

SOMETIMES IT IS ABOUT THE TECH

▶ How transparency and accountability initiatives in Kenya and South Africa choose digital technologies

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Introduction

To better understand the process of finding effective digital technology tools in transparency and accountability initiatives, we interviewed 38 organisations in South Africa and Kenya that had chosen tools to use in a project. We asked them why they had chosen a particular tool, how they chose it, and if they were happy with the results.

The organisations described tactics that varied widely, and used technologies ranging in complexity from SMS messaging systems to web-based data portals. Across this range, we found some successes – but many more challenges – in how organisations chose and implemented digital tools. A large proportion of participants were disappointed with the way the tools worked, how they were used, or what they were able to achieve by using them.

This brief discusses those experiences, highlights elements of successful tool choices, and suggests some steps towards improving selection processes. It also introduces an online tool, the Tool Selection Assistant (available [here](#)), that presents findings in the form of a guide to choosing a tool. The research report on which this brief is based is available [here](#).

A research brief by [the engine room](#), the [Network Society](#) Lab at the University of the Witwatersrand and Mtaani Initiative, based at [Pawa254](#). Supported by [Making All Voices Count](#).



How organisations are using technology

Transparency and accountability initiatives (T&AIs) in Kenya and South Africa are turning to technology in response to changes in the information and communication environment. The organisations behind these initiatives, and increasing numbers of the people they work with, are using more digital tools in more aspects of their lives. This is leading to greater efforts to apply new technologies in their work.

The organisations we spoke to were diverse. Some were national organisations employing hundreds of people, while others were very small, community-based initiatives with only one or two employees. The tactics they described varied widely: some monitored public service delivery, while others organised mass demonstrations. The technologies they used ranged in complexity from SMS messaging systems to web-based data portals. Most (but not all) were technologies suitable for use on mobile phones.

Participants in our research described using digital tools in T&AIs for a range of purposes, including improving data collection (for example, through monitoring public services) and allowing two-way communication between groups like government actors and citizens.

Participants were using a variety of digital technologies in their day-to-day work. However, they rarely described themselves as 'tech organisations'; commonly, they thought of themselves as 'keeping up' with their peers.

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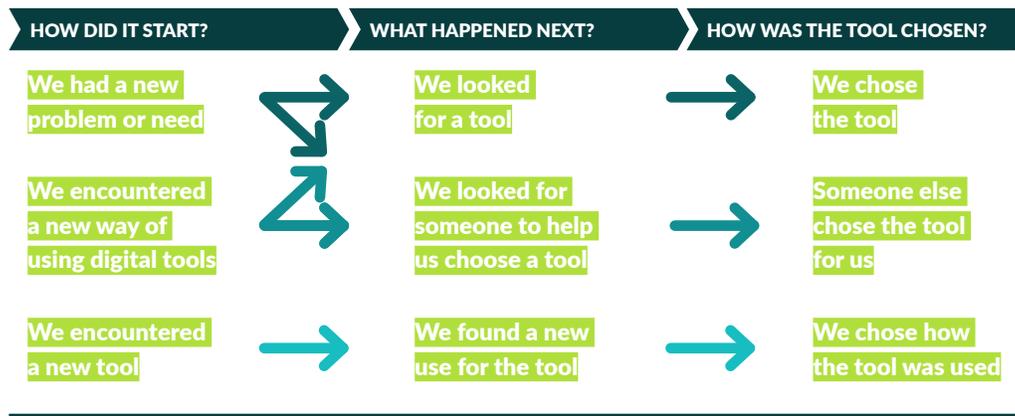
Organisations thought they were using technology fairly effectively in general, but when we explored specific occasions of choosing a tool with them, this overall assessment was tempered by stories of significant frustrations, challenges and disappointments.



How organisations are choosing the tools they use

Organisations are bringing technology tools into their projects for three main reasons. Most organisations started looking for a tool because they had a problem or need that they thought a tool could address. Some started because they discovered a particular tool and wanted to find a way to use it, while others had seen a peer organisation using a tool in another area and wanted to try something similar in their own context.

How organisations chose tools: this diagram explains the paths that organisations typically took when choosing tools. See more on this and other findings in the [full research report](#).



Organisations rarely followed a structured process when choosing a tool, and almost never documented a detailed plan for doing so. In general, they gave relatively little weight to the tool selection process in comparison with planning other aspects of the initiative.

Where organisations conducted any formal or informal research, they tended to look for answers to one or more of three questions:

- ▶ what was the nature of the problem they were trying to address?
- ▶ what tools were available and what they could do?
- ▶ who were the people the organisation hoped would use the tool, and what factors might affect their use?

Hardly any organisations (3 of the 38 interviewed) did research on all three of these questions.

Organisations generally did very limited research to understand what their potential users wanted or needed, even when they hadn't worked with them before. Only 15 did any research on their users at all.

Before launching, they rarely trialled a tool with the people they expected to use it.

