



The Digital Agency offices have a different ambiance from that of traditional Japanese bureaucracy: the offices are colorful and provide free-address workstations.



The new Digital Agency began operation on September 1. It will serve as a control tower of the country's digital transformation, including the provision of administrative services by the government online. HIRAI Takuya, on the right, minister of Digital Agency, shown with ISHIKURA Yoko, the first chief officer of the Agency.

NEW DIGITAL AGENCY PURSUES INCLUSIVE DIGITALIZATION

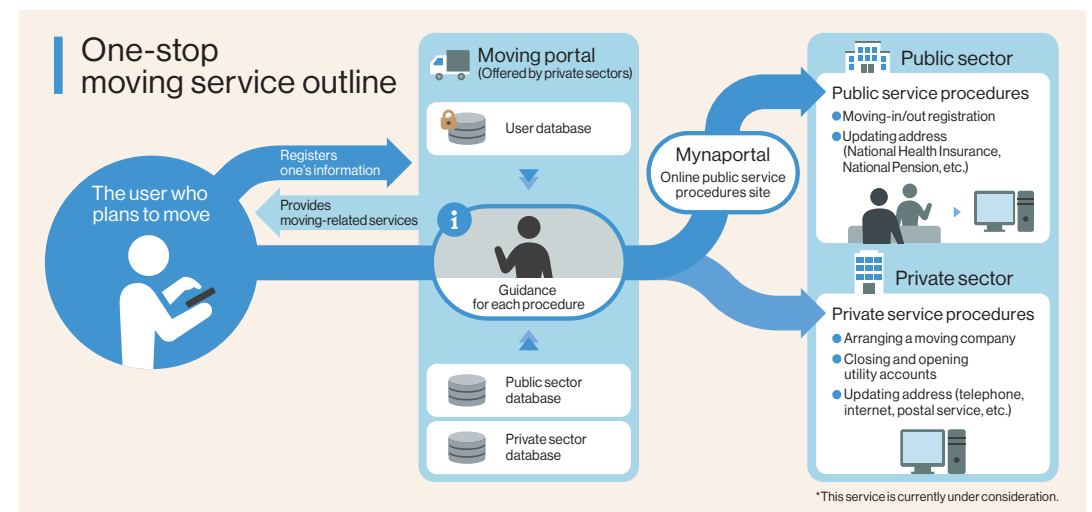
The Japanese government has established a new Digital Agency with a view to overcoming inefficiency in public administration. An expert with years of experience in promoting the ICT of governmental organizations talks about the Agency and its mission.

It is frequently pointed out that Japan has been laggard in digitalizing the governmental administrative functions both at the national and local level. A specific example of this has been the response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic: applying for cash benefits was felt to be unduly complicated and payments were slow in arriving, highlighting the problems of a system that is unfriendly to users and in which data is inadequately linked. The Digital Agency came into being on September 1, charged with the mission of fundamentally solving such issues through the digitalization of public administrative procedures, and promoting the standardization and coordination of data systems.

“Japan is far from lagging behind other nations in information technology since it is equipped with the necessary infrastructure for nationwide communication,” says ZAMMA Toshiyuki, who worked for many years as an executive advisor to the government CIO in both the Ministry of Finance and the Cabinet Secretariat. He has just assumed the post of head of International Strategy at the Digital

Agency. “In fact, Japan ranked 14th last year in the United Nations’ E-Government Survey, putting it in the ‘Very-High’ class. However, the story changes when it comes to optimizing ‘digitalization’ in such a way as to provide good administrative services by the government, which often involves joint efforts with the private sector. Even when individual systems are competent, they will not be user-friendly unless they are properly linked, and it is also important to coordinate with private services that are used on a day-to-day basis. The Digital Agency will play a critical role in overcoming these issues,” he asserts. Zamma himself was previously a systems engineer from the private sector and a long-time consultant at global consulting firms.

One of the missions of the Digital Agency is to break down silos (vertical segmentation) within administrative systems. The Agency aims to strongly improve data linkage across the boundaries of separate government organizations, leading to increased efficiency in their services and operations. It also focuses on capitalizing on expertise from the



private sector. By actively employing professionals, it assumes a more flexible and speedy approach, including utilizing the agile methodology, than had been done in the past. In that manner, the Digital Agency is expected to function as a “lubricant” and an engine of reform to push the government forward—both nationally and at the local level—and improve its performance.

Zamma declares that the focal point of the Agency’s agenda lies in “improving people’s day-to-day lives.” He says, “Let’s say you are moving house. This involves a great deal of work, such as de-registering and registering at various offices, signing up for electricity and gas, and engaging a removal service. You are obliged to write the same address over and over and the whole procedure is very inefficient. We are aiming for a one-stop service that involves less effort and improves citizen’s experiences.”

The idea of a one-stop moving service draws on a similar method, Service Design Thinking, promoted earlier in the U.K. “We are eagerly referencing foreign experiences and methods where we can. Singapore introduced something similar to a digital agency five years ago, and we have also learned from countries such as Finland, Denmark, Estonia and more. But



ZAMMA Toshiyuki, the newly appointed head of International Strategy, hails from the private sector. By relaying information to the world about Japan’s experience in digitalization, he hopes to “pay back” those countries that presented him with knowledge and insights, contributing to international discussions.

different countries have different problems and social settings, so simply copying solutions from elsewhere will not work. We must understand Japan’s needs correctly, pick and choose cases and methods, and then make further improvements to provide feedback to the rest of the world. That is international collaboration in digital age.”

In some instances, however, foreign nations are looking to Japan as the leader. The Earthquake Early Warning System is one such example. Japan has a unique system whereby every cellphone carrier is able to emit an earthquake alert with remarkable speed when a quake occurs. Also highly regarded is the use of real-time hazard maps—which are being improved every day—to aid in times of disaster.

This year, the Vaccination Record System (VRS), which was developed based upon continuous feedback from municipal governments, the system’s main users, made progress in streamlining processes by data linkage. The Digital Agency bears the responsibility of abolishing inefficient practices of the past and thoroughly focuses on the value of “improving people’s day-to-day lives.” Guaranteeing the security of data and systems while providing a platform for collective administrative endeavors, the Agency aims to speed up digitalization in a user-driven manner.

The Digital Agency has just begun the challenge of getting the message out regarding solving social problems through digitalization, and that will eventually help realize a society where all can enjoy the benefits of digitalization in a way that best fits everyone’s individual needs.