# Strong leadership and a risk-friendly culture drive civil service innovation, says new research



Innovation within the civil service is increasingly recognised as a vital driver for improving government efficiency and delivering better services to citizens. Recent research from Global Government Forum (GGF), based on discussions and surveys from their Innovation 2025 conference, reveals several key factors that enable innovation to thrive in this traditionally risk-averse sector. Foremost among these is strong leadership support, which three-quarters of surveyed civil servants identified as essential. This leadership must not only communicate a clear vision for innovation but also allocate time and resources specifically for innovation projects. Beyond backing from the top, the establishment of a culture that embraces failure and fosters open communication is vital. Civil servants highlighted that open idea sharing, risk-taking, and empowerment to make decisions are central to a successful innovation culture.

The emphasis on leadership aligns with broader UK government strategies aiming to transform the civil service. The Government Transformation Strategy 2017-2020 underscored the importance of dynamic leadership in cultivating a digitally savvy and adaptable workforce. Developing new professions and breaking down silos were seen as crucial steps to embedding multidisciplinary approaches and encouraging innovation. More recently, the Civil Service People Plan 2024-2027 has reinforced this by prioritising continuous learning and the build-out of a data-driven culture within the civil service. Here, training and leveraging digital tools are seen as foundational to improving decision-making and service delivery, echoing GGF participants’ calls for better access to modern tools and investment in data skills.

Civil servants themselves view adaptability as the top skill needed for driving innovation. Survey respondents placed a premium on adaptability to change, collaboration, creative problem-solving, and decision-making capabilities. These findings reflect the evolving role of civil servants as problem solvers who must be "risk-smart," an idea championed by Cat Little, Chief Operating Officer for the UK Civil Service. At the Innovation 2025 conference, Little emphasised the necessity for an experimental culture that embraces ‘test and learn’ approaches and sees risks not as barriers but as opportunities for growth and improvement. This framing encourages breaking down organisational silos and empowering teams, which remains a significant challenge in scaling innovation within government.

Technology and data access remain significant enablers, with 87% of respondents recognising the importance of investing in modern digital platforms and training. Ensuring data security and privacy compliance also remains a critical concern, as does breaking down data silos between departments to facilitate better information sharing and integrated service delivery. Outside the UK context, research from other sectors affirms that fostering a digital culture hinges on tolerance for failure, risk-taking, and open communication—all elements necessary to nurture sustained innovation.

Despite a strong will to innovate, the civil service faces hurdles in scaling innovative projects beyond isolated pockets of success. According to GGF’s research, addressing these barriers requires not only fostering leadership that champions innovation but also embedding cultural and structural changes that support experimentation and empower employees. This message resonates with public sector leadership literature emphasizing the need for leaders who can inspire, communicate effectively, and hold themselves accountable for fostering innovation. Building a culture of innovation in government demands persistent effort and alignment across leadership, workforce skills, technology investments, and organisational values.

In summary, creating the conditions for innovation in the civil service is a multifaceted challenge. It requires strong leadership commitment, an open and risk-tolerant culture, continuous skill development focused on adaptability and collaboration, and robust investment in digital tools and data capabilities. While progress is underway, the real opportunity lies in scaling successful initiatives to transform government operations at large, enabling public servants to meet emerging challenges with agility and creativity.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/research-reveals-the-top-factors-that-enable-civil-service-innovation/), [[5]](https://www.numberanalytics.com/blog/innovating-public-sector-leadership), [[7]](https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/building-a-culture-of-innovation-in-government/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/research-reveals-the-top-factors-that-enable-civil-service-innovation/), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-transformation-strategy-2017-to-2020/government-transformation-strategy-people-skills-and-culture), [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-people-plan-2024-2027/civil-service-people-plan-2024-2027-html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/research-reveals-the-top-factors-that-enable-civil-service-innovation/), [[4]](https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/stand-and-deliver-three-imperatives-for-civil-servants), [[7]](https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/building-a-culture-of-innovation-in-government/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/research-reveals-the-top-factors-that-enable-civil-service-innovation/), [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-people-plan-2024-2027/civil-service-people-plan-2024-2027-html), [[6]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10033523/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/research-reveals-the-top-factors-that-enable-civil-service-innovation/), [[5]](https://www.numberanalytics.com/blog/innovating-public-sector-leadership), [[7]](https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/building-a-culture-of-innovation-in-government/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/research-reveals-the-top-factors-that-enable-civil-service-innovation/), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-transformation-strategy-2017-to-2020/government-transformation-strategy-people-skills-and-culture), [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-people-plan-2024-2027/civil-service-people-plan-2024-2027-html), [[4]](https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/stand-and-deliver-three-imperatives-for-civil-servants)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/research-reveals-the-top-factors-that-enable-civil-service-innovation/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-transformation-strategy-2017-to-2020/government-transformation-strategy-people-skills-and-culture> - The UK Government Transformation Strategy outlines the importance of developing a skilled and adaptable civil service to drive innovation. It highlights the need for continuous learning, the introduction of new professions, and the breaking down of professional silos to embed multidisciplinary thinking. The strategy also emphasizes the significance of leadership in fostering a culture that supports digital transformation and the adoption of new technologies, ensuring that civil servants are equipped to meet evolving challenges effectively.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-people-plan-2024-2027/civil-service-people-plan-2024-2027-html> - The Civil Service People Plan 2024-2027 focuses on enhancing the skills and capabilities of civil servants to meet government priorities. It advocates for a culture of continuous learning, offering both in-person and digital training opportunities. The plan emphasizes the importance of data-driven decision-making and the development of a data-driven learning organisation, ensuring that civil servants are well-equipped to deliver efficient public services and tackle future challenges.
4. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/stand-and-deliver-three-imperatives-for-civil-servants> - McKinsey discusses the evolving role of civil servants in the context of modern governance. It highlights the necessity for civil servants to adapt to new challenges by embracing data-driven decision-making, fostering partnerships between government and the private sector, and developing capabilities that support innovation. The article underscores the importance of continuous learning and the ability to respond rapidly to changes, ensuring that civil servants can effectively address complex societal issues.
5. <https://www.numberanalytics.com/blog/innovating-public-sector-leadership> - This article explores the critical role of leadership in driving innovation within the public sector. It emphasizes that leaders must create environments that encourage experimentation, risk-taking, and learning from failure. The piece outlines essential leadership traits, including a clear vision for innovation, the ability to inspire staff, strong communication skills, and a commitment to continuous improvement. It also addresses common barriers to innovation and suggests strategies for overcoming them to foster a culture of innovation.
6. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10033523/> - This study examines factors that influence the acquisition of a digital culture in large organisations in Chile. It identifies key elements such as customer orientation, openness to change, tolerance for failure, and a culture of experimentation and innovation. The research highlights the importance of risk tolerance, rewards and incentives aligned with digital transformation, and digital agility. It also underscores the role of open communication, integration of multifunctional teams, and the promotion of disruptive change in fostering a digital culture.
7. <https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/building-a-culture-of-innovation-in-government/> - The Partnership for Public Service discusses strategies for building a culture of innovation within government. It emphasizes the critical role of leadership in driving cultural change and suggests updating leadership qualifications to include components on experimentation and technical literacy. The article advocates for enabling high-performing leaders to share expertise and support implementation through cross-agency communities of practice. It also recommends requiring performance targets and evaluations to hold leaders accountable for the results of their programs and the culture they create.