



Malta: matching public service with service to the public

Thirteen years after acceding to the EU, Malta – the smallest Member State¹ – will assume the presidency of the Council of the EU for the first six months of the year. Since it gained independence in 1964, Malta, a crossroads of cultures and influences (including Arab, British, French and Italian), has built a robust civil service. The government is constantly changing and adapting to both the needs of its citizens and budget constraints.

With indicators showing healthy public finances (the first budget surplus at the end of 2016 after 35 years of deficit combined with a regularly declining public debt, which has just crossed the 60% threshold) and strong economic growth (4%, combined with the lowest unemployment rate in the euro area along with Germany), Malta is now the only Mediterranean country to have earned an "A" rating from the three main rating agencies². Deprived of natural resources and heavily dependent on energy imports, its economy is based on almost 80% on services: in addition to a large banking sector (eight times the country's GDP but relatively untouched by the 2009 financial crisis), the tourism (30% of GDP) and online gambling (11%) sectors show steady growth.

Like Cyprus, Malta has been a member of the Commonwealth since its independence. It has maintained a special relationship with the UK and several of its institutions were created while still part of the British Empire. This is true of the Public Service Commission³, an independent authority set up under Article 109 of the 1974 Constitution, which is tasked with ensuring "the provision of excellent public services in a delegated environment through an efficient public appointment process which upholds the principles of merit and equity". The five-member Commission plays a key role in the developing and implementing government reforms.

A user-oriented HR policy

Several successive reforms have marked the history of the Maltese public service. Initially, reform efforts reflected the country's move towards becoming a neutral and sovereign nation, which was finally achieved in 1987. They drew inspiration in part from trends in Europe and in the major English-speaking countries (appointment of an ombudsman, following the New Zealand model, implementation of a form of New Public Management, an overhaul of the Public Service Code, etc.).

In December 2014, the government simultaneously launched a public service renewal programme⁴ and a new website, Servizz.gov⁵. In doing so, it wanted to bring the Commission back to basics and to embark on a far-reaching modernization effort that would bring together citizens and public officials. The aim is to deliver services that are increasingly in line with the changing expectations of users while improving the appeal and working conditions of the work of the country's 30,000 civil servants and 20,000 public employees (a quarter of the labour force). The reforms are led by the Principal Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister, Mario Cutajar, who heads up the Management Efficiency Unit⁶.

¹ Both in terms of size (316 km²) and population (435,000 inhabitants)

² http://mfim.gov.mt/en/Press_Releases/Pages/PR170532.aspx

³ <https://opm.gov.mt/en/PSC/Pages/PSC.aspx>

⁴ <https://opm.gov.mt/en/PublicService/Pages/Public%20Service%20renewal.aspx>

⁵ <http://servizz.gov.mt/en/Pages/Servizz/default.aspx>

⁶ <https://opm.gov.mt/en/MEU/Pages/Structure.aspx>

In the new system, the former HR department, the "Management and Personal Office", will become the "People and Standards Division"⁷, a clear indication of the government's desire to reorient HR processes towards an objective-based system, whether internal (staff well-being and greater focus on their professional career paths) or external (better response to the needs of public service users). Similar to a continuous improvement approach, the division has established 12 directives⁸ that provide guidelines for recruitment, appointment, assessment, compliance with rights and obligations, as well as quality audit and management control.

User satisfaction

A project team focused on analysing the needs of the population. Using the Ferrell model⁹, they built a detailed mapping, which highlighted the need for two fully-integrated ways to access public services in order to help staff be as efficient as possible without creating a divide between two "categories of citizens". According to Winston Pirota, who heads up the operation at MEU, "Malta has managed to address the digital divide by providing different channels, keeping the personal touch while addressing the growing online community."

This new, fully-integrated structure is based on two pillars:

- For the offline community there are five "One Stop Shops"¹⁰. They provide a reception desk for citizens who do not live in the capital where they can accomplish all administrative procedures at convenient times (late opening once a week and Saturday mornings). A free hotline (153) also provides access to information on public services and all data that does not require authentication.
- For the "online" community, an interdepartmental website¹¹. It is organised thematically and provides online forms for 800 different services. In March 2017, an initial set of 21 smartphone apps – called "Maltapps"¹² – was rolled out, and as of December, some public service staff will also use apps in the performance of their duties.

Joyce Cassar, head of the People and Standards Division, observed that any approach, regardless of the channel, is subject to a time commitment that must be respected. She added that government employees are also encouraged to suggest improvements. They are given a specific tool to do so (IDEA¹³), and the best initiatives are honored during the annual Public Service Week.

Innovate to improve efficiency and response times

Malta hosted the 9th European Conference on the Quality of Public Services, which was held in San Giljan on 15 and 16 May, where it presented these innovative programmes to representatives from 34 delegations. Prime minister Joseph Muscat opened the meeting¹⁴ with a resolute focus on the future: "We shall, without any doubt, continue to place greater emphasis on having the right tools in place to serve a modern, efficient, and effective public service, which serves the people according to their needs. Truly, the best is yet to come".

Other initiatives are underway, including the creation of the Institute for Public Service¹⁵, based on a public-private partnership with the Malta College of Art, Science and Technology and the University of Malta, as well as the introduction of the first key performance indicators¹⁶ and a 360° assessment scheme¹⁷ within the Public service.

Jean-François Adrian

⁷ <https://publicservice.gov.mt/en/people/Pages/Home.aspx>

⁸ <https://opm.gov.mt/en/PSD/Pages/Directives.aspx>

⁹ The "6W" model (Who, What, When, Where, Why and hoW). See <https://thecpt.org/about-us/leadership/o-c-ferrell-ph-d/>

¹⁰ <http://servizz.gov.mt/en/Pages/Servizz/Locations/default.aspx>

¹¹ <http://servizz.gov.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx>

¹² <https://mita.gov.mt/en/ict-features/Pages/2017/1-Maltapps.aspx>

¹³ <https://opm.gov.mt/en/PublicService/Pages/IDEA.aspx>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/Press%20Releases/Pages/2017/May/15/pr171253.aspx>

¹⁵ <https://opm.gov.mt/en/PublicService/Pages/News%20Items/News%20Items%202016/Agreement-to-set-up-Institute-for-Public-Services-signed-at-graduation-ceremony-for-200-public-officers.aspx>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/Press%20Releases/Pages/2017/May/15/pr171253.aspx>

¹⁷ Appraisal of managers by their subordinates, peers and supervisors: <http://db.com.mt/360-degree-employee-appraisal/>