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# Bridging the gender gaps in GovTech

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Photo: Arne Hoel / World Bank

This International Women’s Day, the [UN Commission on the Status of Women](#) will spotlight its main objective—which is, Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. On occasion, this blog examines gender gaps in GovTech and the opportunities that exist to bridge these gaps in the public sector.

Globally, there is an equal need for digital skills in the public sector as there is in the private sector. Digital skills are especially critical to ensure that increasing GovTech investments achieve their potential and are used in day-to-day operations. A near universal challenge for governments modernizing their public sectors is to attract and retain people with the skills to design, deploy, and monitor GovTech solutions. There are several aspects to this challenge, which include remuneration, digital-skills competencies, and potential for professional growth. For women in GovTech, these are exacerbated, specifically in terms of gaps in skills, wages, and opportunities.

The most common excuse for the difficulty to attract and retain information and communications technology (ICT) specialists in the public sector is that the private sector offers higher compensation and greater career growth potential. This is not gender specific. The World Bank’s [Tech Savvy: Advancing GovTech Reforms in Public Administration](#) identifies ways to address the wage differentials in ICT roles. In some countries, governments

can apply a market coefficient to supplement wages for staff with ICT skills, which are considered a priority in both private and public sectors. For example, the United States allows recruitment incentives as high as 25 percent of starting wages.

## Women Are Less Likely to Be Employed in Tech, Face More Constraints

ILO data shows that globally, women are less likely to be employed in the tech sector and, when employed, tend to be paid less than their male counterparts. According to a recent study by Accenture and Girls who Code, women also tend to leave careers in technology earlier and at a higher rate than men. In the United States, for example, 50 percent of women exit their technology careers by age 35 and, further, they abandon these careers at a 45 percent higher rate than men. The same study cites organizational culture as the primary reason women leave tech careers (37 percent of respondents).

Another study found that women face a more constrained and negative culture around innovation within governments. They receive less support when trying out new ideas, are penalized more often when experiments go wrong, and overall feel less encouraged to innovate when compared with men. The GovTech Maturity Index data shows that 41 percent of economies do not have a policy or program to improve public sector innovation.

As a result, many developing countries report high turnover in ICT staffing. Staff may start their careers in the public sector and hone their skills there before moving to the private sector, which may offer better opportunities and a different culture that may prioritize learning, innovation, and entrepreneurship. In Argentina, for example, high employee turnover within its digital and innovation agencies is partially attributable to the private sector's more agile and innovation-driven mindset and culture.

Upskilling programs to help staff perform their current roles while progressing to more complex roles is one way to build capacity and provide professional advancement opportunities. Skilling plans should evolve and be tailored to meet specific needs for different groups of civil servants. Fostering an environment of learning may provide additional work satisfaction. However, these programs are not apparent in many of the World Bank's client countries. According to the 2022 GTMI data, only 66 out of 198 surveyed economies (or 33 percent) reported they have both a public sector skills strategy and program.

One country that seems to be doing it correctly is Australia. As part of its Public Service Modernization Fund, the country has piloted digital-career pathways, which links roles, skills, and classifications across a career in the public service. This includes developing learning standards and establishing a shared understanding of different digital roles based on associated skills, knowledge, and experience. Individual IT specialists can see how their current skills could be applied to digital roles, the digital career paths they could pursue in civil service, and the new skills they would need to acquire to prepare for promotion.

## **Incentivizing women to join public sector ICT roles**

In a note published on govtech.com, [women business leaders call for a multifaceted](#) approach to attract more women to the tech sector. They emphasize the need to foster a truly inclusive environment and develop talent pipelines that accelerate pay equity and participation rates. In the public sector, creating gender-informed policies and practices, gender-blind evaluations of competencies, revisiting hiring and promotion procedures, developing skills-based career pathways, and focusing on cultural change may result in greater female participation in GovTech.

Civil service leaders need to reaffirm their commitment to inclusive societal development, with the knowledge that economically empowered women create a more equitable and sustainable future. To this end, new thinking and approaches to address gender participation gaps and pay equity in GovTech is necessary to develop and maintain the female leaders of the present and future.

### **Editor's note**

This is the second of a series of blogs discussing the importance of a gender lens in GovTech policymaking and implementation. These blogs are the result of a collaboration between the World Bank [GovTech Global Unit](#) and [The Digital Economist](#), aligning with the multistakeholder approach of the [GovTech Global Partnership](#).