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Winter 1-4-2022

Public Administration and the New Normal: One More Guess

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Recommended Citation

APA Citation

Baradei, L. (2022). Public Administration and the New Normal: One More Guess. *PATIMES*, https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles/4378

MLA Citation

Baradei, Laila El "Public Administration and the New Normal: One More Guess." *PATIMES*, 2022, https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles/4378

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This is an author's draft of an article published in the PA Times.

The final version, the version of record, is available online at:

<https://patimes.org/public-administration-and-the-new-normal-one-more-guess/>



Public Administration and the New Normal: One More Guess

So, what is the New Normal going to be like? People are wondering. A lot of articles have been written about the topic, but no one has the answer to that one-million-dollar question. Everyday something new happens and takes world leaders by surprise; the latest thing being *Omicron*, the new variant for COVID-19, that is disrupting all set plans. After earlier promises of regular celebrations for Christmas and New Year holidays in many parts of the United States and Europe, these celebrations are being cancelled.

Many talk about the New Normal as being here already. A lot of things have changed with the pandemic, mostly about work and its arrangements. Working online was perceived as a perfect option by many, especially during periods of lock-down. However, when the lock downs and curfews were lifted, many organizations continued to adopt a blended format. Face-to-face meetings are only held when necessary, otherwise we use platforms like Zoom. “Let’s Zoom,” has become a thing.

Over the past two years, since the start of the pandemic, working online has had both its advantages and drawbacks. Many employees were more comfortable working from home, saving on commuting time and even reportedly becoming more productive. Organizations realized that they were saving money on electricity and wi-fi connectivity. However, parents working from home, especially with school aged children studying online, were mostly at their wits end. They found difficulty juggling monitoring bored children stuck to their screens for hours, and their own work. Similarly, parents of university students were not that happy with the online modality. Many were paying the same tuition fees, but finding their children staying in their rooms, and sometimes not even getting out of bed, for most of the day. I, for one, did not have a problem when my graduate students joined Zoom in their PJs, having the bed headboard as the background picture. The important thing for me was that they were attending classes!

What are the speculations worldwide about the New Normal in government? The picture is not yet clear. Scholars and practitioners alike are making assumptions about what we need to do differently for more effective governance. Recommendations include the following:

- ***An expansion in e-government programs worldwide:*** COVID-19 has resulted in a positive push to governments’ e-services and digital transformation initiatives. This is likely to continue and has resulted in great benefits for both governments and citizens.
- ***Use of Social Media by Government as a Communication Tool:*** Government organizations are recognizing the importance of social media platforms as a core tool for their communication efforts. Departments of Health especially have actively endorsed the use of Facebook and Twitter to communicate with their constituents during the pandemic.
- ***Better heeding of data security issues:*** Security issues were sometimes compromised with the excessive and rushed use of online means of communication by governments and citizens during the pandemic. In many of our early online university classes, before implementing more stringent security and password protected access, we have had odd hackers interrupting our sessions; only because they could. Online communication and massive data collection will continue into the future, however, on both a national and global level. Access to big data will need better securitization to protect citizens’ privacy.
- ***Government officials to develop and acquire new competencies:*** The New Normal will require a number of changes from government officials, including the development of a high level of ethical deliberation skills. These will be needed to help them make optimal decisions when faced with difficult ethical dilemmas like: choosing between a high level of transparency, versus risking the spread of rumors and inciting panic; or between going into a lock-down to protect citizens’ health, versus favoring the protection of the economy. Speculations are there as

well for other needed competencies in public services related to data analytics skills, and high levels of resilience during crises situation.

- ***More empathy and support to employees returning to the workplace:*** There is a need to understand that different people were affected differently by the pandemic. Many employees, including public servants, have re-shuffled their work priorities and have developed different expectations related to their work. They no longer want to accept long commutes and rigid office policies and procedures. Governments have to come up with more friendly work environments to accommodate the changed needs and expectations.
- ***Enhanced Dependence on Public Private Partnerships:*** The role of the private sector and the nonprofits was crucial in the fight against the pandemic and this needs to be further emphasized by all parties.

Parallel to all the above speculations about the New Normal, we are witnessing how national borders are simply melting down in front of the pandemic. Governments invest billions in building high walls to protect themselves from incoming illegal migrants, but fail to find ways to stop the minute virus trespassing and lethally attacking. Perhaps the New Normal requires selflessness, more than anything else. We are not going to be safe unless everyone is safe. We are learning, but the hard way!