



# DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AMIDST DEVIANCE: UNDERSTANDING IMPACTS DEVIANT WORKPLACE BEHAVIOUR DYNAMICS

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**Category:** [International Edition](#)

**Purpose:** To increase our understanding of public sector digital transformation, we explore the impact of deviant behaviour on digital transformation. This contributes to the current literature on digital Transformation as well as to that of deviant workplace behaviour.

**Design:** We conduct a qualitative case study of a digital transformation initiative in an Italian municipality. The study utilizes longitudinal data from two sets of interviews over a three year period.

**Findings:** We identify three types of institutional drift related to digital transformation, i.e., decelerating digital transformation, maintaining infrastructural stability, and accelerating digital transformation. We categorize mediators for said drift and theorize on the role of deviant workplace behaviour as a strategic driver for digital transformation.

**Research Limitations/implications:** With the study being a case study, it is limited in terms of generalizability and transferability. Through the study, we sensitize the notion of digital transformation and show how deviant behaviour results in strategic polyphony. Future studies are informed through offering a new perspective to public sector digital transformation strategy.

**Practical implications:** Practice should view deviant workplace behaviour as simultaneously constructive and



destructive in lieu of planned digital transformation, as well as see its presence as a potential sign of sub-par prerequisites for digital transformation.

Societal implications: Through our study, deviant workplace behaviour is highlighted as a source of strategic polyphony and hence an important aspect of digital transformation strategy.

Originality: Through being the first paper to apply the theory of institutional drift to digital transformation settings as well as identifying the impact of deviant workplace behaviour on digital transformation, the study offers novel insights.

Keywords: institutional drift, deviant workplace behaviour, digital transformation

## Introduction

Since the dawn of the formal organization, organizational change has been cumbersome and riddled with caveats. Through studies of inertia and organizational resistance (Ebbers and Dijk, 2007; Malhotra et al. 2021), we have learned that organizations are poised in opposition to change. Change is a non-natural state for the organization, and organizational actors will engage in direct conflict with change initiatives. Or to put it in the words of Newton's third law of motion: for any action, there is an equal but opposite reaction. Previous research has addressed these issues of active resistance through a plethora of constructs such as guerilla warfare, cynicism, inertia, and rigidity (Sarkar and Osiyevskyy, 2018). Far from conclusive, the findings indicate that resistance impacts everything from the outcome of specific initiatives (Frick et al., 2021) to the institutional order (Voronov et al., 2021) and strategic direction of the organization (Baptista et al., 2021). Resistance is not solely acting against the change initiative resulting in standstills but prodding the organization into new directions. Resistance is hence a generative process (Dillard-Wright, 2022). Digital transformation is a specific type of organizational change instigated through the utilization of digital technologies (Hanelt et al., 2021). Previous research highlights that the transformation involves both incremental improvements in existing operations and radical changes in the underlying business model (Vial, 2019). With transformation being both incremental and radical, resistance is often abounded (Magnusson et al., 2021), and will influence the direction of digital transformation (Chanas et al., 2019). There have been multiple studies of how resistance impacts digital transformation (Frick et al., 2021), yet so far there have been but few studies of how practice deviations on the micro level, over time, create drift in the strategic direction of an organization. Voronov et al (2021) propose a theory for how practice deviations result in institutional drift, i.e., an incremental re-shaping of the institutional order of an organization. We posit that this theory warrants testing in relation to digital transformation in the public sector, yet that it requires further configuration. To this end we equate practice deviations with the previously studied construct of deviant workplace behaviour (Appelbaum et al., 2007). We pose that to understand the digital transformation of a public sector organization, we need to understand the impact of deviant workplace behaviour. We answer the following research question:



*RQ1: What is the impact of deviant workplace behaviour on digital transformation?*

The question is answered through a qualitative single case study of the Italian municipality that since 2019 has had a significant program for digital transformation. We contribute to research through answering the calls from Voronov et al (2021) on empirical tests of their proposed theory of institutional drift, as well as Lawrence (2008, p. 189) call for studies of “actors who are able to somehow compromise, avoid or defy systems of institutional control or episodes of interested agency”.

## Previous research and theoretical framing

Digital transformation, here understood along the lines of Hanelt et al (2021) as organizational change brought about through the utilization of digital technologies, has received ample scholarly and practical attention during the past couple of years. Through a multitude of studies, research has addressed issues ranging from its micro- to macro foundations (Chanias et al., 2019; Lanamäki et al., 2020; Magnusson et al., 2021; Smith and Beretta, 2021; Wilson and Mergel, 2022). Core to previous findings lies the perception of digital transformation being a composite of parallel actions to exploit existing opportunities (e.g., decrease cost of continued operations, increased efficiency) and explore new opportunities (e.g., develop new value offerings, increase innovation) (Oberländer et al., 2021). Due to its oftentimes disruptive character, digital transformation is reportedly met with resistance from managers and co-workers (Christ-Brendemühl and Schaarschmidt, 2019). In a conceptual study by Voronov et al (2021), the impact of resistance in the form of practice deviations (i.e., unsanctioned behaviour) is proposed to over time change the institutional order of the organization in question. Through co-workers not sanctioning the norms, the organization experiences what Voronov et al refer to as “institutional drift”.

