

When a citizen becomes the messenger between institutions

Citizen-mediated administration and the hidden transfer of administrative work

Independent, non-governmental research initiative.

Abstract

When institutions do not carry the administrative relationship between themselves, the citizen often carries it for them. This paper examines the ordinary but frequently overlooked work involved when a person must obtain, transport, explain or re-enter information so that separate organisations can complete one administrative journey.

The unpaid work

A citizen may be asked to download a document from one organisation, print or save it, understand what it proves, explain its relevance and upload it to another. None of those actions may look substantial in isolation. Together they form a layer of unpriced administrative labour. Unpriced administrative labour is still administrative labour.

The human API

In digital terms, an application programming interface allows systems to exchange information. Where no effective institutional interface exists, the citizen can become a human API: receiving information from Institution A, transforming it into the form Institution B expects, and manually transmitting it.

The administrative parcel

The citizen may also become the carrier of an administrative parcel: a fact, certificate, decision, reference, history or explanation that one institution possesses but another requires. The question is not whether citizens should ever carry information. It is whether citizen transport has become the default merely because it is convenient for institutions.

The case manager

Once several organisations are involved, the citizen may have to remember who said what, identify the next step, chase a delayed response, detect a failed hand-off and decide which organisation should be contacted. The person is no longer simply an applicant or service user; they are performing elements of case management.

Citizen Coordination Load

Citizen Coordination Load describes the additional time, effort and responsibility imposed principally because the citizen must compensate for boundaries between institutions. It is a way of making visible work that is otherwise dispersed across telephone calls, portals, emails, journeys, files and memory.

The counterfactual test

Remove the messenger. Does the message still arrive? If a process stalls simply because the citizen does not carry information from A to B, that is evidence that citizen mediation is doing substantive coordination work.

Five hand-off models

A hand-off may rely on citizen transport, direct institutional transfer, citizen-authorised transfer, verification against a trusted source, or lawful reuse of information already held. No single model is always correct. The point is to ask why a particular model has been chosen and who bears its administrative cost.

A practical case diary

A case diary can record the citizen's objective, each organisation contacted, what was requested, whether another organisation became involved, whether information was repeated, whether documents were carried, whether the citizen had to explain one organisation to another, the time involved, and whether the process would have continued if the citizen had done nothing.

Conclusion

The citizen should remain a participant in administration where participation is necessary. The problem begins when participation quietly becomes mediation and mediation becomes infrastructure. When institutions do not carry the administrative relationship between themselves, the citizen often carries it for them. The citizen becomes the messenger.

Irish Office for Administrative Simplification

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This paper is intended to clarify problems and develop questions for further research rather than prescribe institutional arrangements.