

The building blocks required for a bright digital future

By [Paige dos Santos](#)

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Connecting citizens enables the public sector to communicate effectively with the population, pre-empting certain events and making sure citizens are notified of critical information. But the opportunity goes further than just being able to send and receive information.



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As the general population spends more and more time on smartphones, this captive audience provides the perfect vehicle to shape and drive a better tomorrow for our country. Through the utilisation of behaviour design techniques, we can better understand how citizens make decisions, shaped by social bonds, choice framing and circumstance.



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This insight can be used to reward positive citizen behaviours, creating more impactful policies, and stimulating community upliftment. By creating a single point of connection with citizens and providing value to their daily lives, the public sector can initiate a process of stimulating positive behavioural changes in line with broader policies.

In addition to this, the ability to understand how citizens move through the various systems, both digitally and physically, offers a myriad of cost-saving opportunities. Information collected can be used to create easy-to-use self-serve options.

As reported by the Economist, a digital transaction is typically 20 times cheaper than one by phone, and 50 times cheaper than a face-to-face transaction. Streamlined digital interfaces also save citizens considerable time and effort.

In Boston, just moving paper forms online is estimated to have saved citizens almost 10,000 hours. In a South African context, where many citizens spend long hours queueing for a variety of public services, often taking unpaid leave from work, the impact is even more notable.

Connecting citizens for sustainable cities

In a global effort to improve the lives of billions of people around the world, leaders adopted the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015.

Purpose-driven businesses pledge their resources to make a positive global impact. Leveraging technology and data to improve the citizen experience directly contributes to achieving [Sustainable Development Goal 11, 'Sustainable Cities and Communities'](#), which aims to make cities safe, inclusive, resilient and sustainable.

The vast and rich data pools that can be collected across multiple channels can reveal many insights regarding societal needs and opportunities. The public sector's response to meeting the needs unearthed by such data sets will understandably be limited to the resources available to build or deploy suitable solutions.

These constraints provide an opportunity to create platforms for API-enabled entrepreneurship. By providing entrepreneurs with secure API access to anonymised data sets, social enterprises can be incubated, providing for the needs of citizens and cities.

The building blocks of connected cities

However, bringing these benefits to life is not as simple as implementing one or two systems and solving the data access barrier. To take advantage of the considerable benefits of enabling truly connected citizens, we need to get the fundamental building blocks right.

- **Connected governments before connected citizens.** With many government departments making moves towards enabling connected citizens, pockets of excellence are emerging. The true value lies in being able to connect data from multiple government departments in order to generate deep insights and identify areas where value can be created, and costs saved. Integration with multiple backend systems remains a reality. Making this less complex is a priority.
- **Citizens need to trust before they are willing to connect.** In 2018, SAP asked a group of representatives from more than 45 countries what they wanted from their future cities. The results painted an interesting picture: Many millennials wanted more efficient public transport systems, but at the same time, they were unwilling to engage with services that “invaded their privacy.”

Trust and transparency is imperative to effective citizen engagement. Customer identity and access management platforms enable citizens to see exactly how their data is being used and manage their preferences instantaneously.

According to a 2016 report by Accenture Interactive, 70% of individuals will opt into allowing data use - provided they know how it is being used.

- **Unlocking citizen potential through a focus on design.** Citizen engagement can be a powerful tool in creating positive change in societies. Engaging citizens to drive positive behavioural change requires more than just an omnichannel communications plan. It requires a focus on the psychology of what makes communities tick. Utilising behavioural design techniques in campaign design can lead to higher levels of impact in shorter periods of time.

An example of this is a water shortage crisis that took place in Columbia. Initially, a state of public emergency was declared, and the government launched a traditional communication programme warning inhabitant of the coming crisis.



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This only increased water consumption and hoarding. A change in strategy saw the government sending out volunteers to explain the best water conservation measure, publicising daily water consumption figures and naming those who were cooperating with the effort, as well as those who were not. The result was reductions in water usage that persisted long after the crisis was resolved.

A much deeper understanding of human behaviour is needed

To reap the benefits of a connected citizen strategy, we need to start implementing cohesive technology strategies and combining these with a deep understanding of human behaviour in a South African context.

Such an approach paves the way for a connected future where we can effectively measure the impact and value trade-offs of policy decisions. A future where our leadership has the transparency required to make investment decisions that propel our country forward. And every citizen feels empowered to make a meaningful impact in their community, no matter how large or small.

Private and public-sector organisations with all their multifarious complexities; societies, from the family to the nation; economies, from the subsistence farmer to the giant multinational - all are inherently human undertakings fuelled by desires and ideas and made possible through collaboration, conversations and amazing technologies.

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