The notion of organizational actors not following rules, regulations, and norms (and the subsequent consequences) has been previously studied within a variety of aspects. As noted by Ciborra (2000), organizations are poised in the tension between control and drift, destined to move in directions that are sometimes intentional, and at other times unintentional. Baptista et al (2021) studied the implementation of a digital check-in solution at a UK airport and found that deviations in terms of use lead to strategic drift for the organization as such, Rahrovani (2020) studied the strategic impacts of social media platforms and Nielsen et al (2022) studied how translation of constructs over organizational sets creates conceptual drift. Following Voronov et al (2021), this study builds on a theoretical foundation of institutional work, i.e., “the practice of individual and collective actors aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence et al., 2011, p. 52), calling for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between agency and structure, as well as seeing institutional processes as emergent, non-deterministic and non-linear. This strand of institutional theory has a long tradition, yet has only more recently become a way for an increased emphasis on the role of the individual in institutions (Aghazadeh et al., 2021), and on the role of unintended consequences in the shaping of social reality.



As organizational actors engage in deviant workplace behaviour, they invariably change the organization (Appelbaum et al., 2007). Robinson & Bennett (1995) propose a typology for deviant workplace behaviour (Figure 1), differentiating between the organizational vs inter-personal level and minor vs serious consequences of the behaviour. As seen, the deviant behaviour categorized by Robinson and Bennett as mainly negative with little or no potential positive consequences for the organization as such.

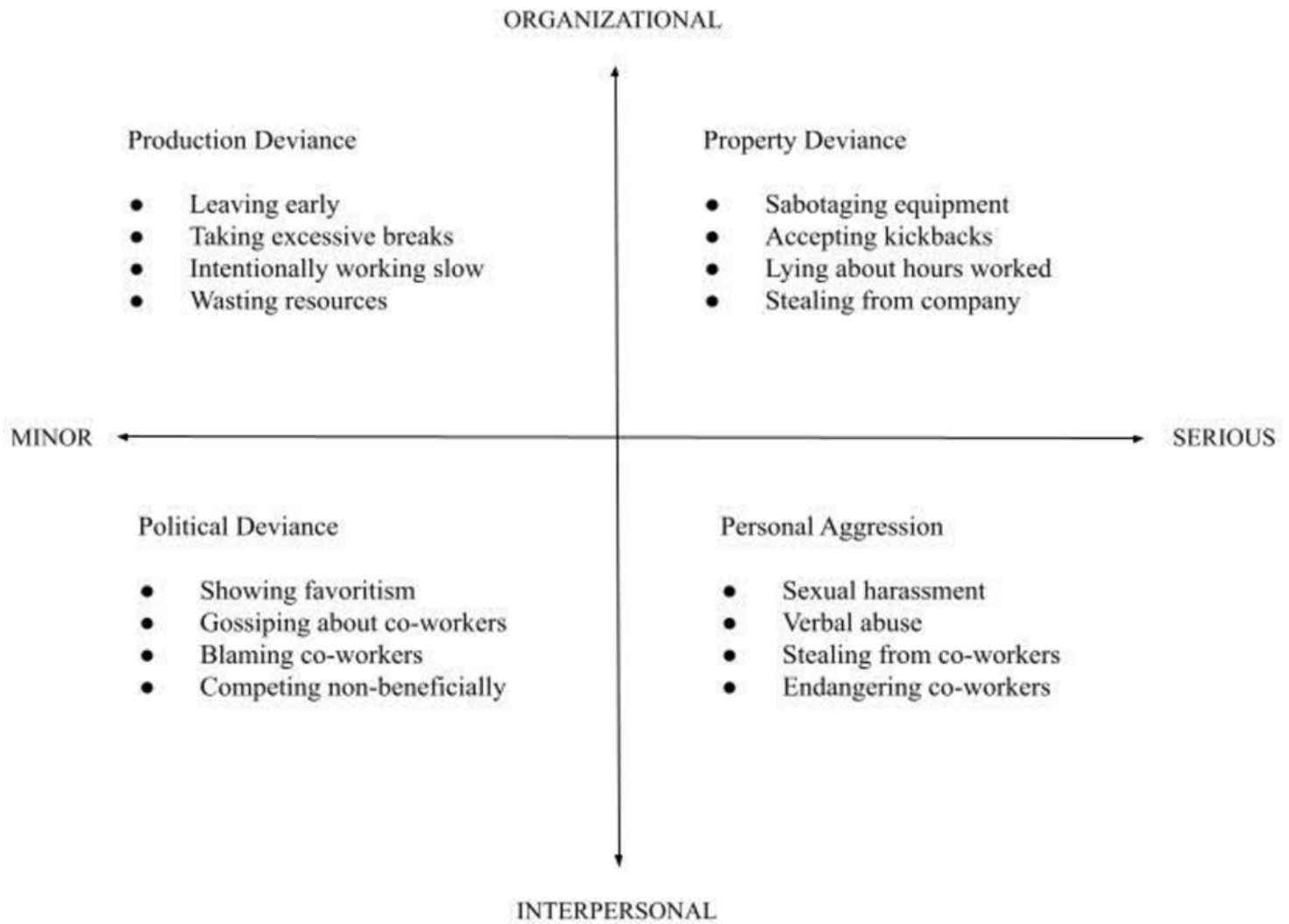


Figure 1. Categorization of deviant workplace behaviour

Warren (2003) acknowledges that certain deviant workplace behaviour may have a positive impact on the organization and develops an integrative typology with both constructive and destructive behaviour. In terms of the constructive, this behaviour may be in the form of refusal to comply with dysfunctional configurations and as proposed by Spreitzer & Sonenshein (2004) behaviour that is associated with honorable intent. Magnusson et al's (2020) study of how the co-workers at the Swedish Tax Authority engaged in unsanctioned



