.⁵

4. *Public servants and the COVID-19 pandemic: Emerging responses and initial recommendations* (OECD, 2020)
5. *Highly Capable, Future-Ready: APS Learning and Development Action Plan* (APS, 2021)

CASE STUDY

How the UK government is measuring the impact of its Government Campus

The Government Skills and Curriculum Unit was established in 2020 to help the UK Civil Service adopt a more integrated, strategic and data-informed approach to learning and development. In 2021, they launched the Government Campus. This is a digital portal and centralised curriculum to coordinate all learning across government. They published a long-term strategy for monitoring and evaluation in 2021. There are three elements of the strategy, outlined below.

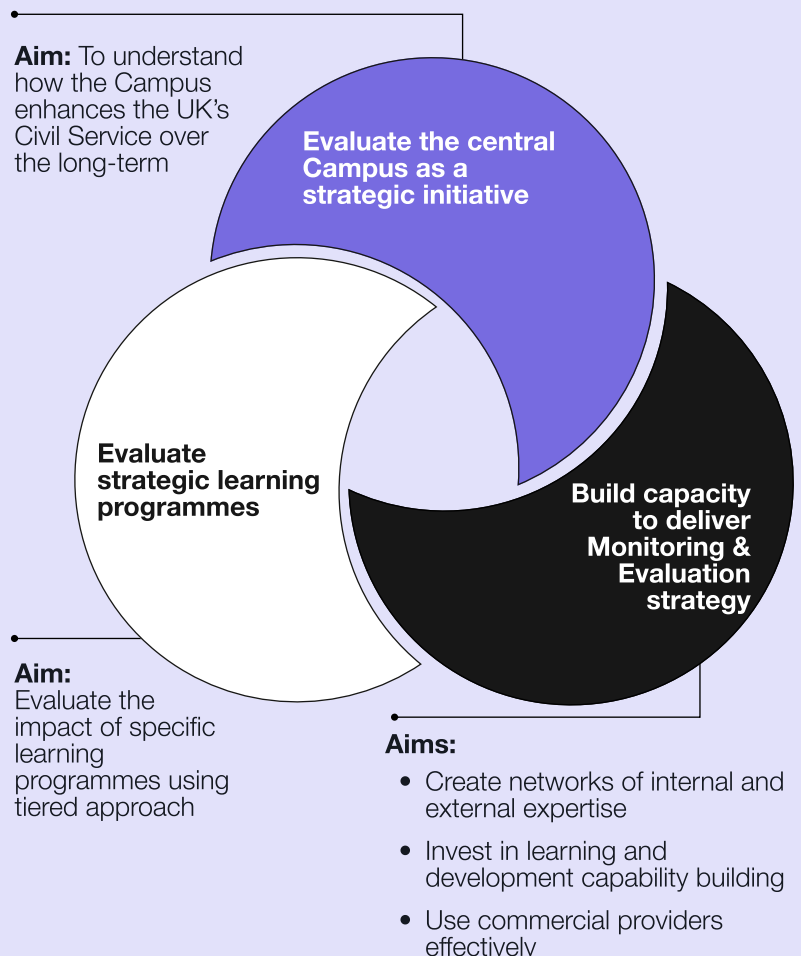
GSCU uses a tiered approach to evaluate the impact of specific learning initiatives.

Tier 1 evaluation is reserved for programmes with significant expenditure, which require robust impact and economic evaluation.

Tier 2 evaluations will use more standardised data collection methods, like surveys, tailored to specific groups of civil servants or learning programmes.

Tier 3 evaluation is the least resource-intensive approach, and will involve regular data collection on outcomes like expenditure, participation rates and learner satisfaction.

Since its launch in 2020, the Government Campus has rolled out a government-wide curriculum, initiated a major digital project to create a cross-government skills portal, as well as improved the physical and digital infrastructure for learning and development.⁶



6. Design principles for evaluation; Evaluation strategy implementation update (GSCU, [2023a](#); [2023b](#))

Smart design and artificial intelligence can enrich online learning

Strategic initiatives for learning can help governments build capabilities for their whole workforce. But to deliver value for money at this scale, governments need high quality learning and robust systems to monitor and measure its impact.

Few doubt the potential of online learning for scale and efficiency. However, questions about the quality and richness of the online learning experience persist in some cases. Prejudice and preconceptions may influence these attitudes, sometimes informed by low quality online learning experiences, designed or delivered without expert partners.



New generative AI capabilities will help large-scale online learning feel more personalised.

As part of its online learning offering, Apolitical is building an AI-powered tutor, trained on course content and additional contextual information (like country-specific policy documents) to help public servants engage with their learning more critically and interactively.

