Preparing Bhutan's Civil Service for the Age of AI

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Introduction

The trajectory of Bhutan's civil service is inevitably intertwined with the rapid advancements in digital technology. The Royal Kasho (Royal Edict) on Civil Service Reform, issued on 17 December, 2020, stands as a profound reminder of the urgent need for structural and cultural transformation within our bureaucracy.

It explicitly highlighted the indispensable role of technology and innovation, urging us to "be grounded as a robust organisation that is apolitical, meritorious, innovative, resilient, and driven by a culture of research and state-of-the-art technology". This Royal vision was further solidified during His Majesty the King's address on National Day in 2024.

In a powerful call to action, His Majesty challenged us to build an enlightened, entrepreneurial bureaucracy capable of achieving 10 times (10X) the productivity and efficiency.

Drawing inspiration from these profound mandates, the 4th Commission of the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) formulated a five-year strategic roadmap for its tenure, from May, 2024, to April, 2029. Recognising that achieving exponential leaps in productivity requires more than incremental changes, the RCSC believes that the development of artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities is a critical strategic enabler.

The roadmap envisions building an accelerator operating system for an enlightened entrepreneurial bureaucracy and identifies five strategic thrust areas -- high-impact leadership; high-performing workforce; talented entrepreneurial professionals; motivated civil servants; and an innovative civil service (Royal Civil Service Commission, 2024).

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While AI is not the only means through which these goals will be pursued, it is increasingly clear that meaningful progress in several of these areas will depend on civil servants becoming more fluent, confident, and responsible in their use of AI and related digital tools.

A high-performing workforce must be able to automate repetitive work, analyse information more efficiently, and make better use of time. Talented entrepreneurial professionals must be comfortable experimenting with new tools, redesigning workflows, and identifying opportunities for public value creation.

An innovative civil service must be empowered to solve problems differently. Even leadership itself will increasingly require AI literacy, because leaders must know not only what AI can do, but also what it must not be allowed to do.

In this light, this article reviews the initiatives undertaken by the Royal Civil Service Commission and the Government Technology Agency to foster AI adoption within the civil service thus far, while outlining our strategic plans for the future.

The AI Boom and the Bhutanese Context

The modern AI revolution, catalysed by the launch of tools like ChatGPT in late 2022, has permeated every sector globally, and Bhutan has been no exception. In fact, a rather fascinating statistic emerged during this period: Bhutan was identified as one of the top users of ChatGPT in the region in March 2024 (CoinJournal, 2024). "Bhutan leads in the adoption of ChatGPT, with a notable 15.96% of the population using the technology," it reported.

As a fun fact, this suggests that Bhutanese curiosity about AI arrived early and energetically. This organic, grassroots adoption of generative AI among Bhutanese citizens and civil servants demonstrated a keen appetite for embracing new technologies.

It became immediately apparent that civil servants were actively exploring these tools to assist with daily administrative, analytical, and communicative tasks. However, the unregulated use of such powerful technologies in the

public sector brings forth complex challenges regarding ethics, data privacy, and intellectual property.

Establishing Boundaries: Guidelines for Ethical AI Usage

Recognising the increasing popularity of generative AI tools and their inevitable integration into the daily workflows of civil servants, the RCSC, in collaboration with the GovTech Agency, issued the "Guideline for Generative Artificial Intelligence Usage in the Civil Service" in 2024.

We understood that prohibiting the use of AI would be both counterproductive and impossible. Instead, our approach was to establish a clear framework. We had to take a definitive stance on how civil servants should utilise these tools in their official capacities, ensuring that their actions remain ethical, secure, and aligned with national laws.

The guidelines primarily address two critical domains: Legal compliance and ethical integrity. Generative AI, with its unprecedented ability to craft compelling text, translate languages, and generate multimedia content, holds immense potential for civil servants.

However, navigating this frontier requires mindful consideration of existing legal frameworks. For instance, the Information, Communications and Media Act of Bhutan 2018 stands as a cornerstone in safeguarding against the dissemination of misinformation and upholding responsible online conduct.

Additionally, the National Digital Identity Act of Bhutan 2023 and the Data Management Guide 2023 outline stringent best practices for handling sensitive information, ensuring absolute respect for individual privacy and data security. The Copyright Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2001 addresses complex issues related to intellectual property and copyright infringement in AI-generated outputs.

Furthermore, the Civil Liability Act of Bhutan 2023 delineates the accountability of individuals, whether they are service providers or users. Ultimately, civil servants' use of generative AI is guided by the core values and code of conduct prescribed in the Civil Service Act of Bhutan 2010.