digital innovation activities (i.e., shadow innovation) to save the long-term relevance of the organization, offers an additional example of said constructive deviant workplace behaviour. Previous research has also identified a set of influencing factors regarding deviant workplace behaviour in the form of control and power (Lawrence and Robinson, 2007), structure (Moon, 2021), culture (Ramasubbu and Kemerer, 2021), individual factors (Ramadugu and Rastogi, 2021) and autonomy (Graham, 1986). To increase our understanding of how deviant workplace behaviour impacts digital transformation, we utilize the theory of institutional drift as proposed by Voronov et al (2021). According to the theory, practice deviations (i.e., deviant workplace behaviour) may be either unnoticed, ignored or deemed threatening by the other coworkers. If the practice deviation is unnoticed, it has no effect on the institutional order, but if it is either ignored or deemed threatening (i.e., in both cases acknowledged) it will have an effect and result in institutional drift or even institutional doubt (Figure 2).

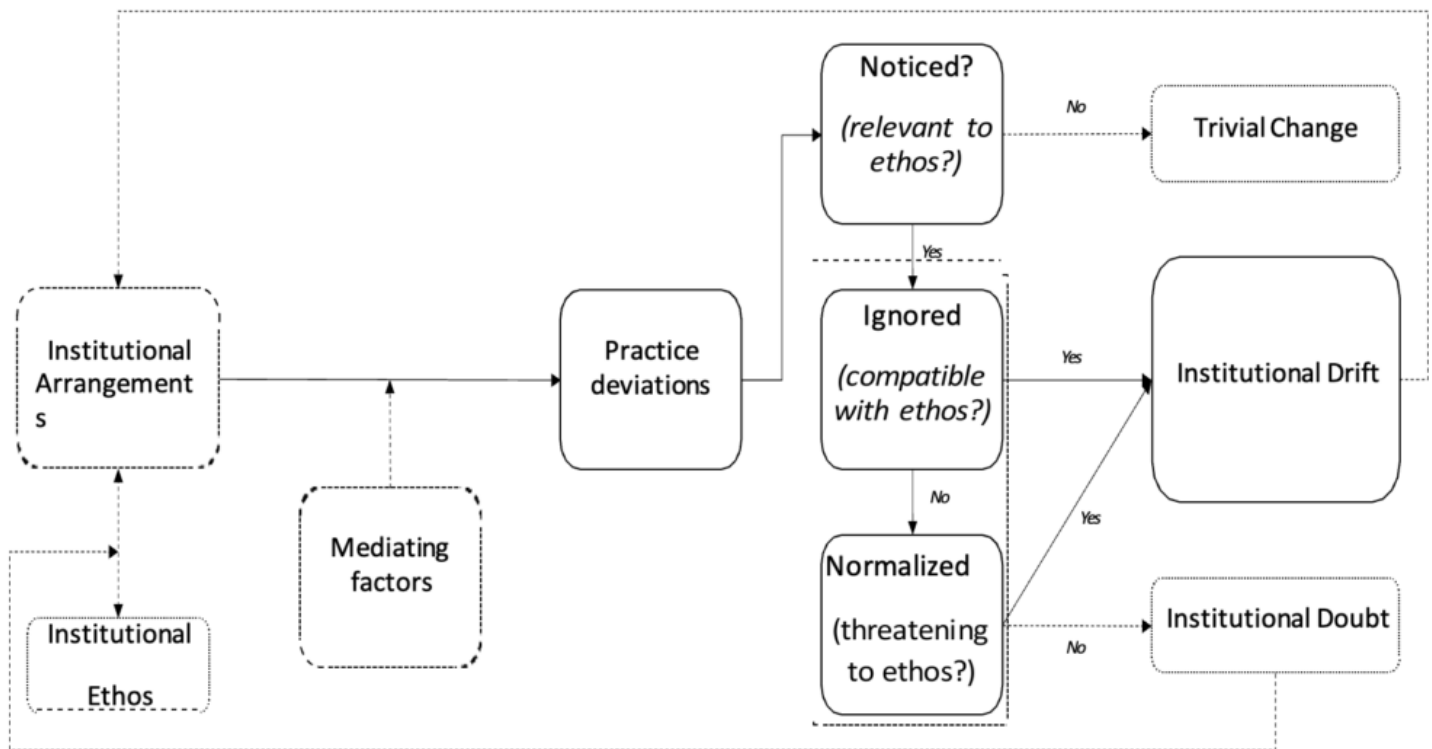


Figure 2. Voronov et al's (2021) process model of institutional drift

## Method

This study follows a qualitative, single case-based approach. The case was selected on two main criteria. First, we wanted to find an incumbent organization with a predigital heritage (Chanas et al., 2019). The rationale for this was that we wanted to study a case where the digital logic (Baskerville et al., 2020) could be seen as clashing with something that existed previously, since this was believed to be good conditions for studying



deviant workplace behaviour in relation to digital transformation. Second, we wanted to find an organization with a substantial and explicit digital transformation program. The rationale for this was that the explicit program would increase the likelihood of the organizational actors being aware of digital transformation happening (Wilson and Mergel, 2022). Utilizing these two criteria, we identified the case of Bari municipality. Bari is the capital city of the Region of Puglia in the South of Italy, with 6 000 employees serving 324.198 citizens. In 2019, the organization initiated a substantial digital transformation program as a response to a forecasted financial crisis. As the forecast read, the municipality would not be able to continue functioning without significant changes to its operations. With decreasing tax revenues, increasing demands for public services and decreasing access to competence, the municipality identified digital transformation as of the highest priority to safeguard continued operations.

