

**MINISTRY: PUBLIC SERVICE AND ADMINISTRATION**

**REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

**QUESTION FOR WRITTEN REPLY**

**DATE: 5 MAY 2023**

**QUESTION NO.: 1435.**

**Inkosi R N Cebekhulu (IFP) to ask the Minister of Public Service and Administration:**

Whether her department has any plans to ensure Artificial Intelligence transformation in the Public Service; if not, why not; if so, what are the full, relevant details? **NW1663E**

**REPLY:**

The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) has developed the **Digital Government Policy Framewor**k and the **Public Service Digital Transformation Strategy** as part of initiatives to guide the public service in embracing the use of Artificial Intelligence in planning and service delivery. Government considers, AI “as a set of computer science techniques that enable systems to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision making, and language translation”.

The following are already being implemented to ensure that the transformative nature of AI is fully harnessed:

1. The department is leading research into the Future of Work and the required skills in partnership with the Public Service Education and Training Authority (PSETA), WITS and TUT;
2. A skills audit is being rolled out using the Public Service Skills Audit Methodology to identify the current skills, qualifications and competencies that are already available within the state;
3. Full rollout of the GovChat platform, which is a chatbot-based solution that enables citizens to access government services and information via popular social media platforms. The GovChat platform proved very efficient during the lockdown period as government responded to the COVID-19 pandemic where it made it easier for citizens to interact with the government and access services;
4. Taking advantage of partnerships with the Private Sector to deliver services digitally;
5. Making use of digital booking system to manage long ques and speed service delivery for popular services such renewal of vehicle and driver licenses (Department of Transport), IDs and passports (Department of Home Affairs), registration of learners in schools (Education) and delivery of chronic medication (Department of Health);
6. Continued innovation at the South African Revenue Service showcasing how technology can be used to improve organisational performance, leading to citizen satisfaction;
7. Use of WhatsApp, USSD, and email platforms to process 14 million Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant applications, and successfully granting six million qualifying applicants in a short space of time by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA)
8. The Department of Communications and Digital Technologies’ partnership with several universities to establish AI institutes to promote skills development and innovation; And
9. The promotion of AI linked softwares and workspaces for office productivity and functionality.

The Department is alive to the possibilities that AI will have in revolutionising industries as diverse as health care, education, law, criminal justice, journalism, aerospace, and manufacturing, with the potential to profoundly affect how people live, work, and play. However, it also acknowledges the existence of significant obstacles that require attention, including ethical considerations in AI usage, tackling the issue of data scarcity, ensuring universal access to AI benefits, and addressing the digital divide, among other challenges.

To fully capitalize on the potential of AI, it is crucial for all participants in the ecosystem to play their respective roles. These include:

1. Government: Policy makers must adopt a long-term perspective and act as coordinators and regulators of the ecosystem to ensure that its benefits are accessible to all.
2. Academia: Academia drives state-of-the-art research, serves as a breeding ground for tomorrow's high-growth AI start-ups, and must collaborate with industry to continuously retrain the workforce.
3. International AI community: Collaboration with the international AI community is vital for South Africa's development in AI, as it will enable the country to compete on a global level.
4. Industry: Industry is responsible for providing broadband connectivity, funding, expanding the use of AI technologies, and retraining the workforce for an AI-enabled future.
5. Civil society: Civil society is responsible for extending the advantages of AI to underserved communities and serves as an alarm system for regulating AI risks in the future."

The National School of Government (NSG) continues to host Masterclasses to create awareness on the use of artificial intelligence in the public service.

The DPSA, in partnership with the Centre for Public Service Innovation (CPSI), the Wits School of Governance, the DCDT and international partners including the Danish Agency of Digitisation, the OECD and the United Nations University is compiling global best practices to strengthen streamlining of open digital governance and transformation. Denmark is the highest-ranking country on the eGovernment Survey and according to the 2022 UN eGovernment Survey, South Africa is ranked the highest on the Continent on digitisation and digital transformation and this approach will assist the country to retain the top spot.

The CPSI is also investing in supporting innovators within and outside of government who contribute to the digitisation and digital transformation of the Public Sector including through “hackathons” and piloting projects such as *Guardian Health* which uses AI in improving diagnostics in Health. Top of FormThe approach to the adoption of AI is rooted in the professionalisation and wage bill management imperative for meeting the needs and expectations of society through improving the efficiency and effectiveness of office work by automating routine tasks, improving collaboration, and providing intelligent insights and recommendations.

The department acknowledges the numerous advantages that can be attained by integrating AI into various sectors and the abovementioned approach showcases how these and the challenges are being comprehensively responded to.

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