

THE ALGERIAN UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION FROM THE PAPER BUREAUCRACY TO THE DIGITALIZATION BUREAUCRACY

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Abstract. The aim of this study was to investigate the real reasons behind the complexities that disrupt the Algerian administration. The researcher also tried to focus on the most important element of administration, which is the human resource, through the great influence of his culture on the behaviors within the administrative space in which he is present, and how these behaviors contributed to affect the flexibility of the administration in front of the reforms that the custodian administrations are trying to introduce to the public facility of the state, of which the university is a part. The university administration was also affected by these updates related to its digitization, and some behaviors of human cadres contributed to the complexity of this process.

Keywords: *Management; The Bureaucracy; Digitization; The Paper; The Employee*

Introduction

The administrative research community agrees that bureaucracy consists of the structures upon which the distribution and organization of administrative powers are based, according to an organized framework overseen by a specific authority. The term is also commonly used to describe the administrative structures affiliated with the government in a country, through which the administration's authority is embodied in the organization of aspects of life within the state, according to the concept of the spatial and temporal context in which it is practiced.

Despite recent human advancements, especially in technology, officials and employees in some countries remain trapped in the classical view of bureaucratic administration. This approach hinders the achievement of desired or planned

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goals. Bureaucratic behaviors become obstacles to progress, even when central administration tries to keep pace with technological advancements by introducing digital programs. These programs may not align with the human, material, and technical capabilities of the administration due to a bureaucratic culture based on rationalizing resource management and avoiding risk. This clashes with the dynamics and competition in a world with new concepts and practices. Therefore, the Algerian administration cannot be separated from this context that we are trying to delve into, based on the researcher's observation of slowness and stagnation within the administrative sphere to which he temporarily belongs. He attempts, through his actions and behaviors, to understand the size and nature of the problem, in light of the continuous attempts by the supervisory administrations to simplify and facilitate procedures. These administrations have recently been trying to promote the idea of digitizing the administration in general, and university administration in particular. However, what is observed is more complexity in the procedures, which have recently taken on a digital character, through the Progress system, which aims to facilitate administrative procedures within the university, such as electronic registration, viewing and entering grades, submitting university qualification files, submitting doctoral thesis defense files, the employment platform, the short-term internship platform, and so on.

However, the administrative reality in some Algerian universities has become more complex, especially when it comes to combining the digital and the paper-based. This is due to a digital administrative orientation preceded by administrative procedures where paper documents are the gateway through which the authority of bureaucracy is embodied. These paper documents, once the paper stage is over, will turn into stalled digital processes. This raises the following question: How has bureaucratic culture contributed to hindering digitization in the Algerian administration?

Research Methodology

In this study, the researcher relied on the descriptive approach, through which he attempts to describe the state of university administrative behavior by employing the observation tool, which the researcher believes gives more credibility to the study because it conveys the true picture that takes place within the university administrative space in light of the emerging variables in it, represented by digital transformation.

Study Hypotheses:

- The culture of the Algerian individual contributes to the embodiment of negative bureaucratic behavior in administration.
- Paper is a tool through which administration expresses its power and backwardness simultaneously.
- Digitalization is the modern means through which bureaucracy is embodied in Algerian administration.

Study Objectives:

By shedding light on this administrative practice in the Algerian university, the researcher attempts to determine the following:

- The real reasons behind the complexity and rigidity of administrative behavior in the Algerian university.
- The impact of the Algerian individual's culture on the most important outcomes of modernity, represented by digitalization.
- The reality of university administration in light of the supervisory administration's attempts to embody the administrative digital transformation project.

Culture and Bureaucracy among the Algerian Employee

Algeria did not escape the transformations the world experienced on many levels. Given that it had lived through those administrative changes witnessed in the European continent, particularly under French rule – which was then one of the most important political, economic, and administrative actors in the world – the outcomes of administrative processes were reflected in shaping and forming the culture of the Algerian individual after independence, considering the nature of the period in which the Algerian human resource was formed.

Algeria was not immune to the transformations the world witnessed on many levels. Considering it was living under those administrative shifts that the European continent, especially under French rule, was experiencing, and which was among the most important political, economic, and administrative actors in the world at that time, the outputs of the administrative process were reflected in the embodiment and formation of the culture of the Algerian individual after independence, given the nature of the stage in which the Algerian human resource was formed.