Even without AI, thoughtful course design and cohort-based learning programmes can generate rich interaction and improve completion rates. The Digital Excellence Programme, which is delivered on the Apolitical platform, is the UK government's flagship digital leadership training initiative for senior civil servants. Government departments have been enrolling cohorts of learners since early 2023. Some of these cohorts are using resources from the course to organise discussions with their teams or peers, to explore the ideas and apply them to their context.

The evidence shows that social learning is effective. Our evaluation data, for example, shows that learners who enrol as part of cohorts have higher rates of completion.

TREND 3

Public servants are harnessing informal learning to upskill quickly

The need for speed is pushing public servants to direct their own learning. Governments should harness this valuable time.

The pace of change is accelerating, which means public servants need to be able to acquire new knowledge and skills more quickly.

Rapidly learning how to use generative AI in the workplace is a prime example. Apolitical's polling shows that nearly 60% of public servants are already using the technology. These public servants are often seeking urgent personal professional development — they want immediate, practical knowledge that they can apply to their jobs. Within a year of launching the [Government AI Campus](#), we saw more than 13,000 public servants engaging with articles, events, and short courses on AI and, more recently, contributing to a [global AI community of practice](#).

Traditional, in-person courses at schools of government are not designed to keep up with this pace of learning. For example, our May 2024 AI survey shows that only 15% of public servants have received training on how to use generative AI tools. The traditional delivery model of formal learning simply can't serve the needs of tens of thousands of learners at the required speed. ⁷

15%



The proportion of public servants who have received training on new generative AI tools

7. Will governments ever learn? A study of current provision and the key gaps ([Sir Geoff Mulgan, 2024](#))

Public servants take control of their own learning

Apolitical recently conducted a global survey of public servants' learning and development, involving over 1,800 participants from around the world. The full survey results will be published in the next two months. A key insight from this research is that public servants spend significantly more time engaged with informal learning activities — like reading articles or talking to peers — than formal courses or other structured learning.

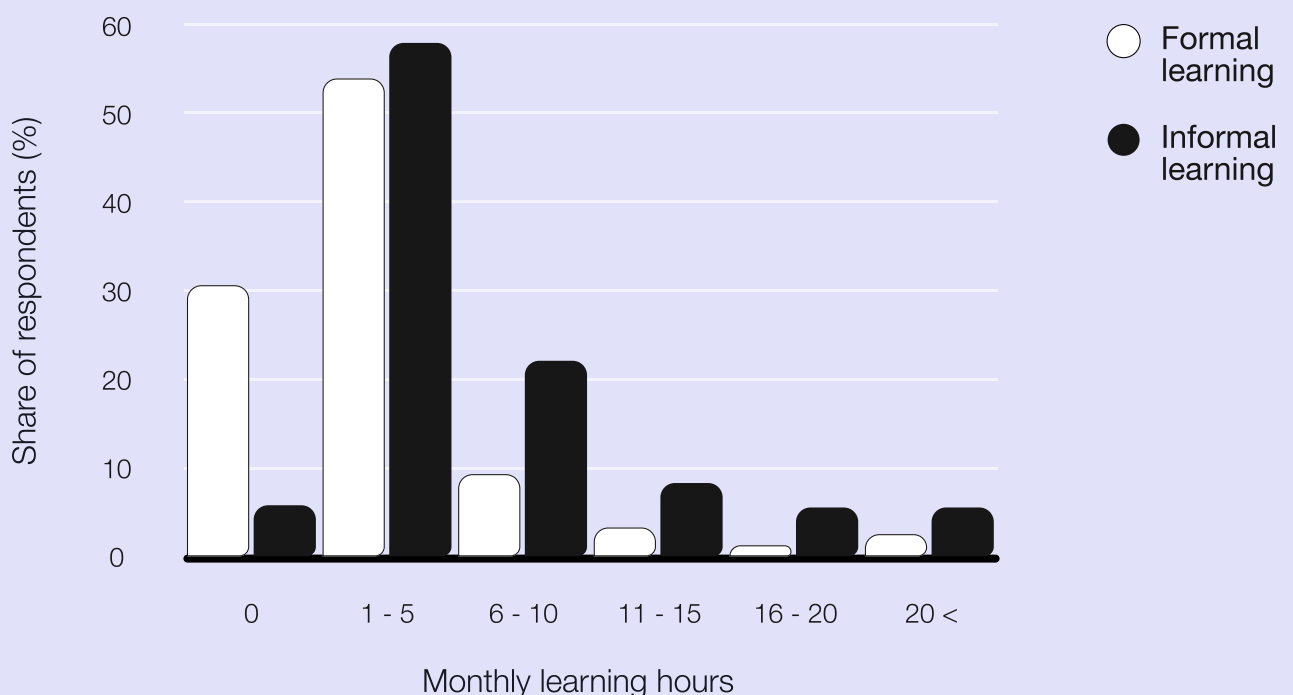


It's hard to measure, in terms of quantity, quality and impact. But all the evidence suggests that it is happening in significant quantities and that it is positively linked to job satisfaction and performance. Governments need to support, shape and harness this learning as a source of dynamic capability. ⁸

There are hundreds-of-thousands of hours worth of learning happening in governments every month.

