

Research Article

Series I - Foundations of Institutional Cognition

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Institutional Cognition in Everyday Public Administration



IDHUS Institute

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Introduction

When readers first encounter the concept of Institutional Cognition, it is understandable that they may imagine a future model of governance built upon advanced artificial intelligence, highly sophisticated organisational architectures or entirely new forms of public administration. The language of cognition, intelligence and adaptive systems can appear unfamiliar within discussions of government, leading to the impression that these ideas belong primarily to future institutions rather than to those operating today. Yet one of the most important insights offered by the IDHUS framework is precisely the opposite. Institutional Cognition is not something that governments must one day invent. It is something that they already practise, often without describing it in those terms.

Every public institution depends upon cognitive processes simply to perform its everyday responsibilities. A local authority evaluates information before approving planning applications. A healthcare agency analyses previous outcomes before updating clinical guidance. Tax administrations refine procedures after identifying recurring operational difficulties. Education ministries adapt policies in response to changing demographic trends and new evidence concerning learning outcomes. Emergency management organisations improve coordination following natural disasters or public health emergencies. None of these activities is ordinarily described as Institutional Cognition, yet each reflects an institution observing its environment, preserving experience, learning from previous action and modifying future behaviour accordingly.

The reason these activities often remain invisible is that they are usually understood separately rather than collectively. Administrative learning is discussed within one field of public management, organisational memory within another, policy evaluation within another and knowledge management within yet another. Institutions therefore develop many cognitive capabilities without recognising that these capabilities form interconnected parts of a much larger organisational architecture. The concept of Institutional Cognition provides a unifying perspective through which these familiar activities can be understood as expressions of a single underlying process: the capacity of institutions to acquire, preserve, interpret and apply knowledge in support of better governance.

Earlier articles in our research series introduced the principal components of this cognitive architecture. We explored how institutions learn from experience, preserve organisational memory, develop collective intelligence, understand complex systems and adapt continuously while maintaining organisational continuity. Most recently, we examined how these capabilities interact within an integrated cognitive architecture rather than functioning as isolated organisational processes. Having established these conceptual foundations, we are now able to return to the everyday realities of public administration and recognise these same capabilities operating within ordinary governmental practice.

This change in perspective is significant because it transforms the way public administration itself is understood. Administrative work is often portrayed primarily as the implementation of policies, the delivery of public services or the application of legal procedures. While these activities remain central to government, they also involve continuous processes of observation, interpretation, judgement and learning. Public officials rarely perform identical tasks indefinitely without modification. Instead, they continuously refine procedures, incorporate new knowledge, respond to changing societal needs and adjust organisational practices as experience accumulates. The ordinary functioning of government therefore already contains many of the essential characteristics of cognitive behaviour.

Importantly, recognising these cognitive processes does not imply that every public institution has already become a fully cognitive organisation. Institutions vary considerably in the maturity of their cognitive capabilities. Some preserve knowledge effectively but struggle to learn systematically from experience. Others demonstrate remarkable adaptive capacity while lacking

mechanisms for sharing learning across organisational boundaries. Some excel at operational decision-making yet find it difficult to integrate long-term strategic knowledge into everyday governance. Institutional Cognition should therefore be understood as existing along a continuum rather than as a simple distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive organisations. Every institution possesses cognitive capabilities to some degree, but their integration and sophistication differ substantially.

Artificial intelligence is accelerating awareness of these existing capabilities because it makes many organisational learning processes more visible than before. Digital knowledge systems reveal how information circulates throughout institutions, analytical platforms expose recurring patterns within administrative practice and AI-supported decision tools demonstrate the importance of organisational memory and collective expertise in everyday governance. Yet these technologies should not be mistaken for the origin of institutional cognition itself. Public institutions learned, remembered and adapted long before artificial intelligence existed. AI expands these capabilities, but it builds upon cognitive foundations that have been evolving throughout the history of organised governance.

Within the framework of the IDHUS Institute, this recognition represents an important conceptual shift. Rather than asking whether institutions can become cognitive, we begin asking how their existing cognitive capabilities can be strengthened, connected and developed more deliberately. Public administration already contains the building blocks of Institutional Cognition. The task now is to understand how these familiar activities can be integrated into increasingly intelligent systems capable of responding more effectively to the growing complexity of contemporary governance.

