

Digital transformation in medium sized cities – Debate and research perspectives

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Digital transformation has arguably become the most significant reform trend in public administration (Dunleavy et al. 2005, 2008, 2013; Politt 2011; Bogumil and Jann, 2020; Mergel 2019). Within the literature, municipality size is thought to have a significant effect on digital transformation processes (for example, see Ho and Ya Ni 2004, Holden et al. 2003, Manoharan 2013, Moon 2002, Feeney and Brown 2017, Gulati et al. 2014, Reddick 2009). However, there are unaddressed questions in the link between municipality size and digitalization.

In Germany, most of the literature on local government digitalization focuses on large cities (Lerche 2012, Schwab and Danken 2017, Thapa und Schwab 2018, Schuppan 2009). While some studies have been carried out utilizing survey data of all municipalities over 15.000 inhabitants (Bogumil et al. 2019, Schwab et al. 2019), they turn to large cities for case studies that explain the survey results. Therefore, large municipalities seem to dominate the German digitalization debate.

At the other end of the municipality size continuum, there is also a significant body of literature on reform processes in small municipalities. While not strictly focused on digitalization, its implication is that, among small municipalities, a larger municipality size is associated with better capacity (Lauber 2014, Ebinger et al. 2019, Ebinger et al. 2011, Kuhlmann et al. 2012, Kuhlmann et al. 2017, Fritz and Feld 2015).

Thus, there is knowledge about transformations at both ends of the local size continuum. However, the middle ground has not been sufficiently researched. This study focuses on the 509 medium sized municipalities between 20.000 and 50.000 inhabitants.

One can nevertheless recognize two conflicting perspectives on transformations in medium sized municipalities within the public sector reform literature,

- There is a theoretical argument that medium sized municipalities enjoy a privileged position to carry out transformation processes (Wollmann et al. 1985; Bogumil et al. 2007). Compared to small municipalities, they are large enough to avoid issues of lacking capacity. At the same time, they are small enough to avoid some of the challenges faced by larger cities, mainly a complex organizational structure and political arena which can lead to blockades.
- However, the opposite can be argued. Medium sized municipalities could present capacities more akin to small municipalities while facing demands comparable to those in larger municipalities.

The latter perspective is supported by quantitative research. On average, larger municipality size correlates with a more advanced state of digitalization in international studies (Ho and Ya Ni 2004, Holden et al. 2003, Manoharan 2013, Moon 2002, Feeney and Brown 2017, Gulati et al. 2014, Reddick 2009) as well as in Germany (Opiela et al. 2019). Nevertheless, these quantitative overviews do not look inside the black box of digital transformations in medium sized cities.

The author's recently started PhD project, with the research question *How do the particularities of small medium sized municipalities affect the extent of adoption of digital transformations?* seeks to shed light on this topic by studying 1. the extent and variance of digital transformations in medium sized cities, 2. the institutional dynamics that play a role, and 3. the success factors and barriers that can be recognized.

This article discusses first perspectives on the following two sub-questions:

- What is the current state of discussion regarding success factors and barriers to digital transformation in medium sized cities?
- Which perspectives from administrative science can provide a conceptual framework to approach digital transformation processes in medium sized cities?

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