Public servants are significantly more engaged in informal learning activities than formal opportunities.

Apolitical Public Servants' Learning & Skills Trends Survey (May 2024)



‘Contextualisation’ is the future of online learning in government

The future of high quality online learning in government needs to overcome two challenges. First, it needs to help break down the siloes that are often entrenched in bureaucracies, to give learners a more collaborative experience. Second, it needs to feel relevant to the world and daily work of public servants.



Communities of Practice are a powerful tool for fast, informal applied learning.

Communities of Practice (CoP) have a long history as powerful catalysts for collaboration, innovation and learning in government. In 2003, the U.S. Federal Highways Commission established a CoP with over 100 federal and state agents to speed up the roll-out of rumble strips, a proven intervention for reducing road traffic accidents.⁹

Back in the 2010s, the UK’s Government Digital Service fostered a thriving CoP to cultivate a new professional group within the Civil Service.¹⁰ The CoP model has also proved successful in faster moving areas like AI. In the United States, for example, the US General Services Administration has a 3,000+ CoP for generative AI.

These examples show that CoP are an established method of informal learning in government. However, they also show that CoP have mostly been used at the national level in government. Nevertheless, international CoP exist, and they are often linked to expert institutions to disseminate knowledge and research. Examples of this include the cross-sector CoP to improve the implementation of development programmes, established in 2007 by the African Capacity Building Foundation. Or, more recently, the Mission Oriented Innovation Network, established by University College London’s Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, founded in 2017, to help promote mission-based governance.

Apolitical launched Communities of Practice on our platform in December 2023.

Since then, more than 4,000 members have joined, interacting on topics from AI to neurodiversity, adaptive policymaking and design thinking. It’s early evidence of public servants’ desire to connect with their peers.

8. *Getting Skills Right* (OECD, 2019)

9. *Communities of Practice: A New Tool for Government Managers* (IBM, 2003)

10. Kattell, 2022

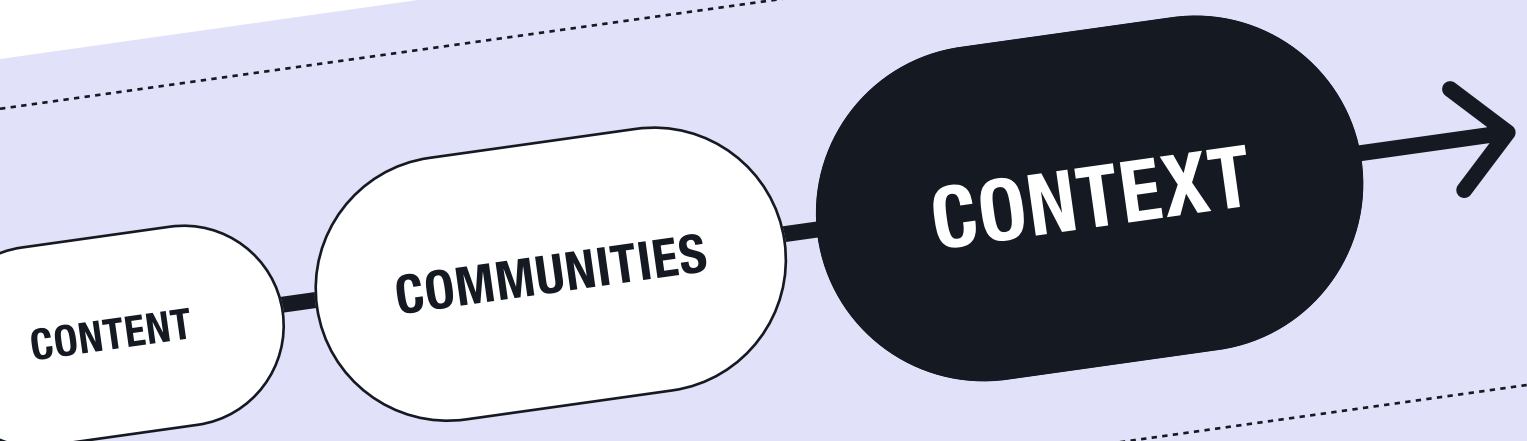
Public servants want learning that is immediately relevant to their daily work

Real life examples are key to learning. Respondents to our Learning and Skills Trends survey said that real case studies are the second most important feature of a high quality learning experience. Governments want contextualisation, too. A recent Scottish parliamentary enquiry found that local councils were dissatisfied with overly-generic climate training content.¹¹

The more contextualised the content, the more impactful the learning.

Building communities around learning can help to achieve this. Social interaction features are commonplace on many online learning platforms, and governments, like Singapore, have created communities of practice through course graduates.