To appreciate this more fully, we begin by examining one of the most familiar yet often overlooked examples of Institutional Cognition in practice. Every day, public organisations improve their work through accumulated experience, refining procedures, updating practices and strengthening organisational understanding.

Learning Through Everyday Administrative Practice

Learning is often associated with formal training programmes, professional development courses or organisational reform initiatives. While these activities undoubtedly contribute to improving public administration, they represent only one dimension of how institutions learn. The vast majority of organisational learning occurs quietly within the ordinary routines of administrative life. Every interaction with citizens, every policy implementation, every completed project and every operational challenge generates experience from which institutions can gradually improve. Institutional Cognition begins not in exceptional moments of transformation but in the continuous accumulation of practical knowledge that accompanies the everyday work of governance.

Consider the operation of a municipal planning department. Planning officers review applications daily, interpret regulations, consult technical specialists and communicate with citizens. Over time, recurring patterns become increasingly familiar. Certain administrative procedures consistently produce delays, some communication methods improve public understanding more effectively than others and particular regulatory ambiguities repeatedly create unnecessary complexity. Although no single case fundamentally changes the organisation, the cumulative effect of thousands of similar experiences gradually reshapes how the department operates. Procedures become more efficient, guidance becomes clearer and professional

judgement becomes increasingly refined. The institution has learned, even if no formal learning programme has been announced.

The same process can be observed throughout every area of public administration. Healthcare organisations improve clinical protocols after analysing patient outcomes. Emergency services refine coordination procedures following operational exercises and real incidents. Tax authorities simplify administrative processes after identifying recurring difficulties experienced by citizens. Educational institutions revise teaching frameworks as evidence concerning student performance accumulates. Social services continuously adjust intervention strategies in response to evolving community needs. In each case, institutions transform operational experience into improved organisational capability through a process of continuous learning embedded within routine practice rather than extraordinary reform.

One of the defining characteristics of this everyday learning is its incremental nature. Public institutions rarely become substantially more effective because of a single dramatic innovation. Instead, organisational capability usually develops through the accumulation of many relatively small improvements introduced consistently over time. A revised administrative form, a clearer internal procedure, improved coordination between departments or a more effective method of communicating with the public may appear modest in isolation. Yet when such refinements occur continuously across years and decades, they produce profound institutional evolution. Cognitive institutions therefore understand that learning is often less about revolutionary change than about maintaining a sustained commitment to gradual improvement.

This process also illustrates why Institutional Cognition extends beyond individual expertise. Individual public servants naturally become more experienced as they perform their responsibilities, but institutional learning occurs only when personal experience becomes organisational knowledge. A valuable procedural improvement developed by one team acquires lasting significance when it is shared across the institution, incorporated into official guidance and preserved for future generations of public officials. Organisations therefore learn not simply because individuals become more knowledgeable, but because mechanisms exist through which individual learning becomes collective capability.

Institutional memory plays an essential role within this transformation. Every improvement generated through daily administrative practice becomes more valuable when it is preserved rather than forgotten. Updated procedures, revised guidance, operational evaluations and accumulated professional expertise all contribute to the institution's expanding cognitive architecture. Memory ensures that learning extends beyond the immediate circumstances in which it originated, allowing future decisions to benefit from knowledge acquired through previous experience. Everyday learning therefore becomes cumulative, gradually strengthening the institution's capacity to respond intelligently to increasingly complex governance challenges.

Artificial intelligence is beginning to accelerate this process by making organisational learning more visible and systematic. Administrative systems increasingly identify recurring operational patterns, detect inefficiencies, analyse service performance and reveal opportunities for procedural improvement that might previously have remained unnoticed. AI-supported analytics enable institutions to examine thousands of cases simultaneously, identifying trends that individual officials could not realistically detect through manual observation alone. These capabilities do not replace professional judgement, but they significantly expand the evidence available for organisational learning, allowing everyday experience to contribute more effectively to institutional improvement.