Digital transformation is initiated by the politicians, and executed through a digital transformation department working in close collaboration with the service center for IT. The municipality sees digital transformation as a method for business development, and as such they have moved away from a supply- demand model where digital initiatives were internally procured from the supporting functions into a setup where the digital transformation experts support local business development following a DevOps setup. This study utilizes two sets of data collected between 2019-2022. The first set is part of a larger, programmatic research initiative (Burton-Jones, 2009) where researchers have been engaged in clinical inquiry (Schein, 2008) designed to support the digital transformation of the organization. Here, the primary data collection method has been interviews, where a total of 65 interviews have been conducted with various stakeholders in the organization. We utilize this dataset to sensitize ourselves with the organization and their digital transformation initiative yet refrain from directly including this data in our analysis of deviant workplace behaviour.

The second set is comprised of 15 semi-structured interviews (Table 1) conducted in direct conjunction with the study of deviant workplace behaviour during the spring of 2021. The interviewees were selected following three criteria from the literature on deviant workplace behaviour: hierarchal position (Moon, 2021), proximity with digital transformation (Christ-Brendemühl and Schaarschmidt, 2019) and tenure (Appelbaum et al., 2007). Out of the 15 respondents, three were upper-level managers, four mid-level managers, three team-leaders and five public servants. The interviews were conducted through Zoom, recorded and transcribed. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using NVivo 2020 in two phases. First, we coded individual accounts of deviant workplace behaviour, inductively creating 12 second-order categories (Table 2). Second, we analyzed the mediating factors deductively from the previous literature to act as a basis for inductive categorization (O'Neil Green, 2008) of 10 categories (Table 3). This was followed by interpretation of the findings through the theory of institutional drift.

## Results

### *Deviant workplace behaviour in digital transformation*





Category	#	Empirical example
Using workarounds to bypass routines and processes and complete the tasks	19	"Sometimes you have to do the workaround because people are sitting, can't do their work or something. You have to do the workaround" - Interviewee B
Using social networks to bypass routines and processes	12	"And also one thing that's a problem, at least for us, is that it depends on who's asking. We have a... not like hierarchy, it's more like if you have a good relationship with them then you can get away with more and get stuff" - Interviewee K  "That's more like the shadow IT stuff because we don't have the tools that is maybe good to work with and we go around say stuff like Miro that we use or I would use in workshops instead of Microsoft Teams Whiteboard that sucks in comparison. So stuff like that. But still the municipality pays for it and we know that it's... that we should not do this. But as long as we keep it small and just for us then OK" - Interviewee K
Installing or using unsanctioned IT solutions	11	"I think I should ask more for approval, but I don't do it so often. So maybe I'm 50/50 I should ask a little bit more, but sometimes I take my own decisions and do it my way. It's not right, but it's not completely wrong"- Interviewee J
Not seeking approval for decisions	10	"Yeah, I've been in meetings where they're called the, you know a very non- IT person and said, "Oh well, It's just to connect it to the Wi-Fi" and then really... like one of the best IT persons we have that does not have good social skills call them an idiot because well, "no you you can't do that. Are you fucking stupid?" Yeah "we have protocols" and stuff like that" - Interviewee K
Not contributing or disrupting meetings	10	"Yeah, some of them that don't use the program they like... now we are like 95% using teams, but some still use Skype because they think Teams is not good enough or not safe enough for one example." - Interviewee L
Use of legacy systems as prioritized way of working	6	"Yeah, but sure they some people can walk over to the person that's calling in with the problem and help them at their office. Yeah, sure, even though we shouldn't because we have other personnel for doing the on-site and problem solving. But yeah, I feel like it's part of helping each other out internally. And the customer expresses the great need for help. And yeah, it's just about being kind I think."
Bypassing the hiring process	5	"But sometimes IT takes decisions on their own... Uh, because maybe the line is not very clear what responsibilities are on the service centre IT and what responsibilities are on my side if you understand. And so..... people on service centre IT sometimes do things, maybe prioritise..... do priorities that are not in the way they are supposed to do. Because we do the priorities for them"
Releasing unfinished projects to accelerate DT or running shadow projects that conflict with DT	5	

Table 2. Category, frequency and example of deviant workplace behaviour.



Utilizing the frequencies of identification, we see that the most common deviant behaviour is that of workarounds (19 observations), where coworkers act in non-compliance with the existing governance to get things done. In all the observations, this category was related to wanting to either pursue something that was not possible, or to increase the pace and avoid what they regarded as inertia in the existing routines, i.e., the behaviour was deemed constructive.

As for how workarounds were operationalized, the predominant method found in the data was that of 10 utilizing personal networks to circumvent the formal governance (12 observations). Instead of following the established routines, they would simply ask or bargain a favor from somebody sitting on the resources needed. Shadow IT was found to be the third most common deviant workplace behaviour (11 observations). Instead of following the governance in place and go through the formalized process for acquiring new IT, coworkers would simply handle the procurement through their own operating budgets (i.e., not the centralized IT budget), pay for the software out-of-pocket or simply use freeware solutions. Not asking for approval, i.e., following Grace Hoppers law of it being easier to ask forgiveness than permission was also found as a type of deviant workplace behaviour (10 observations). Here the coworkers worked under the impression that approval should really be asked for, but since this would slow down the pace of digital transformation they simply disregarded it and circumvented formal decision gates. During and directly adjacent to meetings displayed a separate category of deviant workplace behaviour (10 observations) categorized as destructive. Here, coworkers would either express negative comments about the competence of other coworkers or parts of the organization, or simply engage in soldiering and being overly passive during the meetings.