These robust legal frameworks serve as crucial safeguards, ensuring that our AI endeavours strictly adhere to Bhutan's values and regulations.

Equally important is the mitigation of plagiarism and deceitful use. Due to its advanced, human-like capabilities, generative AI can easily be misused for unethical practices such as academic cheating, impersonation, or the fabrication of data.

In the context of civil service, passing off AI-generated or paraphrased content as original work, or fabricating research data, constitutes a breach of professional integrity. Furthermore, the ability of AI models to write code introduces cybersecurity vulnerabilities, as threat actors can leverage these tools to create malware or impersonate trusted individuals to collect sensitive information.

While using generative AI to learn new concepts, brainstorm, or understand complex topics is highly encouraged, relying on it entirely to write reports, solve specialised problems, or conduct research without proper attribution, crosses the line into plagiarism. Employees are advised to exercise caution and any civil servant found violating these principles is personally liable for their actions.

The First AI Training: A Proof of Concept

Policy frameworks, while necessary, must be accompanied by active capacity building. To truly understand how AI could elevate the efficiency of civil servants, the RCSC organised a pilot training programme. This initiative made us confident that AI skills could genuinely empower civil servants across various functions.

The first-ever AI training programme is titled "Innovation, Strategy, and AI Fluency," from 28 November, 2024 to 22 April, 2025. This 10-week virtual programme, conducted over Zoom, brought together 22 RCSC officials. It was facilitated by Dr. Michael Atkinson of Brigham Young University, and Co-Founder & CEO of SkillsSurge. This initiative reflects RCSC's commitment to adopting technologies that enhance workplace productivity.

The curriculum was thoughtfully structured to build both foundational knowledge and practical competency, progressing week by week from AI fundamentals and workflow optimisation to strategic thinking, innovation, and advanced implementation, culminating in a final project showcase.

A defining feature of this training was its strong emphasis on real-world application. Each of the 22 participants developed and executed an AI-driven project directly relevant to their professional roles.

These projects spanned a wide spectrum of civil service functions, offering a powerful testament to AI's transformative potential. For instance, Tshering Choden from the Human Resource Audit Division (HRAD) leveraged AI tools, including ChatGPT, NotebookLM, and Napkin.ai-to streamline strategic HR audit reviews, achieving a remarkable 75% reduction in review time and sharing this knowledge with her colleagues.

Dorji Choidup redesigned the Civil Service Examination Blueprint using AI to better support merit-based and competency-based graduate recruitment. Pema Deki developed an AI-powered internship tracking framework for King's Scholarship students, which management swiftly endorsed and implemented. Thinley Choden automated the retrieval of past Commission meeting agendas, significantly reducing the time spent on manual file searches.

Across divisions, participants identified practical opportunities to reduce manual workloads, improve data-driven decision-making, and standardise processes, collectively demonstrating that AI is not a distant aspiration for Bhutan's civil service, but an actionable and immediate tool for building a future-ready public sector.

This programme marked a pivotal step in the RCSC's broader agenda to equip its civil servants with the skills and mindset needed to harness digital tools for smarter, more responsive governance.

Self-Driven Learning and Targeted Interventions

Following the success of the pilot programme, a comprehensive survey was jointly undertaken by the RCSC and GovTech to gauge the level of AI awareness and existing skills across the entire civil service.

The findings showed that 67.7 percent of civil servants were already using AI tools, especially generative AI, 98.1 percent expressed strong interest in AI training, and 78.8 percent agreed or strongly agreed that AI could improve government efficiency (RCSC & GovTech, 2025).

These results confirmed two things at once: First, that AI had already entered the administrative reality of the civil service; and second, that the demand for structured skilling was far greater than conventional training delivery models could easily meet.

However, providing specialised in-person AI training to tens of thousands of civil servants presented a monumental logistical and financial challenge.

Fortunately, the digital age offers a wealth of high-quality, free educational resources. In early 2025, the RCSC issued a notification titled "Calling on All Civil Servants to Embrace AI Skilling and Ethical Engagement for Public Service." The central thesis of this notification was to urge all civil servants to take ownership of their professional development by learning AI through available online platforms.

To facilitate this, the RCSC provided curated links to free courses and identified two distinct learning pathways, tailored to the professional backgrounds and job responsibilities of the staff-one for non-technical administrators seeking everyday efficiency, and another for ICT personnel aiming for deeper technical integration.

In parallel with self-paced learning, the RCSC actively sought partnerships to deliver formal, targeted training.