For us, these familiar examples demonstrate that learning is already deeply embedded within the daily operation of public administration. Institutions continuously improve because they accumulate experience, preserve practical knowledge and refine their understanding through repeated interaction with society. Institutional Cognition therefore does not introduce learning into government for the first time. It provides a conceptual framework through which existing learning processes can become more coherent, more systematic and more deliberately integrated into the broader architecture of cognitive governance.

Learning, however, represents only one aspect of everyday institutional cognition. Public administration also demonstrates another characteristic that often remains hidden behind organisational structures: decisions rarely emerge from isolated individuals acting alone. Instead, they reflect the accumulated knowledge, experience and coordinated judgement of the institution as a whole.

Decision-Making Beyond Individual Officials

Public decisions are frequently associated with ministers, elected representatives, senior civil servants or agency directors. Public attention naturally focuses on those individuals who formally approve policies, sign regulations or announce governmental initiatives. While these figures undoubtedly occupy positions of significant responsibility, the reality of public administration is considerably more complex. Most governmental decisions emerge from extensive processes of consultation, analysis, evaluation and collaboration involving many different individuals and organisational units. Institutional Cognition becomes visible precisely because decisions represent the outcome of distributed organisational intelligence rather than the judgement of isolated decision-makers.

Even relatively routine administrative decisions illustrate this principle. Before a public policy reaches ministerial approval, it may have been informed by legal analysis, economic modelling, operational experience, financial assessment, stakeholder consultation, scientific research and administrative evaluation. Specialists from multiple disciplines contribute their expertise, previous policy experience provides historical context, legal frameworks establish boundaries for action and institutional memory offers insight into earlier reforms addressing similar challenges. The final decision therefore embodies far more than the perspective of any single individual. It reflects the accumulated cognitive activity of the institution itself.

This distributed character of decision-making becomes even more apparent during complex governance challenges. Responding to a public health emergency, designing climate adaptation strategies or regulating emerging technologies requires expertise extending far beyond the competence of any individual official. Epidemiologists, economists, engineers, legal scholars, public administrators, communication specialists and many others contribute different forms of knowledge that must ultimately be integrated into coherent governmental action. Institutions succeed not because one individual possesses every answer but because organisational structures enable diverse forms of expertise to converge within shared decision processes. Collective judgement becomes one of the institution's greatest cognitive resources.

Institutional memory also shapes these decisions in ways that often remain invisible. Rarely do public organisations confront entirely unprecedented situations. Earlier policy initiatives, judicial decisions, operational experiences and historical reforms provide valuable reference points that influence contemporary judgement. Officials routinely consult previous legislation, administrative guidance, evaluation reports and historical precedents before determining how current challenges should be addressed. These practices demonstrate that institutions already think across time, drawing upon accumulated organisational knowledge rather than relying exclusively upon present circumstances. Every decision therefore reflects both current evidence and the cognitive inheritance preserved by previous generations of public administration.

Equally important is the role of established administrative procedures. Far from representing mere bureaucracy, many procedural frameworks exist because they embody institutional learning accumulated over long periods. Requirements for consultation, legal review,

financial assessment and interdepartmental coordination have frequently evolved through experience, ensuring that important decisions benefit from multiple perspectives before implementation. These procedures illustrate how cognition becomes embedded within organisational practice. Institutions preserve judgement not only through the knowledge of experienced individuals but also through governance processes designed to encourage careful reflection, evidence-based reasoning and responsible decision-making.

Artificial intelligence increasingly supports these everyday decision processes by expanding the analytical capabilities available to public officials. AI systems assist in reviewing large bodies of documentation, identifying relevant precedents, analysing policy alternatives and modelling possible consequences of different courses of action. They enable decision-makers to navigate increasingly complex governance environments with greater confidence and broader awareness than traditional methods alone could provide. Yet these technologies reinforce rather than replace the institutional character of decision-making. Public decisions continue requiring democratic accountability, ethical judgement, legal interpretation and constitutional responsibility, dimensions that remain inseparable from human governance. These familiar administrative practices reveal that Institutional Cognition already operates throughout the decision-making structures of modern government. Decisions emerge from interconnected systems of observation, memory, expertise, collaboration and organisational judgement that extend well beyond individual office holders. The institution itself becomes the enduring cognitive actor, capable of preserving continuity despite inevitable changes in leadership, personnel and political priorities.