The Culture of the Algerian Employee

Independence carried within it much hope and many challenges for Algerian society, which had suffered from systematic ignorance, from which only a small group was spared. This group had to advance the country through an administration concerned with its affairs and ensuring its needs were met. However, the inherited challenges were greater than the hopes, which could only be achieved through work. This reality forced managers and administrators to engage in adaptation and acclimatization so as not to feel alienated and administratively and organizationally backward (Zant, 2024, p. 7) from what is happening in the world.

Engagement with socialism as a political, economic, and social orientation contributed to the production of a new type of culture that, over the years, permeated the elites and employees in the public sector, which was originally exclusively authorized to manage public affairs at the time. This culture was characterized by equality, rejection of class disparities, collective management, and denunciation of cheating, which created a basis for practices later characterized by laziness

and idleness (Bekis, 2018, p. 97). This continued for decades, producing an individual who placed no value on work under the benevolent, giving state. In contrast, it was expected that a revolution, in which its sons and daughters excelled at regaining their rights, would produce a culture that values work, diligence, and honesty, through which a state of institutions would be built. However, the opposite happened due to the poor implementation of the socialist system. This culture was reinforced after the Black Decade through economic reforms that were betrayed by the country's political context and the culture of the ruling elites, further accumulating a culture of social connections, nepotism, favoritism, and administrative corruption, which strongly confronted every attempt to break out of this negative cultural crisis for the administrators and managers of the Algerian administration. This way of thinking has driven the transformation of management in Algerian institutions from a legal dimension to a social dimension, resulting in the spread of laxity, dependency, and the dilution of spaces, as confirmed by the daily practices of Algerian administration employees in all sectors. Examples include a lack of discipline and the wasting of time.

Bureaucracy among Algerian Employees

The culture ingrained in the Algerian employee has led to concepts unrelated to the administrative organization, which was born out of a specific organizational environment. Therefore, we see a significant disparity in the application of bureaucracy in some of our Arab countries compared to other countries, where administration is characterized by flexibility and speed in providing services. In contrast, in Algeria, administrative transactions take time, consume many documents, and sometimes require mediation. The World Bank indicated in its recent report that countries with high levels of bureaucracy and corruption may lose between 5% and 10% of their GDP (Attigui, 2024). Furthermore, some researchers specializing in this field, such as economist Djilali Benamrane, have described the bureaucratic environment in Algeria as a dark environment that hinders the country's growth (Benamrane, 2014). The Algerian employee has been saturated with the negative values of bureaucracy as a result of the centralized management of administrations as a governmental orientation, which has been confirmed since the 1980s, and has produced a closed administration that is not open to the world. Bureaucratic practice suggests to the Algerian employee the confirmation of the power and authority of his administration, and thus his power and authority in particular. This is what was confirmed by the financial specialist, Amhamed Abassi, in his article for the French-speaking newspaper *Al-Watan*, that Algeria is the only country in the world whose political, administrative and social practices remain so. He added that the bureaucracy, which makes the Algerian administration dysfunctional and inflexible, where the easily led or those affiliated with a particular political party advance and progress, and where loyalty is given precedence over performance, has become a uniquely Algerian evil and a fundamental problem facing any attempt to build a transparent political model or a growing economy (Abaci, 2022).

The Authority of the Algerian Administration

It cannot be denied that the Algerian administration possesses a certain authority, and this stems from the negative perception of it within society. Political discourse following the Hirak movement has focused on this description, and this is what we have observed in the speeches of President Tebboune, whose complaints about the administration were recorded in his press meetings. Despite the efforts made by successive governments, especially in recent years, the Algerian administration remains under suspicion and accusation, which has greatly affected its reputation. Researchers in this field attribute the main reason for this reputation to negative bureaucracy, as the most important tool through which the administration expresses its power. The characteristics of the Algerian administration include the following (Al-Munzir, 2020 p. 32):

Extreme centralization: its goal is the control of the senior leadership over the reins of affairs, by not delegating authority and responsibility to those below them, which has caused a lot of problems at the executive level of procedures.

Rigid bureaucracy: it consists in the strong commitment of officials to implement the orders of the higher leadership, which widened the gap between them and subordinates and therefore with all those dealing with the administration, and this management style indicates a malfunction in communication between the base and the top, resulting in a very slow decision-making that paralyzes administrative work.

Evasion of responsibility: the form of mismatch of responsibility with the powers vested in employees, negative manifestations of which are the absence of professional conscience and lack of commitment to responsibility among most managers of the Algerian department, this disclaimer is in itself a force towards those who deal with this department, which leads to the client's helplessness towards management and disruption of their own interests and the public interest as a guarantor of all private interests.

