



iceland



PUBLIC SERVICE DIGITIZATION LEADS THE WAY
TO CITIZEN EMPOWERMENT

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In Iceland, a “digital-first” approach to government services drives high user satisfaction. Robust e-authentication systems enhance transparency and efficiency, bolstering democratic processes. Challenges include ensuring accessibility, cybersecurity, and digital literacy. Iceland both consumes and produces digital content, fostering a vibrant content ecosystem. Inclusivity, security, and citizen engagement are central to digital policy goals.

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How would you define or describe the digital trends in your country, especially regarding digital social impact ventures?

Research consistently shows that Icelanders have a strong preference for digital government services. In

response, through the digital policy and the establishment of Digital Iceland, the government has prioritised a “digital-first” approach. This ensures that all citizens desiring access to digital government services have that option, aligning with the diverse needs of our population, including those facing challenges related to transportation, disabilities, employment, or rural living conditions.

Several initiatives underpin this strategy, including when you log onto Digital Iceland¹, you can select to log on as an individual person or as a company where you are a registered user. To log on, you use your electronic ID, which is your unique and secure identity. From there, you can open up your “My pages”, for example, for “Health” or “Finances & Taxes”, which has significantly improved for individuals, or you can open up “People with Disabilities”, focusing on enhancing accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Beyond government services, we’ve also seen remarkable contributions from digital social impact ventures, collaborating with the public sector to address social issues through innovative digital solutions.

Addressing the inherent challenges of this digital-first approach, efforts have been made to ensure digital literacy and accessibility, particularly in remote areas, ensuring that digital services are inclusive and beneficial for all citizens.

Metrics of success, such as an increase in digital service usage and high satisfaction rates among users, underscore the effectiveness and public approval of this strategy. The rise in use increased by 66 per cent from January 2023 to January 2024. Looking ahead, we aim to expand our digital service offerings and continue our collaboration with private and social sectors to foster a more connected and inclusive digital society in Iceland.²

¹ To read more, visit www.island.is

² More information can be found at www.island.is/en/o/digital-iceland/the-

How would you describe recent digital shifts in your country?

In Iceland, digital literacy and connectivity are among the highest globally, driving a significant shift in user expectations towards digital services. This demand has been met with a robust framework for digital governance and secure e-authentication, enabling a comprehensive transition of both public and private services to online platforms.

The digital landscape in Iceland today is unrecognisable compared to 20 years ago. The author can also discuss the situation from 1981 to 1985 when he was in charge of where to go in Iceland. Now, citizens can complete a range of tasks digitally—from filing taxes and applying for parental leave to requesting passports—all from the comfort of their homes. These advancements are a testament to the successful implementation of digital services that cater to the evolving needs of our society.

Among the notable achievements, the introduction of the Digital Island website has streamlined complicated life events such as learning how to drive and losing a loved one, with complex communication between agencies and users, significantly enhancing user experience and efficiency. Moreover, our commitment to ensuring secure and accessible digital services for all has involved tackling challenges such as enhancing cybersecurity measures, bridging the digital divide, and ensuring equitable access to technology across the population.

Looking forward, Iceland continues to explore innovative digital solutions to further improve public services and expand the digital economy. Upcoming projects for Digital Iceland aim to simplify people's lives in Iceland and showcase our ongoing commitment to leading in digital transformation and governance.

[digital-journey-in-numbers](#).

The impact of these digital shifts on Icelandic society has been profound, simplifying administrative processes and fostering a more connected and efficient community. As we move forward, we focus on leveraging digital innovation to enhance the quality of life for all Icelanders and maintain our position as a leading digital nation.

Describe and provide insight into whether your country is democratic or the internet is breaking democracy in your body of politics.

Iceland is a constitutional republic characterised by a robust multi-party system and governed by a coalition that upholds the nation’s core values, including a staunch commitment to human rights and digital innovation. Our dedication to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights is reflected in policy and the vibrant online movements that have found a platform through the internet.