Decision-making, however, relies upon another capability that often receives little attention because it functions quietly beneath the surface of everyday administration. Institutions remain capable of acting coherently over years and decades because they continuously preserve and reuse accumulated organisational knowledge within their routine operations.

How Institutions Remember During Daily Operations

Institutional memory is often associated with archives, official records or historical documentation stored within government repositories. These resources undoubtedly play an essential role in preserving administrative continuity, yet they represent only a small part of how public institutions remember. In everyday administrative practice, institutional memory is continuously expressed through routine operations that allow organisations to build upon previous experience without consciously referring to it on every occasion. Every established procedure, operational guideline, professional practice and organisational convention embodies knowledge accumulated over many years of public service. Institutions therefore remember not only through what they record but also through the way they routinely perform their work.

This form of organisational memory becomes particularly visible when experienced public officials collaborate with newer colleagues. Much of what enables an institution to function effectively is transmitted through shared practice rather than formal instruction alone. Senior professionals explain why certain procedures exist, describe how previous situations were resolved and provide context that cannot easily be captured within administrative manuals. Over time, this practical knowledge becomes embedded within the organisation itself as successive generations of public servants inherit and refine accumulated experience. Institutional memory is therefore not static preservation but an active process through which organisational understanding is continuously renewed through everyday professional interaction.

Administrative procedures themselves frequently represent condensed expressions of institutional learning. A procurement process, for example, may appear to consist simply of legal requirements and operational steps. Yet each element often reflects lessons acquired through previous experience: mechanisms introduced to ensure transparency, safeguards designed to prevent conflicts of interest or coordination processes developed after earlier operational difficulties. Citizens interacting with these procedures may perceive only their immediate administrative function, while the institution recognises them as practical expressions of accumulated organisational knowledge. Daily operations therefore reveal how memory becomes embedded within governance itself rather than remaining confined to historical records.

Institutional memory also becomes evident whenever organisations encounter familiar situations. Public administrations regularly face recurring seasonal challenges, economic fluctuations, natural hazards, electoral transitions or changing service demands. Although every occurrence possesses unique characteristics, institutions rarely begin their response from the beginning. Previous contingency plans, operational evaluations, established coordination mechanisms and historical experience all contribute to contemporary action. Officials instinctively consult earlier guidance, review previous responses and adapt established practices to current circumstances. In doing so, they demonstrate one of the defining characteristics of Institutional Cognition: the ability to connect present action with accumulated organisational experience.

An equally important dimension of everyday memory concerns organisational culture. Every public institution develops shared assumptions concerning professional responsibility, public service, ethical conduct and appropriate administrative behaviour. These values are rarely learned solely through written regulations. Instead, they emerge gradually through participation in the organisation's daily activities, where new members observe how experienced colleagues approach complex situations, interact with citizens and interpret institutional responsibilities. Culture therefore functions as a powerful repository of institutional memory because it preserves not only procedural knowledge but also the deeper principles guiding organisational judgement.

Artificial intelligence is beginning to strengthen these forms of organisational remembrance by making accumulated institutional knowledge more accessible during routine administrative work. Intelligent search systems, knowledge management platforms and AI-supported document analysis increasingly enable public officials to locate relevant precedents, historical guidance and previous policy evaluations within seconds rather than hours or days. These technologies reduce the practical barriers that have often separated current administrative work from historical organisational experience. Nevertheless, they do not replace institutional memory itself. AI retrieves information, but institutions remain responsible for interpreting its significance, understanding its historical context and determining how previous experience should inform present governance.

These everyday examples illustrate that institutional memory is already deeply woven into the fabric of public administration. Organisations remember through people, procedures, professional communities, governance practices and organisational cultures operating continuously beneath the visible surface of administrative activity. Institutional Cognition does not introduce memory where none previously existed. Rather, it enables institutions to recognise memory as one of the essential cognitive capabilities supporting every aspect of effective governance.