Loyalty at the expense of performance: this advantage is one of the main factors for the expulsion of human competencies, and unfortunately, this is what the Algerian management is characterized by, which is the logic of thinking of officials in management through their preference for loyal people and bringing them closer to decision-making.

Corruption and exploitation of influence: the reality of the Algerian administration does not believe in the rule of responsibility, assignment, not honor, the logic of loyalty is based on the logic of personal interests through promotion in positions and weaving a network of relationships that would not have been without the career position. Which gives the employee the power of presence and the power of decision.

These five elements are what prompted the Algerian administration to devote its power and strength in front of everyone who deals with it, and it has come to disrupt top decisions because of the threat it carried towards the personal interests of its employees.

*Paper (Documents): From a Symbol
of Power to an Expression of Backwardness*

Administrative documents (paper) are the weapon that incapacitates everyone who deals with the administration. It is its subtle tool to impose its authority by complicating administrative procedures. Despite some measures aimed at reducing the use of administrative documents, the Algerian employee's administrative logic, which is determined by their culture and the nature of their training, makes them very attached to papers in their administrative transactions, despite the availability of modern means of communication represented in email, social media, and computers. In addition to the context in which administration exists in the world, it has become strongly associated with technological progress, which has imposed itself in all transactions, and which the Algerian administration cannot be isolated from. We mention, for example, the biometric transformation of travel documents (passport).

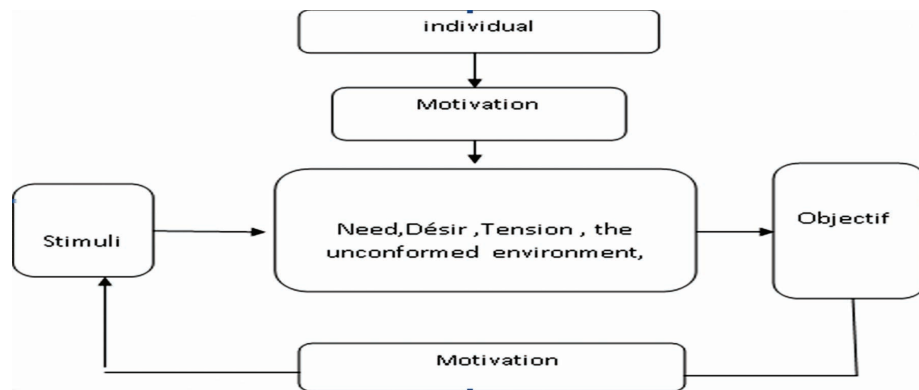
However, despite the supervisory administrations' keenness on the digital transformation of civil status documents, some administrative practices in the Algerian administration are still trapped in a traditional mindset of management due to their reliance on requesting documents that are already recorded in the biometric ID card or biometric passport. The administrative subordinates' justification for this is the lack of technical capabilities through which the administration can ascertain the authenticity of the digital document, which reinforces the role of the document ('the paper') as a guarantee of protection for employees. This honest justification confirms the disconnect between central administrations and their annexes, as well as the strength of traditional documents in consolidating the pillars of administrative power in Algeria, far from the simplification and acceleration of administrative procedures imposed by technology in the age of speed. This prompted the President to create a committee to investigate the disruption of digitization equipment, accusing what he called parties in public administrations and financial lobbies of resisting the project (Lahiani, 2025).

These behaviors, characteristic of some employees in the Algerian administration, represent a genuine obstacle for both the government and the governed. This is due to a mindset shaped by historical and contemporary factors, resulting in a colonial administrative mentality that relies heavily on paperwork and approvals from numerous administrative bodies. This opens the door to authority, influence, complexity, and entanglement among these administrative structures, prompting former Prime Minister Djerad to describe bureaucracy as an "epidemic" that has reduced the implementation rate of decisions from 10 to 20 percent (Bureaucracy in Algeria: Corruption rooted in the mentality for decades, 2020).

The researcher believes that these behaviors, through which their perpetrators try to demonstrate their dominance, actually reflect the extent of backwardness to which they have brought Algerian administration, driven by a desire to preserve their personal interests at the expense of the public good, even if that forces them to resort to primitive management methods in an age of development and

technology. This is the description that suits them, as the President said in his speech to businessmen and investors: “These administrations still operate with outdated methods that time has surpassed...” whose real aim is to institutionalize opacity in management.