Another destructive category of deviant behaviour was found in the continuation of use of legacy systems over newly implemented solutions (6 observations). Despite new systems and solutions having been implemented, some users would actively engage in counteraction, avoiding onboarding regardless of the organization having clearly communicated policies related to which solutions should be used for what. The municipality had a hard time decommissioning systems on account of factors such as them having data that needed to be saved for ten years whereby the system was left active. We also found examples of extra-role or out-of-role behaviour (5 observations), where co-workers could be seen as misappropriating and spending resources on going the extra mile for both citizens and other co-workers that were not perceived as being part of their regular jobs.

Closely related to this category of deviant behaviour is the misaligned prioritization of tasks or projects (5 observations). Here, the co-worker would actively re-prioritize, in direct conflict with the set priorities and with the expressed strategy of the organization to attain objectives they perceive as taking precedence. In relation to potential breaches of laws related to staffing, we identified a separate category of deviant behaviour in the circumvention of the hiring process (5 observations). With the current governmental regulation on recruitment in place, hiring is seen as a cumbersome process with significant elements of red tape where the rationale of said regulation is not always visible. To circumvent this, individuals would e.g., engage in deviant workplace behaviour through extending existing contracts rather than initiating a new hiring process.

Circumvention was also present in relation to the project management methodology utilized in the





organization (5 observations). Here, co-workers are obliged to halt projects until the formal requirements for passing a certain decision gate have been met. Instead of following these regulations, we saw examples of co-workers circumventing the process and flagging projects as “done” without having reached the formal requirements. As for the least prevalent categories of deviant behaviour identified, these were related to voicing concerns/explicitly questioning legitimacy (2 observations) and running shadow digital initiatives (2 observations).

### **Mediating factors of deviant workplace behaviour in digital transformation**

In addition to identifying the types of deviant workplace behaviour, we also studied the mediating factors involved for said behaviour. The mediating factors (structured by inductive category) identified in the study are found in Table 3, inductively structure in four categories.

<b>Mediating factor</b>	<b>#</b>
<i>ORGANIZATIONAL</i>	229
Organizational structure	129
Role ambiguity	59
Lack of resources	41
<i>INDIVIDUAL</i>	150
Personality traits and beliefs	74
Knowledge and skills	48
Tenure	28
<i>TECHNOLOGICAL</i>	88
Technological limitations	56
Fast-paced development and DT process	32
<i>SOCIAL</i>	76
Organizational culture and climate	39
Social pressures to conform to group	37

Table 3. Mediating factors of deviant workplace behaviour

As seen in table 3, the most common category of mediator of deviant workplace behaviour was Organizational (42% of total occurrences). If the organizational structure is deemed counterproductive to the espoused direction that the coworker feels is legitimate, this will increase the likelihood of deviant behaviour. This may include both aspects of simply poor design (i.e., processes that are not purposive in any shape or form) or aspects of bureaucratization (i.e., regulatorily or in other ways normative driven design patterns such as red-



tape). Other types of organizational mediators identified in the study include lack of resources and role ambiguity, both the direct consequence of the design and enactment of governance in the organization. The second most common mediator was Individual (28% of total occurrences). Here we see both tenure and knowledge and skills positively associated with deviant workplace behaviour. In other words, the more competent the composition of coworkers are, the higher the likelihood of deviant workplace behaviour. In addition to this, the personality traits and beliefs of the individual co-worker is also found to be a mediating factor, with connotations of ideas about justice, responsibility and honor. The third most common category of mediator was Technological (16% of total occurrences). Current limitations in the installed base in the organization (technological limitations) are found to be a mediating factor. If the system does not support what is perceived as “best practice”, users will be prone to circumvent use through the introduction of hybrid routines. In addition to this, the fast-paced development and DT process is also found to be a mediating factor for deviant workplace behaviour, in the form of both destructive (e.g., resisting the fast-paced development) and constructive (e.g., circumventing legislation) behaviour.

The least common category of mediator was Social (14% of total occurrences). Factors include the organizational culture and climate, as well as the social pressure to conform to group. If the organizational culture is one heavily steeped in continuous improvements and minor (or no) changes over time, i.e., one of stability, this will increase the probability of deviant workplace behaviour targeted at increasing the pace of change. If the social pressure to conform to group is high (i.e., low acceptance of behaviour variations), then this will increase the likelihood of deviant behaviour.

### **Three types of institutional drift in digital transformation**

We identify three types of institutional drift in our study as seen in Table 5.