Yet memory alone does not ensure institutional effectiveness. Preserved knowledge acquires its greatest value only when it influences future behaviour. Public institutions must continually revise their practices, refine their procedures and adjust their responses as society itself evolves. This dynamic relationship between memory and organisational evolution leads naturally to the next dimension of everyday Institutional Cognition: **Continuous Adaptation in Public Administration.**

Continuous Adaptation in Public Administration

Public administration is sometimes portrayed as a system designed primarily to preserve stability and ensure the consistent application of established rules. While continuity remains one of its defining responsibilities, everyday administrative practice reveals a more dynamic reality. Governments continuously modify procedures, update regulations, improve public services and refine operational methods in response to changing circumstances. These adjustments are often gradual and rarely attract public attention, yet together they demonstrate that adaptation is already a permanent feature of administrative life. Institutional Cognition becomes visible because public institutions are constantly learning how to perform their responsibilities more effectively without abandoning the continuity that society depends upon.

One of the clearest examples of this adaptive capacity can be found in the evolution of administrative procedures. Public organisations routinely identify opportunities to simplify citizen interactions, reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, improve digital accessibility or strengthen coordination between departments. These improvements rarely emerge through isolated acts of innovation. They are usually the result of accumulated operational experience gathered over months or years of daily administrative work. Officials observe recurring difficulties, evaluate alternative approaches and gradually introduce refinements that enhance organisational performance. Adaptation therefore occurs not only during major reforms but also through the continuous adjustment of everyday administrative practice.

Policy implementation offers another illustration of this process. Once legislation has been adopted, institutions quickly begin learning how policies operate under real-world conditions. Unexpected administrative challenges emerge, citizens respond in ways that differ from initial expectations and practical experience reveals opportunities for improvement that could not have been fully anticipated during policy design. Rather than treating implementation as the final stage of governance, cognitive institutions recognise it as the beginning of a new learning cycle. Operational feedback becomes a valuable source of knowledge through which future policy development can be strengthened. Adaptation is therefore embedded within the normal life cycle of public policy rather than reserved for moments of institutional crisis.

This continuous evolution also reflects the growing complexity of the environments within which governments operate. Demographic change, technological innovation, environmental pressures and evolving public expectations require institutions to revise many aspects of their work while preserving legal certainty and organisational continuity. Public administrations therefore adapt not because previous approaches were necessarily incorrect, but because new realities require updated responses. Effective governance increasingly depends upon maintaining alignment between institutional capability and societal change. Adaptation becomes an ongoing responsibility rather than an occasional administrative project.

Importantly, everyday adaptation demonstrates that institutions already possess many of the characteristics associated with cognitive systems. They observe their operating environment, compare current performance with previous experience, evaluate the consequences of administrative decisions and incorporate new understanding into subsequent practice. These processes frequently occur without being explicitly recognised as Institutional Cognition, yet they reveal that public administration has long relied upon iterative cycles of learning and improvement. The IDHUS framework simply provides a conceptual language through which these familiar organisational behaviours can be understood as interconnected elements of a broader cognitive architecture.

Artificial intelligence is accelerating this adaptive capacity by enabling institutions to identify opportunities for improvement more rapidly than ever before. AI-supported analytics can

reveal operational bottlenecks, detect emerging service demands, evaluate policy implementation and identify recurring patterns across large administrative datasets. Governments increasingly possess the ability to monitor organisational performance almost continuously rather than relying exclusively upon periodic evaluations. These capabilities allow adaptation to become more timely, more evidence-informed and more responsive to changing conditions. Yet the decision to modify governance practices remains fundamentally institutional. Technology identifies possibilities for improvement, while public institutions determine which changes best serve democratic objectives and long-term societal interests.

In this context, adaptation should therefore be understood as an ordinary characteristic of good public administration rather than an exceptional organisational achievement. Every institution that refines procedures, improves services, updates operational practices or incorporates lessons from experience already demonstrates cognitive behaviour. The challenge for future governance is not to introduce adaptation where none exists, but to organise these existing adaptive processes more systematically, ensuring that observation, memory, learning and decision-making reinforce one another within an increasingly coherent cognitive architecture.

This perspective prepares us for perhaps the most visible contemporary expression of Institutional Cognition in everyday governance. As artificial intelligence becomes progressively integrated into public administration, many cognitive processes that previously developed gradually through human collaboration are being augmented by powerful computational capabilities.