The digital landscape in Iceland has significantly bolstered our democratic processes. Through our “digital first” strategy, we have embraced technology to enhance government transparency, efficiency, and public engagement. Initiatives such as digital authentication and www.island.is application systems have revolutionised how citizens interact with their government, from online consultations to digitalised public services, ensuring that governance is more accessible and responsive.

However, the journey towards a fully digital democracy has challenges. Issues like misinformation, digital literacy, and ensuring equitable access to technology require continuous effort. Iceland is actively working to mitigate these challenges through educational programs, regulatory frameworks, and investments in digital infrastructure, ensuring that the internet remains a space for positive democratic engagement.

Looking ahead, Iceland remains committed to exploring innovative ways to use digital technologies to further democratic values. Future initiatives will focus on enhancing e-participation, protecting digital rights, and ensuring our digital transformation respects and promotes our democratic ideals.

By leveraging the power of the internet and digital technologies, Iceland aims to preserve and enrich our democratic heritage, ensuring that it continues to evolve to meet the needs and expectations of all Icelanders.

Digital Tools are considered to be empowering. Can you describe which sector in your country has been most helped by digital?

Digital tools have been a cornerstone of empowerment across various sectors in Iceland, with digital authentication, or e-ID, playing a pivotal role. Managed by the government-owned company Auðkenni (www.audkenni.is), the national e-ID allows all Icelanders to authenticate themselves digitally, laying the groundwork for a wide array of digital services. This system is utilised by both the public and private sectors for online authentication, achieving an impressive adoption rate of approximately 95 per cent among the Icelandic work market and 80 per cent among those aged 75 and older.

Digital Iceland has been instrumental in leveraging this technology, developing open-source tools that are accessible to everyone and assisting government entities in their implementation. These tools, including application systems, a digital mailbox, and central “My Pages” that provide access to personal government data, are all built upon the national e-ID system.

The impact of digital tools extends beyond authentication. In sectors like healthcare, digital tools have streamlined

appointments and medical records access, improving patient care and operational efficiency. In education, they have facilitated remote learning and expanded educational resources. For public services, the move to digital has not only made government more accessible and responsive but also more cost-effective, optimising the use of public funds.

While the transition to digital has brought numerous benefits, it has also posed challenges, particularly in ensuring that all citizens have the skills and access needed to utilise these services. Efforts to address these challenges have included digital literacy programs and initiatives aimed at enhancing internet accessibility across the country.

Looking forward, Digital Iceland continues to innovate, with plans to expand digital services and further integrate digital tools into government operations. These efforts aim to not only improve the efficiency and accessibility of public services but also to empower citizens by providing them with secure, convenient access to government interactions and personal data.

What are the biggest challenges in your country in terms of digital transformation?

While digital transformation in Iceland is progressing rapidly, the pace varies across different sectors, with some areas experiencing faster adoption and higher user uptake than others. This discrepancy presents a unique set of challenges as user expectations increasingly lean towards seamless and universal access to government services online. Users now anticipate the ability to access all government functions digitally, setting a high bar for digital service provision.

Meeting these expectations requires expanding and improving digital services and ensuring they are accessible to everyone, regardless of disabilities. This inclusivity challenge means

developing and implementing robust accessibility standards, such as screen readers for the visually impaired and simplified navigation for those with cognitive disabilities, to ensure digital services are universally usable.

In addition to user expectations and accessibility, other significant challenges include maintaining robust cybersecurity measures to protect user data, ensuring data privacy in an increasingly digital landscape, promoting digital literacy among all demographics to enable effective use of digital services, and upgrading infrastructure to support the growing demand for online services.

To address these challenges, Digital Iceland is actively working on several fronts. Strategies include ongoing user feedback mechanisms to better understand and meet public expectations, partnerships with organisations specialising in accessibility to enhance service usability, and continuous investment in cybersecurity and privacy measures. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at boosting digital literacy and infrastructure development are crucial to our comprehensive approach to digital transformation.