Type	Drift I - decelerating DT	Drift II - maintaining infrastructural stability	Drift III - accelerating DT
Bypassing the hiring process			X
Not seeking approval for decisions		X	X
Use of legacy systems as prioritized way of working	X		
Not contributing or disrupting meetings	X		
Using workarounds to bypass routines and processes and complete the tasks	X	X	X
Running shadow projects that conflict with or are not prioritized by DT departments	X		
Installing or using unsanctioned IT solutions	X		



Using social networks to bypass routines and processes			X
Challenging the status quo			X
Releasing unfinished projects to accelerate DT or running shadow projects that conflict with DT			X
Extra-role or out-of-role behaviours		X	
Prioritizing tasks and projects that conflict with DT goals		X	
<i>Identified keywords in the interviews</i>	<i>Red tape, bureaucracy, stability</i>	<i>Stability, security, quality, service</i>	<i>Courage, openness, innovation, risk taking</i>

Table 5. Deviant behaviour in three types of institutional drift

In terms of the institutional drift of decelerating digital transformation, the primary rationale for engaging in this is associated with a deviant stance to the overarching idea of digital transformation for the business unit that is subjected to the initiative. The actors account to a feeling of loss of control, where agendas that they have not bought into and accepted are being pushed, as they see it, counter to the rationale of the organization and their own roles. We saw a prevalence of leaning on notions of red tape and bureaucracy as intimately necessary for the safeguarding of the viability of the organization. The very idea and norm of stability becomes a safeguarding of the existing institutional order. The organizational response to the deviant workplace behaviours identified are noticed but primarily ignored by the digital transformation team under the rationale of certain business units then not becoming prioritized. This is rational behaviour given that the resources available to the digital transformation team are outweighed by both the objective and the existing demand from other business units, whereby it merely (in the short term) results in a re-prioritization and acceptance of certain business units not engaging in digital transformation. Figure 3 illustrates the institutional drift of decelerating digital transformation.

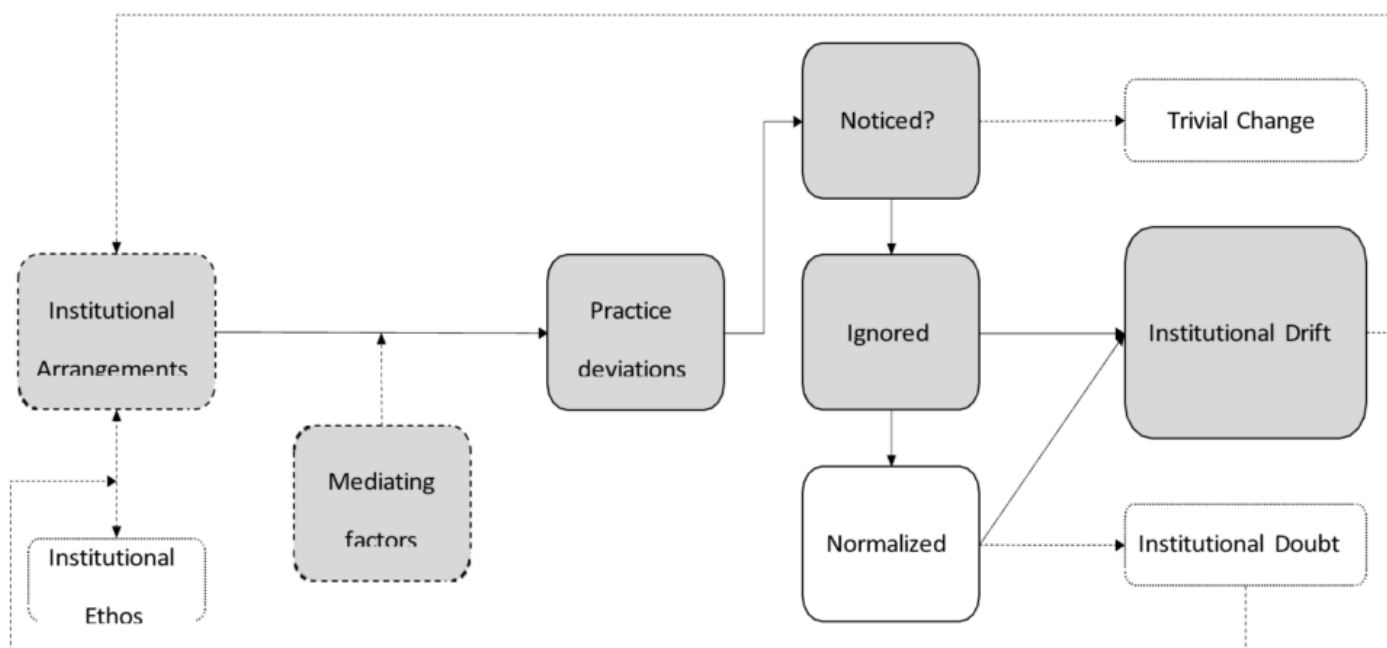


Figure 3. Drift 1: Decelerating digital transformation

The institutional drift of decelerating digital transformation is mediated by all categories of mediating factors except Technology. In the organizational category, both organizational structure and lack of resources mediate the drift. In the personal category, both personality traits and beliefs and knowledge and skills mediate the drift. In the social category, organizational culture and climate as well as social pressures to conform to group mediate the drift. As for the institutional drift of maintaining infrastructural stability, this is primarily seen within the IT department of the organization. Here, the actors engage in deviant workplace behaviour to safeguard the structural integrity of the existing legacy environment. Instead of pushing for modernization and development, activities related with higher levels of risk than pure maintenance, coworkers reprioritize and focus their resources on making sure that the stability of the infrastructure is intact. Here, we see the respondents frequently returning to notions such as security and quality, as well as service and stability. As the organization needs to have a stable supply of secure, (high) quality services, the deviant behaviour is poised to make sure that this is never compromised. This goes against the intended objective of digital transformation, i.e., in some respects fundamentally changing the logic of the municipality and instead reverts the attention to quality management in the form of incremental and continuous improvements. The deviant behaviour is largely noticed by the IT managers yet ignored on account of the stability of the existing infrastructure being the core objective of the IT department after development was re-sourced to the digital transformation department in 2021. Despite digital transformation being a prioritized initiative, it is not yet perceived by all to be part of the institutional ethos, whereby the deviant behaviour is not normalized but instead leads to institutional drift without institutional doubt. Figure 4 illustrates the institutional drift of maintaining infrastructural stability