Artificial Intelligence in Everyday Governance

Few developments have influenced contemporary public administration as visibly as the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence. Across governments worldwide, AI is beginning to assist with document analysis, administrative workflows, citizen services, regulatory oversight, policy evaluation and operational planning. These technological advances often create the impression that public administration is entering an entirely new era in which cognition is being introduced into government for the first time. From the perspective of Institutional Cognition, however, a more nuanced interpretation emerges. Artificial intelligence is not creating cognition where none previously existed. Rather, it is amplifying cognitive processes that have long formed part of the everyday operation of public institutions.

This distinction is essential because it changes how technological transformation should be understood. Public administrations have always collected information, interpreted evidence, preserved institutional knowledge and coordinated complex decision-making processes. Artificial intelligence enhances each of these capabilities by increasing the speed, scale and depth with which they can be performed. AI systems can examine vast collections of administrative documents, identify patterns across millions of records, summarise complex regulatory information and support public officials in navigating increasingly intricate policy environments. Yet every one of these computational functions contributes to cognitive processes that institutions were already carrying out, albeit with more limited analytical capacity.

Consider the work of a public official responsible for evaluating applications for a government programme. Traditionally, this task required reviewing documentation, verifying eligibility, consulting applicable regulations and comparing individual cases with previous administrative decisions. Artificial intelligence now assists by organising documents, highlighting relevant information, identifying inconsistencies and retrieving comparable precedents from

extensive institutional archives. The official still exercises professional judgement, interprets legal requirements and assumes responsibility for the final decision, but many routine cognitive tasks become significantly more efficient. AI therefore strengthens institutional capability without replacing institutional responsibility.

The same principle applies across numerous areas of public administration. Public health agencies employ AI to identify emerging epidemiological patterns while relying upon medical experts to interpret their significance. Environmental authorities analyse satellite imagery through machine learning systems that support, rather than substitute for, environmental governance. Tax administrations use intelligent analytical tools to detect anomalies requiring further investigation, while experienced officials determine the appropriate administrative response. Social services increasingly employ predictive analytics to identify communities that may require additional support, yet public professionals remain responsible for designing and delivering interventions grounded in ethical and legal principles. In every case, artificial intelligence expands the institution's capacity to perceive and analyse complexity while leaving governance itself firmly within the domain of accountable public institutions.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of AI lies in its ability to strengthen the connections between the different components of Institutional Cognition. Information collected through observation can be processed more rapidly, organisational memory becomes more accessible, learning from large volumes of experience becomes increasingly systematic and decision-makers gain access to richer analytical support than previous generations of public administration could have imagined. Rather than enhancing only one aspect of governance, artificial intelligence reinforces the interactions that allow cognitive systems to function as integrated wholes. It helps transform isolated administrative capabilities into more coherent organisational intelligence.

At the same time, the growing presence of artificial intelligence also highlights the enduring importance of uniquely institutional capabilities that technology cannot provide independently. AI may identify statistically significant patterns, but it cannot determine the constitutional legitimacy of a policy. It can estimate probable outcomes, yet it cannot decide which public values should take precedence when competing societal interests must be balanced. It may retrieve historical precedents, but it cannot understand the political, cultural and ethical context within which those precedents originally emerged. These responsibilities remain inseparable from democratic institutions because governance involves not only information processing but also judgement, accountability and public purpose.

This relationship between computational intelligence and institutional judgement represents one of the defining characteristics of future public administration. The most effective governments will not simply possess more advanced artificial intelligence. They will possess stronger cognitive architectures capable of integrating technological capabilities with human expertise, organisational memory, democratic legitimacy and long-term institutional learning. Technology alone cannot create intelligent governance. It becomes transformative only when embedded within institutions that already understand how to observe, learn, decide and adapt responsibly.

Within the framework of the IDHUS Institute, artificial intelligence should therefore be viewed as an accelerator rather than the foundation of Institutional Cognition. It enhances the cognitive capacities that public institutions have gradually developed over centuries of administrative evolution, enabling governments to respond more effectively to increasing societal complexity while preserving the human judgement upon which legitimate governance ultimately depends. The future of public administration is consequently neither purely human nor purely technological. It is increasingly characterised by collaborative cognitive systems in which institutional intelligence and computational intelligence reinforce one another in the service of society.