Looking forward, Digital Iceland is committed to leveraging technology and innovation to keep pace with user expectations and lead by example in creating a digitally inclusive society where everyone can benefit from the advancements in digital government services.

Does your country consume digital content more than it produces, or vice versa?

In Iceland, as in many other countries, digital content consumption is significantly high. Our media landscape is diverse, with public and privately-owned media companies offering a wide array of content. This diversity ensures that users have access to a broad spectrum of perspectives and genres,

enriching our society's cultural and informational fabric.

In the face of global challenges such as false news and information chaos, the Icelandic government has taken proactive steps to ensure the availability and accessibility of reliable information. The development of the government platform, www.island.is, serves as a central hub for all public services, offering a trustworthy source of information for citizens.

Additionally, the government's information website³, along with a strategic presence on social media, is part of our comprehensive approach to countering misinformation by providing clear, accurate, and accessible information.

While consumption remains high, Iceland also contributes significantly to the production of digital content, spanning areas such as music, literature, software development, and more. Our creators and media companies have made notable impacts both locally and internationally, highlighting the creativity and innovation inherent in Icelandic digital content production.

The synergy between public and private media sectors is crucial in fostering a vibrant digital content ecosystem. This collaboration ensures a balanced mix of content that caters to various interests and demographics, supporting an informed and engaged society.

Looking forward, Iceland aims to continue enhancing its digital content landscape by encouraging local production, investing in digital literacy, and implementing policies that support the creation and distribution of quality content. These efforts are geared towards maintaining a dynamic balance between content consumption and production, ensuring that Iceland remains a prolific consumer of digital content and a significant contributor to the global digital content sphere.

³ www.government.is

Can you make recommendations on how your country should make digital policies an equaliser?

To harness digital policies as a force for equality, Iceland is committed to implementing “digital first” policies, ensuring that all citizens who prefer to engage with digital services have the opportunity to do so. This approach places heightened demands and expectations on government agencies and municipalities, pushing for superior levels of security, efficiency, and service time in comparison to traditional face-to-face interactions.

Key to this endeavour is the development and enforcement of robust standards that govern the security of user data and optimise the user experience. These standards are not static; they evolve in response to new technologies, threats, and user feedback, ensuring that digital services remain secure, accessible, and user-friendly.

Incorporating user-centred design principles, our digital services are crafted with the needs and preferences of all Icelanders in mind, ensuring ease of use, accessibility, and relevance. Our commitment to accessibility is unwavering, guided by the Icelandic government’s Digital Policy, which mandates that digital services be accessible to everyone, including those with disabilities, residents of remote areas, and the elderly, thus promoting digital inclusion across the board.

To achieve these goals, engaging with citizens is paramount. We employ various mechanisms to gather feedback on digital services, ensuring that the voices of users directly inform ongoing improvements and policy development. This responsive approach to digital governance ensures that our digital services not only meet current needs but are also adaptable to future demands.

Furthermore, our digital policies are designed with the broader social impact in mind, aiming to reduce economic disparities,

support educational achievements, and enhance public health outcomes. By leveraging digital technologies, we strive to create a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous society for all Icelanders.

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Johann P. Malmquist has a BS in Mathematics and Physics and a PhD in Computer Science. A scholarship from The Institute of International Education paid for the Undergraduate study and IBM fellowship, and the National Foundation paid for the graduate study. Johann worked at IBM T.J. Wattson Research Centre, where he was on the team that created the Query-By-Example database management system. Johann worked for the Ministry of Finance in Iceland for five years and was in charge of computerising the government of Iceland. Among the policies Johann was in charge of developing for the government was the use of networked PCs for government workers back in 1983. In 1985, Johann became a Full Professor at The University of Iceland. At the University, Johann has served as the Chairman of The Department of Computer Science for several years and The Dean of the Faculty of Science for a couple of years. Johann has worked as a consultant for several international companies like Apple Computer and Software AG. Johann has founded several software companies and served as the chairman of them, and some of them have been internationally successful, like GoPro , another successful company that had more than a million downloads in the OVI store Nokia is Hugvakin.