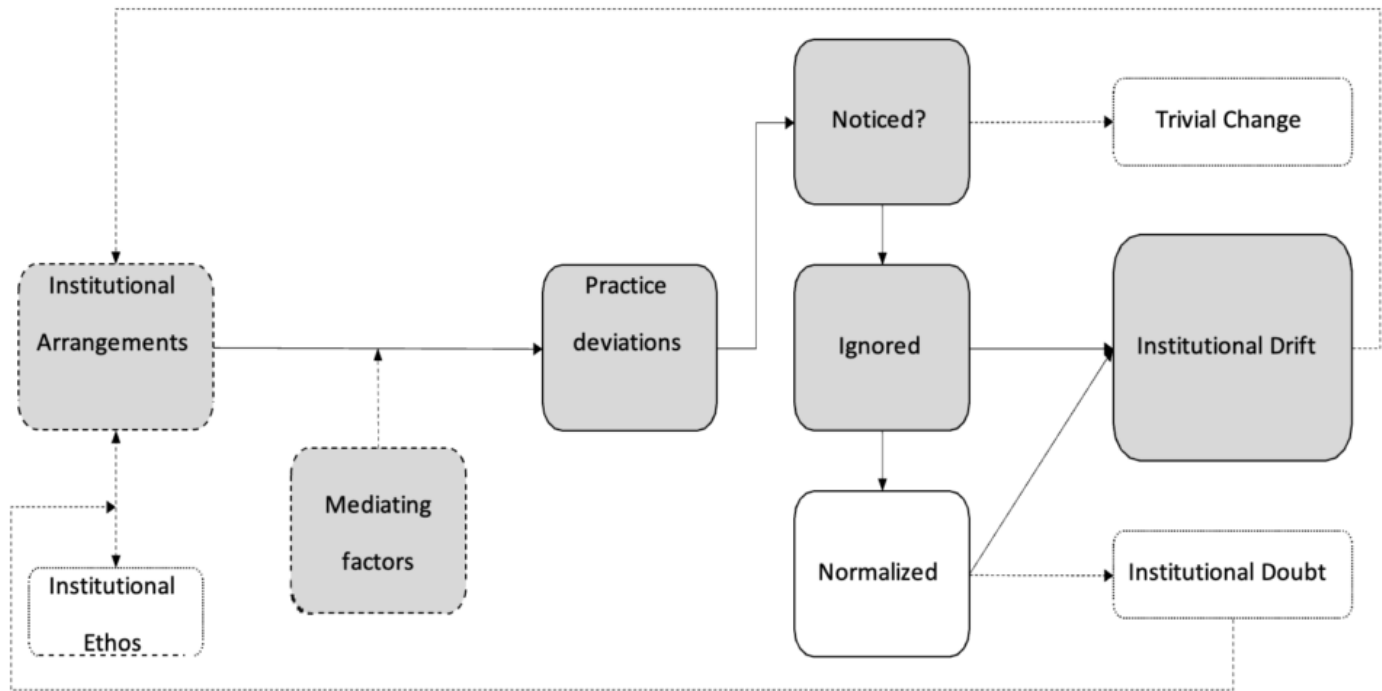


Figure 4. Drift 2: Maintaining infrastructural stability

The institutional drift of maintaining infrastructural stability is mediated by all categories of mediating factors except social. In the organizational and technology categories, all factors (organizational structure, role ambiguity and lack of resources, and technological limitations and fast paced development) are found to mediate the drift. In the individual category, only tenure is found to mediate the drift. In terms of the institutional drift of accelerating digital transformation, the primary rationale for the identified deviant workplace behaviour is that of a pending doom of the existing order. Individuals subscribing to both the transformative power of digital as well as the existential threat to the municipality and the public sector (decreased supply, increased demand, fluctuating demands) latch on to a, ethos that digital transformation is not only necessary but time critical. Here we see the respondents using terms such as courage, innovation, risk-taking and openness to justify their deviant behaviour. The behaviour is by large noticed and normalized, with the digital ethos to some extent threatening the traditional institutional ethos of the municipality, casting significant doubt as well as leading to changes in the institutional arrangements.

This behaviour was most prominent among the digital transformation team members, as well as local champions for digital transformation in the business. Figure 5 illustrates the institutional drift of accelerating digital transformation.



Figure 5. Drift 3: Accelerating digital transformation



The institutional drift of accelerating digital transformation is mediated by all categories of mediating factors except the technological. In the organizational category, organizational structure and lack of resources are found to mediate the drift. In the individual category, personality traits and beliefs as well as tenure are found to mediate the drift. In the social category, only social pressures to conform to group is found to mediate the drift.

## Discussion

As found in this study, deviant workplace behaviour directly impacts digital transformation in three directions in parallel. For instance, in terms of the identified institutional drift of decelerating digital transformation, deviant behaviour in the form of shadow IT and projects, workarounds, sticking with legacy systems and soldiering during digital transformation meetings all contribute to counteracting the agreed upon direction and pace of digital transformation in the organization. With this conflicting with the espoused strategic direction of the organization, this aggregate deviant behaviour could be categorized as destructive (Warren, 2003). However, in line with Voronov et al (2021), these practice deviations are not so much counteracting as changing the direction of the digital transformation *per se*. Previous research on strategy has been criticized for overly emphasizing intentionality and instrumentality in the conception of strategy practices. Findings such as those of Chaniyas et al (2019) and Magnusson et al (2022) highlight the emergent nature of digital transformation strategies, but so far only few studies have addressed the unintentional drift experienced through deviant workplace behaviour. As found in our study, deviant workplace behaviour results in three instances of institutional drift whereby the strategic direction of digital transformation in essence is trifurcated. In parallel with the original strategy, we find evidence of what we argue to be new strategic directions for the organization (accelerating, decelerating, and maintaining).