Recognising this relationship changes the way everyday administrative work is perceived. Routine procedures, operational learning, collaborative decision-making and AI-supported analysis cease to appear as separate organisational activities. Together they reveal the gradual

emergence of a new model of governance in which cognition becomes the defining characteristic of public institutions.

From Administrative Routine to Cognitive Governance

One of the most profound consequences of viewing public administration through the lens of Institutional Cognition is that familiar administrative routines begin to acquire entirely new meaning. Activities that previously appeared to be isolated operational tasks reveal themselves as interconnected expressions of a larger organisational intelligence. Filing reports, analysing evidence, coordinating departments, revising procedures, evaluating programmes or consulting previous cases are no longer understood merely as administrative obligations. They become the observable manifestations of institutions continuously thinking, learning and adapting through their everyday work.

This change in perspective does not require governments to abandon the principles that have historically defined effective public administration. On the contrary, it builds directly upon them. Legal certainty, procedural consistency, professional expertise, transparency and accountability remain indispensable foundations of democratic governance. Institutional Cognition simply demonstrates that these familiar principles also perform cognitive functions. Procedures preserve organisational memory, accountability encourages institutional learning, transparency improves collective understanding and professional expertise strengthens the quality of organisational judgement. The traditional strengths of public administration therefore become integral components of a broader cognitive architecture rather than separate administrative objectives.

Understanding governance in this way also explains why some institutions consistently improve over time while others struggle to adapt despite possessing similar resources. The determining factor is often not the quantity of information available or the sophistication of organisational structures but the extent to which cognitive capabilities reinforce one another. Institutions that systematically connect observation with learning, learning with memory, memory with decision-making and decisions with continuous adaptation gradually develop increasing organisational intelligence. By contrast, organisations in which these capabilities remain fragmented frequently repeat previous mistakes, lose valuable knowledge during personnel changes and find it difficult to respond coherently to emerging challenges. The difference lies less in administrative capacity than in cognitive integration.

This perspective becomes increasingly relevant as governments confront problems whose complexity extends beyond the assumptions of traditional administrative models. Climate change, digital transformation, demographic evolution, cybersecurity, global health risks and rapidly advancing artificial intelligence all require institutions capable of learning continuously while coordinating knowledge across multiple domains. No single department, profession or technology possesses sufficient understanding to address these challenges independently. Effective governance therefore depends upon institutions functioning as integrated cognitive systems capable of combining diverse forms of expertise into coherent public action.

Importantly, this evolution should not be interpreted as a sudden break with the past. Institutional Cognition is not a replacement for public administration but its natural development. Throughout history, governments have progressively expanded their capacity to collect information, preserve experience, coordinate expertise and improve decision-making. Today's technological innovations accelerate this trajectory, but they do not fundamentally alter its

direction. Cognitive governance emerges through the gradual integration of capabilities that have long existed within administrative practice rather than through the creation of an entirely unfamiliar institutional model.

For public officials, this understanding offers an encouraging message. The transition towards cognitive governance does not begin with revolutionary organisational redesign. It begins by recognising the cognitive value already present within ordinary administrative work. Every procedural improvement, every lesson preserved for future colleagues, every collaborative policy discussion and every thoughtful adaptation to changing circumstances contributes to the institution's broader capacity for intelligent governance. Cognitive transformation is therefore not confined to specialised innovation units or advanced digital laboratories. It occurs daily across every office, agency and public service where experience is transformed into better governance.

Artificial intelligence reinforces this evolution by making the cognitive dimensions of administrative work increasingly visible. As AI assists with information management, policy analysis and organisational learning, institutions become more aware of the knowledge flows that have always existed beneath the surface of public administration. The result is not simply greater efficiency but a growing recognition that governance itself is fundamentally a cognitive activity. Public institutions succeed because they continuously acquire, integrate and apply knowledge in pursuit of the public good.

Seen from this perspective, Institutional Cognition ceases to be an abstract theoretical framework and becomes a practical description of how effective public administration already functions at its best. The concept provides a common language through which diverse administrative practices can be understood as parts of a coherent and evolving system of organisational intelligence. It allows governments to recognise that the future of governance is already taking shape within the everyday work of countless public institutions around the world.