The evolution of learning in government



A rich online experience which combines **communities** and **artificial intelligence** to give potentially thousands of learners greater **customisation of traditional content**

Communities of practice on Apolitical are hosted within our exclusive community of nearly 250,000 verified public servants. They are global by default, interdisciplinary, with a distributed approach to knowledge sharing — experts contribute alongside new public servants.

What makes them unique is that they are connected directly to a dedicated learning platform. That means learners on our AI Campus can translate high-level course content, like ethics and privacy, into specific discussions, like 'Are my generative AI prompts subject to freedom of information laws'? The learning journey works in reverse, too. Public servants can start with the specifics and then learn more about underlying principles, policies, and key debates.

Generative AI has big potential for customisation too, as discussed earlier. An embedded AI tutor, for example, could help contextualise a policy issue like poverty or homelessness to a learner's specific location, using public data.

Or learners could explore leadership and management topics in greater detail by querying the tutor about a specific, anonymised scenario and asking for its reflections based on the underlying course materials, curated and reviewed by an experienced learning designer.

Combining these features in one place will create a richer, faster, more context-specific learning experience for public servants.

We believe this is the future of learning in government.



Governments need more senior learning champions. Here's how you can start.

Leaders play an essential role in building dynamic capabilities. Their high-level support is essential for setting direction, encouraging a more strategic approach to learning and unlocking resources, including people's time and attention. Here are three ways leaders need to engage with learning to help build dynamic capabilities in their organisations.

➤ Create a culture of learning in your organisation

Research from the management studies field shows that organisations which are effective at learning are more effective overall. Leaders need to cultivate good learning cultures. That means building organisational self-awareness and creating an environment that is geared toward promoting and facilitating public servants' learning in order to achieve departmental priorities.

➤ Set ambitious goals and protect resources, particularly people's time

The French government sequestered its entire cadre of ambassadors and senior diplomatic staff to do a day of climate training in Paris in 2023. The same year, the UK civil service was able to commit 700,000 learning hours on data skills in just three months. In both cases, it was ambitious leadership and clear prioritisation that unlocked the resources — particularly people's time — to make it happen. These principles can apply at the organisational level.

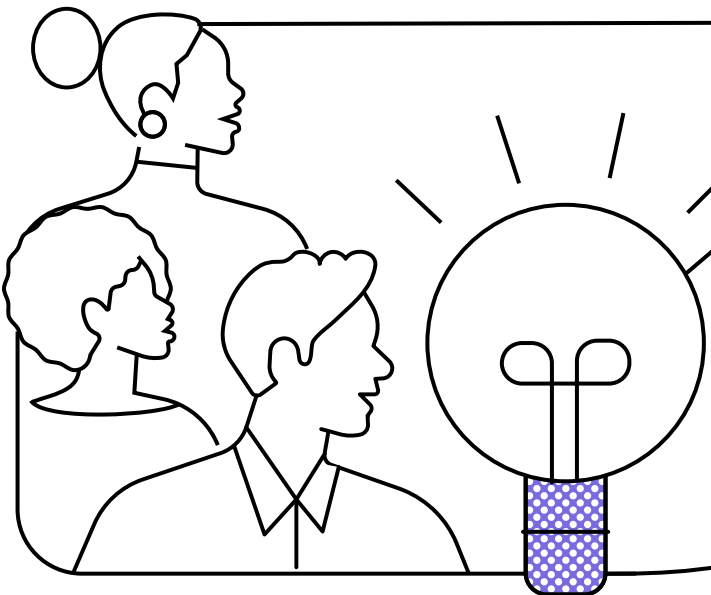
➤ Work strategically with capability building teams

Put learning culture into practice by building close working relationships with capability building teams. Elevate their work to an essential strategic consideration in policy and programme planning. They can do the essential work of mapping where public servants may lack critical skills to deliver the organisation's priorities.

The private sector and philanthropy can support, too



Cross-sector collaboration can help build governments' capabilities.



Knowledge transfer

- Consultancies and other commercial suppliers should work with government in a way that helps build complementary capabilities, through sharing insights, knowledge and best practices. In Singapore, for example, AI suppliers are required to build educational tools into applications for public officers.

Funding

- There is rarely a lack of ambition for learning in government. But a lack of resources is frequently a major constraint. Building public servants' capabilities can boost governments capacity to design and deliver policies and programmes that support development aims. At Apolitical, some of our biggest programmes are delivered with the support of ambitious, impact-focused funders, including the Bezos Earth Fund, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Talk to us

Apolitical provides a range of world class, customisable learning programmes exclusively for the public sector — from climate, digital and AI to leadership and inclusion.

Get in touch with our Chief Partnerships Officer **Pooja Warier Hamilton** to hear how we could support your organisation.



pooja.warier@apolitical.co

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