In other words, deviant workplace behaviour is not merely resistance (i.e., etymologically hold back), but directional in essence. These behaviours skew the overarching strategic direction of the organization. Since the behaviours happen in parallel, we can see drift as introducing polyphony into the strategy of the organization, where different parts of the organization will strive in different directions. Previous research has identified this idea about multiple strategies co-existing in a single organization (Mantere, 2017), much like the literature on organizational identity highlights the concurrent existence of plural identities in i.e., ideographic organizations (Albert and Whetten, 1985). As noted by Warren (2003), the deviant behaviour comes in the form of both constructive and destructive behaviour. Co-workers engage in deviant workplace behaviour when they experience doubt regarding the current direction of the strategy. They choose to take responsibility rather than merely follow, often at considerable risk of personal expense and even peril. In other words, the deviant behaviour becomes a warning signal of doubt and subsequent polyphony. In the case studied, the respondents were clear with acknowledging that their behaviour was non-compliant and even counter-productive, but that they saw their decision to act as virtuous and even natural.

Here we see the identification of the mediating factors as a specific contribution in our study. As found, the





existing organizational design (e.g., governance and settings for management) in the organization trigger constructive deviant workplace behaviour. In other words, the existence of constructive deviant workplace behaviour is not a bug, but rather a feature of the organizational design. As such, the existence of deviant workplace behaviour that conflicts with the aspired strategy becomes more a sign of sub-par organizational design than a question of individual behavioural variation. This supports previous findings from the governance and control literature on the inability for change and responsiveness in governance (Cram et al., 2016).

In relation to the existing plethora of research on digital government, we make two main contributions. First, we contribute through adding to the diversity of approaches for studying the emergent process of digital transformation in government through leaning on the theoretical underpinning of institutional work. Previous contributions in digital government inspired from this tradition (Weerakkody et al., 2016) have

started what we believe to be a fruitful avenue of continued research. Through the direct study of individuals and their role in digital transformation (Wilson and Mergel, 2022) in public sector organizations we believe that future findings will offer valuable insight, particularly in settings signified by high levels of institutionalization and bureaucratization (Sordi et al., 2021).

Second, we contribute through introducing the perspective of deviant workplace behaviour to understand the emergence of digital transformation strategy in public organizations. This perspective has so far been under researched in the context of digital government and deviant behaviour has primarily been studied on the citizen-side (Tang et al., 2019) and from the perspective of deviant behaviour as destructive (Piazza et al., 2022). Our findings illustrate the innate complexity of deviant workplace behaviour as drivers of drift, i.e., a generative force in the evolution of government per se. We believe that this avenue of research should be followed more intently, to further increase our understanding of the public servant as a factual co-creator of strategy.

Third, with this study being the first (in our understanding) to apply and test the theory of institutional drift (Voronov et al., 2021) we believe that this offers a contribution to research. How and why the institutional arrangements of public sector organizations change over time is an important area of inquiry, and one that so far has seen only limited research attention in the form of longitudinal studies related to digital transformation (Scupola and Mergel, 2022). Here, we believe future research should consider utilizing the theory of institutional drift to further our insight into the more processual perspectives to the impact of digital transformation over time. In addition to the contributions to research, this study offers two main contributions to practice. First, the identification of deviant workplace behaviour as not merely counteracting intent but also accelerating its execution should be seen as relevant for practice. As noted by Sordi et al (2021) over-compliance constitutes a pathology in public sector organizations, whereby the deviant workplace behaviour can be seen as purposive reactions from coworkers. Through deviance, the organizations' operations are upheld despite governance and control at times being designed to counteract the enactment of strategy. This positive perspective to deviant behaviour should be further fostered in organizations, while simultaneously balancing the tendencies for less than purposive institutional drift. Second, the presence of deviant workplace behaviours as identified in our study may be interpreted as indications of sub-par pre-requisites for digital transformation in organizations.



Through mapping deviant workplace behaviour, managers will be able to design better pre-requisites for the efficient enactment of strategic choices. We recommend that managers in public sector organizations search for instantiations of deviance as one source of input for redesigning their organizations.

## Limitations

There are two main limitations in our study.

First and foremost, our use of a single case study to analyze the impact of deviant workplace behaviour on digital transformation could be criticized for being a too small sample to amply answer the research question in a manner that would afford generalizability. In line with Eisenhardt (1989), we argue that albeit a small sample for statistical generalizability, our case offers a sound basis for theoretical generalizability.

Second, we acknowledge the perils of public sector research transferability as noted by Bannister (2007). Deviant behaviour is, as argued in the previous literature, dependent on a range of factors, some of which may be linked to the institutional environment of the organization. We have made no attempts at controlling for institutional environment in our study, whereby the question of transferability of findings remains a shortcoming. We would rather expect to see that the manner through which deviant workplace behaviour impacts digital transformation will differ between contexts but argue that the theory of institutional drift would albeit be valuable perspective to further understand the process of said impact.

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