This broader understanding brings us naturally to the conclusion of the article. Having explored the cognitive dimensions of ordinary public administration, we can now reflect on the central insight that emerges from this discussion: **seeing public administration through the lens of Institutional Cognition fundamentally changes how we understand both its present reality and its future evolution.**

Conclusion

Seeing Public Administration Through a New Lens

Institutional Cognition invites us to reconsider one of the most familiar realities of modern society: the everyday work of public administration. For many citizens, government is primarily associated with regulations, procedures, public services and administrative decisions. For public officials, it is often experienced as a continuous sequence of operational responsibilities that require professionalism, consistency and accountability. Yet beneath these visible activities lies another dimension that is rarely acknowledged explicitly. Public administration is not merely administering. It is continuously observing, remembering, learning, deciding and adapting. In other words, it is continuously engaging in cognitive activity.

Recognising this reality represents a profound conceptual shift because it changes the questions we ask about government itself. Instead of asking only whether institutions are efficient, transparent or well organised, we also begin asking whether they learn effectively, preserve knowledge intelligently, integrate diverse expertise successfully and adapt responsibly to changing societal conditions. These questions do not replace traditional concerns of public administration; they enrich them by revealing that governance is fundamentally a process of organisational intelligence evolving over time. Institutions are no longer viewed simply as mechanisms for implementing policy but as living systems that continuously construct, refine and apply collective knowledge in pursuit of the public interest.

Perhaps the most significant insight emerging from this article is that Institutional Cognition is already present within contemporary public administration. Every policy evaluation, every procedural improvement, every lesson learned from operational experience and every coordinated decision involving multiple areas of expertise demonstrates that institutions already possess cognitive capabilities. These capabilities may vary considerably in their maturity and integration, but they are neither hypothetical nor reserved for some distant future. Governments have always depended upon their capacity to accumulate experience and transform that experience into better governance. The language of Institutional Cognition simply allows us to recognise these familiar processes as components of a coherent organisational architecture.

This perspective also helps explain why institutional improvement cannot be reduced solely to technological modernisation or organisational restructuring. New digital platforms, advanced analytical systems and artificial intelligence undoubtedly strengthen many aspects of public administration, but their long-term value depends upon the cognitive architecture within which they operate. A technologically sophisticated institution that fails to learn from experience will continue repeating familiar mistakes. An organisation equipped with advanced AI but unable to preserve institutional memory or integrate knowledge across departments will struggle to convert information into effective governance. Sustainable transformation therefore depends not upon acquiring isolated capabilities but upon strengthening the relationships that allow observation, learning, memory, decision-making and adaptation to function as an integrated whole.

The growing importance of artificial intelligence reinforces rather than diminishes this conclusion. As computational systems become increasingly capable of analysing information, identifying patterns and supporting administrative processes, the uniquely institutional dimensions of governance become even more significant. Democratic legitimacy, ethical judgement, constitutional responsibility and public purpose cannot be delegated to algorithms. Instead, they provide the framework within which computational intelligence acquires meaning and legitimacy. The future of governance will therefore depend upon institutions that successfully combine human judgement with increasingly powerful technological capabilities, creating forms of Human–AI

Institutional Intelligence that remain firmly grounded in democratic values and public accountability.

Within the framework developed by the IDHUS Institute, this understanding serves as an important bridge between theory and practice. Earlier articles introduced the conceptual foundations of Institutional Cognition and explored its principal cognitive components. This article demonstrates that those components are already observable within the ordinary operation of public administration. The transition towards cognitive governance therefore does not begin by inventing entirely new institutions. It begins by recognising the cognitive capabilities that already exist, understanding how they interact and strengthening them through deliberate institutional design. The future grows naturally from the present because the seeds of cognitive governance have long been embedded within the everyday work of government.

Ultimately, seeing public administration through the lens of Institutional Cognition transforms our understanding of both governance and institutional evolution. Government is no longer perceived merely as a structure that applies laws or delivers services. It becomes a continuously learning, adaptive and knowledge-generating system whose effectiveness depends upon its ability to think collectively across time. **Institutional Cognition is therefore not an abstract theoretical construct imposed upon public administration from outside. It is the hidden logic that has quietly shaped effective governance for generations and that will increasingly define the evolution of public institutions throughout the twenty-first century.**