We collaborated with the Gyalpozhing College of Information Technology (GCIT) to conduct a specialised, two-phased training programme. The target audience for this initiative was officers from local governments and regional offices.

It was a conscious decision to prioritise this demographic, as regional civil servants often have fewer networking and learning opportunities compared to their counterparts in core urban centres, due to geographic limitations.

Phase 1 of the programme saw 100 participants undergo online, self-paced training using GCIT's Learning Management System, followed by a rigorous assessment. For Phase 2, the top 30 candidates were selected for an intensive, five-day in-person training programme completed in February, 2026, with very positive feedback.

This initiative recognised that AI is a common, cross-cutting competency applicable across all roles and functions, rather than a specialised skill confined to IT departments. A second cohort of 30 candidates underwent the same in-person training in May 2026, bringing the total number of fully certified regional officers to 60.

Another initiative of the RCSC is the introduction, from 2026 onwards, of an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-related project as part of the Foundational In-service Training (FIT) programme for newly recruited civil service officers entering through the Bhutan Civil Service Examination.

The purpose of this initiative is to ensure that trainee officers identify a real workplace problem, in consultation with their supervisors, and apply AI-informed approaches to develop practical solutions within their respective agencies.

Under this requirement, each trainee officer will identify a genuine work-related issue in consultation with workplace supervisors or mentors. With guidance from both workplace and faculty supervisors, trainees will apply relevant AI concepts and tools using recognised research approaches, such as gap identification, literature review, stakeholder consultation, surveys, design methods, data analysis, automation, and decision-support techniques.

Faculty supervisors will ensure that each trainee submits a structured report in the prescribed format and presents and defends the findings before an assessment panel.

This initiative is intended to equip digitally native officers with practical experience in applying emerging AI tools to real public service challenges, while also nurturing them as future change agents within the civil service.

Engaging Leadership and Ensuring Sustainability

For any technological paradigm shift to be successful, it must be championed by leadership. To this end, the GovTech Agency initiated targeted capacity building for government executives.

Starting on June 4th, 2026, weekly online AI classes were instituted for civil servants at the director level and above. Held every Thursday via Google Meet, these one-hour sessions, facilitated by GovTech officials, cover fundamental AI concepts and practical applications. Feedback indicates that these sessions have been highly effective in demystifying AI for top executives.

Furthermore, AI integration featured prominently at the RCSC's Annual Executive Forum in January 2026 with a dedicated panel discussion on the use of AI in the civil service. This engagement was critical in raising awareness among senior leaders about the available tools, ethical considerations, and strategies for guiding the civil servants under their purview.

Looking ahead, the RCSC recognises that relying on ad-hoc training programmes and external vendors is not a sustainable long-term strategy. We must institutionalise digital competency.

Therefore, the Commission is currently in advanced discussions with the Royal Institute of Management to establish a dedicated Digital Academy. Once operational, this academy will serve as the permanent hub for meeting the evolving digital skilling needs of the civil service, ensuring that training in AI and emerging technologies remains consistent, updated, and accessible.

In parallel, the RCSC, with support from Govtech Agency, is also working to develop a full-fledged learning management system through which civil servants will be able to access online learning opportunities tailored to the digital and AI-related skills required in their respective roles.

Conclusion

The journey towards an enlightened, entrepreneurial, and AI-capable civil service is already underway. Yet, as Bhutan embraces these powerful technologies in pursuit of the 10X productivity envisioned by His Majesty the King, one principle must remain clear: AI should serve human judgement, not replace it.

Some people argue that AI is no longer merely a tool, but a transformative technology with forms of autonomy unlike earlier innovations. Even so, it must remain a servant to human purpose rather than its master.

The central question is not whether AI is powerful, but whether public institutions retain the capacity to direct that power wisely, ethically, and in the public interest.

There is a growing temptation to outsource cognition itself; to allow AI to think, write, and solve problems in place of active human engagement. If this becomes the norm, the long-term risk is not only dependency, but intellectual atrophy. A civil service that ceases to think critically for itself may become faster in appearance, but weaker in substance.

For this reason, civil servants must continue to exercise judgement, reflection, and responsibility in their work, using AI to sharpen ideas, automate routine tasks, and extend administrative capability, rather than substitute for human reasoning.

Used in this way, AI can strengthen rather than diminish the civil service. It can help build a Bhutanese public administration that is more capable, more responsive, and more innovative, while remaining intellectually grounded, ethically alert, and deeply committed to the people it serves.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of his organisation.

Declaration: AI tools were used to assist in refining the language of this article; however, the ideas, arguments, and substantive content are entirely the author's own.

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