Some Western researchers, such as Marcella and Briones, attribute these negative behaviors within the administrative sphere to the psychological state of individuals (employees), which is influenced by personality, attitudes, and perception (Wassila, 2014). All of this is naturally subject to the work environment and its reflections on the general and specific situation of employees (salaries, participation, promotions, incentives, freedom of initiative or lack thereof...). The following figure illustrates the behavior of individuals associated with the motivation process.



Source: Tabet Aoul Wassila, Zerouki Mohamed Amine, 2014, p. 46.

The Relationship Between Employee Culture and Behaviors

Individual culture is shaped by the behaviors they exhibit in reality. Administrative organizations are affected by the relationship between culture and individuals. Management always needs to instill a specific organizational culture and be the one that directs the incoming cultures through its employees. Otherwise, it becomes hostage to multiple cultural dictates that hinder its work and prevent it from achieving its goals. Successful administrative organizations are those that promote a positive culture that makes employees feel heard, which is then reflected in their behavior towards clients or citizens in a positive way.

Unlike administrations influenced by foreign cultures, where a negative work culture prevails, employees are driven to experience job burnout due to their lack of visibility to their administrative leadership. This, in turn, pushes employees toward negative behaviors where personal interests outweigh the public interest, resulting in what is known as administrative corruption. The bureaucratic culture, in its negative form, becomes the mirror through which the employee is seen, making them feel powerful and dominant, thus reducing their productivity.

McKinsey has stated that 60% of negative outcomes in the workplace are caused by toxic behavior in the work environment, which confirms the impact of negative work cultures on employee engagement and productivity (Reeves, 2023). Therefore, organizational culture, whether positive or negative, is more powerful than organizational rules and regulations.

Digitization and its Relationship to Bureaucracy in the Algerian Administration

A study conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) demonstrated that digital services save 74% of the time compared to providing services in the traditional, face-to-face manner. They are also significantly less expensive, in addition to reducing the rate of administrative corruption (IDB, 2018). Gassaoui Alloubi, the French Minister in charge of Digitalization, affirmed that digital services can offer many benefits compared to paper-based services, without neglecting some of the problems encountered in applying the digital model in the West. As Professor of Sociology Gilles Jeannot clarifies, the problem is not in the digital aspect itself, but in its generalization to the macro level of services provided (Albouy, 2022, p. 6). This is what happened in Algeria. The generalization of applying digitization in the absence of a digital culture and a lack of human competencies has created a kind of slowdown in the smooth running of the digital process. However, despite the many negatives of digitization, it has contributed significantly to facilitating procedures, especially at the level of local administrations and with regard to civil status documents. The problems remain mainly related to what we talked about previously, which is the culture and mentality of administrative employees. Digitization in Algeria has added to the administrative employees a kind of power in complicating administrative procedures, due to several objective and technical reasons that contributed to the emergence of digital bureaucracy.

Digitalization in the Algerian Administration

We cannot ignore the transformations that the Algerian administration has undergone at the technical level, despite the numerous problems it still suffers from. The moves by the supervisory administrations have contributed to a shift in the digitalization of civil status documents and the digitalization of the judiciary, which has been welcomed by everyone, employees and citizens alike, in the hope of alleviating the complexity associated with administrative procedures, represented by the abundance of paper (documents). The following table shows Algeria's classification by the United Nations E-Government Survey from 2012 to 2018.

2018	2016	2014	2012	country
80 ^E	72 ^e	75 ^e	103 ^e	Tunisia
110 ^e	85 ^e	82 ^e	120 ^e	Morocco
130 ^e	150 ^e	136 ^e	132 ^e	Algeria

*Table 1: Classification of countries (2012-2018)
based on the electronic management index
Source: Labaz Abdelkader, 2020, p. 23*

From the table, it is clear that we are still lagging behind in the field of e-administration compared to our neighbors in the Maghreb. These figures reflect the reality of the digitization of the Algerian administration after the efforts made before the Hirak movement, let alone after the Hirak, especially after the repeated statements of the President of the Republic regarding the primitive practices of the administration in light of digitization. Despite the fact that Algeria advanced several places from 2016 to 2018 in terms of the telecommunications infrastructure index, moving from 135th to 102nd place, the Online Service Index (OSI) advanced 10 places from 181st to 171st. As for the Human Capital Index (HCI), there was no progress, remaining in 118th place (Abdelkader, 2020, P24). This indicator poses an obstacle to the progress of all projects, especially the digitization project, and is mainly related to the efficiency and culture of the employees responsible for implementing this complex type of program. They have produced a bureaucratic digital reality that has no connection to the spatiotemporal context expressed by the technological advancement taking place in the world.

The Reality of Digitalization in the Algerian University

Despite the modern trajectory of the Algerian state, aimed at improving the performance of public services due to the difficulties and failures experienced by traditional administration, which technological challenges have rendered completely incapable of providing services in line with the current global context, as emphasized by the Coronavirus pandemic of 2019, by pushing the higher authorities to take into account the digitalization of the higher education sector, which, like other public facilities, has been met with a negative view from officials and employees of this sensitive and important sector. This will later be reflected in the process through a number of negative practices that have added bureaucratic complexity to the program, as we will mention later. Indeed, the supervisory ministry began to activate digitalization in the university sector after the Coronavirus pandemic through the slogan “Zero Paper,” and the following resulted from this transformation (Fahima, 2023, p. 494):

– Unifying the scientific publication process in the field of scientific research and technological development (ASJP).

- Activating the e-learning platform.
- Creating the Progress platform to monitor students' academic paths.
- Activating remote lecturing technology in scientific activities.
- Activating the Moodle platform for teaching horizontal modules remotely.

In addition to other platforms concerned with accommodation, catering, university grants, and long- and short-term internships.

On a technical level, the above is an achievement made by the supervisory administration of the higher education and scientific research sector. However, its implementation on the ground still faces numerous technical and human challenges. The researcher believes that, in addition to the technical complexities facing this program, the human element remains the most significant obstacle to the progress of these programs.

Challenges of Digitalization in University Administration

Digitalization in the Algerian university faces many challenges, hindering this important path in its specific time and space context. Perhaps the ailments and negatives of traditional administration have been transferred to the administration in its modern concept related to the digitalization of administrative operations. Someone observing the progress of administrative operations within university administration still does not see a significant difference between what it was in the past and what is happening now, due to several considerations that we will mention as follows:

A. The culture of the human staff overseeing the digitization process, the features of which have become clear through the complexity that still surrounds administrative procedures via the strong presence of administrative documents represented in paper form, which clearly expresses digital bureaucracy in its negative sense. For example, a doctoral student still submits a paper file for discussion, and then the administrative procedures take a long time to pass to the Progress platform, which requires the doctoral student to submit their digital administrative file. Even the digital platform that was created to facilitate the process and save time takes a long time to move from one stage to another. This, of course, varies from university to university, as the matter depends here on the culture and competencies of those supervising this process.

B. Lack of competence among staff assigned to supervise the digitization process, as the majority do not have training in computer science, internet technologies and their applications, or their training is weak.

C. Weak internet network and its occasional unavailability (for some students), which makes accessing these platforms difficult in many cases, such as when student grades are being posted, or students trying to view their grades. This prompts them to contact the administration and access them traditionally after repeated efforts and attempts sometimes.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, the researcher concludes that bureaucracy in Algerian administration is a culture of functional society, aimed at consolidating functional practices to extend control and influence through multiple classical mechanisms and tools, such as administrative documents, or modern ones, such as digitization and its platforms. All of these serve the negative bureaucratic approach, which has greatly hampered the public interest, and given ample space for personal interests, resulting in administrative corruption and complicated administrative procedures, to the point of standing in the way of sovereign decisions. Through this theoretical research, and based on field data, we have reached the following results:

- The culture of employees and the nature of their training greatly affect the management style, whether traditional or modern.
- Bureaucracy in Algerian administration in general, and in university administration in particular, is a functional way of life.
- Centralization is the main cause of the crystallization of document bureaucracy or digitization bureaucracy.
- Lack of compatibility between incoming reform programs and the nature of management and the training of managers.

Based on the aforementioned discussion and the conclusions drawn, the researcher proposes the following:

- Attracting qualified and specialized human resources in the field of information technology.
- The necessity of a strong political will, aware of the reality and its problems, and with a clear vision regarding how to embody a serious digital transformation, away from dictations and orders.
- Drawing inspiration from successful international experiences in the field of information technology and entering into scientific partnerships with them to consolidate the culture of digital work within university administration.
- Encouraging subordinates and employees to move away from negative bureaucracy and motivating them materially and morally.
- Reducing excessive centralization and working to provide a digital infrastructure that is compatible with the modern context in which the Algerian administration exists.

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