Few organisations actually compared other tool options before choosing a particular tool. A very high proportion of organisations (10 out of 20 in Kenya, and 11 out of 18 in South Africa) built a tool from scratch, often without checking if existing tools could do the job. Many of these organisations had very limited prior experience of building or modifying tools themselves, and relied on service providers or partners to do so. In a large number of these cases, the organisations didn't really choose a tool at all, but delegated the decision to technical partners.

How did their choices work out?

Of the 38 organisations interviewed, less than a quarter were happy with the tools they had chosen. The most common reasons for dissatisfaction were:

- ▶ technical issues that made tools hard to use or limited their usefulness – which participants only discovered *after* they had chosen the tools.
- ▶ the targeted users' failure to adopt the tools to the degree that the organisation had hoped (almost half the organisations interviewed). In some cases, the users didn't use the tools at all. Although this 'uptake failure' wasn't always attributable to the particular tool selected, the tools' specific attributes often contributed directly to low uptake.

Both problems were especially common among organisations that built a tool from scratch. Many organisations also described major problems in the process of developing a new tool, including delays, budget overruns and difficulties in managing the relationship with technical partners or suppliers that affected the initiative's overall progress.

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Very few participants (4 out of 38) said that, in a similar scenario, they would choose a tool in the same way again.

Many had already considered or chosen alternative tools since then (5 out of 20 in Kenya, and 6 out of 18 in South Africa).

A path to better tool choices?

So, could organisations improve how they choose digital tools within the constraints they face?

This study involved 38 initiatives spread across different contexts, using a broad set of technologies to meet a variety of objectives. Our comments are made with this diversity in mind. Not all the participants may share our perspectives: even understandings of what successful tool adoption looks like are different. With these important caveats noted, we believe that our research leads to some useful insights on the process of tool selection, and points to significant opportunities for improving it.

Unknown unknowns

Many of the problems we saw could have been mitigated if organisations had done more research before choosing a tool. Speaking with hindsight, many participants regretted not doing more research before making a choice. But identifying in advance what research is most needed is challenging. The organisations we studied often faced “unknown unknowns” – they didn’t know enough to know what they didn’t know.

Trialling

For organisations with limited resources and technical expertise, the most efficient research strategy was trialling a tool before adopting it. We found that organisations that did this, particularly with their intended users in their specific context, were usually happy with a tool’s performance. Trialling helped to address the problem of ‘unknown unknowns’, because the testing process brought up questions that organisations had not considered before.

Planning for failure

The most effective way of limiting the impact of an unsuitable tool choice was including a series of ‘iterations’ (adaptations made throughout the course of a project). Most organisations we studied made no allowance for adapting a tool after beginning to implement it, often continuing the project, despite the knowledge that the tool was ineffective. This goes against the software development principle that the first iteration of a tool is almost never the last.

A LEARNING TRAJECTORY

Most tool selection processes in our research, judged by whether the organisation felt the chosen tool met their needs, were unsuccessful. On the surface, this is worrying – if initiatives are consistently failing to choose technology tools that support their goals, should they be using technology at all?

However, it is important to recognise that these organisations started from very different levels of knowledge about choosing and implementing digital technologies. Many of the efforts organisations described were highly experimental. Organisations often undertook them as part of an overall desire to adapt to changes in technology use around them, or to improve their understanding of deploying technology tools. In retrospect, it was clear that many had already learned lessons that would inform future efforts.

We therefore suggest that each tool selection process should be understood as part of an organisation’s trajectory of learning on how to use technology in their work.

To move forward along this ‘learning trajectory’, organisations need better access to networks and practical guidance that is targeted and relevant to their situation.

Among organisations that were satisfied with their chosen tool, the tool's complexity typically matched their levels of technical knowledge and capacity. However, organisations often struggled to judge their own levels of knowledge, and how far they could realistically extend them. Organisations that can identify and address specific knowledge gaps while choosing tools could be more prepared to tackle these 'unknown unknowns', and thereby make more appropriate tool choices.

The small number of organisations in our study that had explicitly planned for the risks involved in choosing new tools were most likely to be happy with their selection, and to gain knowledge that they could use in future. Further promoting this iterative approach could also help organisations on their learning trajectory.

Recommendations

We have identified six 'heuristics' (rules of thumb) that could help organisations to make effective tool choices – choices that better meet their needs and that could contribute, over time, to better use of technology in transparency and accountability initiatives. We also offer four recommendations for donors or organisations that want to support organisations in making tool selections.

While our research suggests that many organisations could benefit from allocating more resources to research and planning, we should be realistic about the limits of this approach. 'Formal' planning processes can be expensive and time-consuming, and our research indicates that organisations may be unlikely to use them in reality. Heuristics are 'shortcuts' that can provide outcomes that are as good as more systematic or formal methods. Each of the following heuristics is grounded in evidence from our research, which is explored in depth in our full-length report (available at toolselect.theengineroom.org).

Six rules of thumb for choosing the right technology tool

Map out what you need to know

Identify the main gaps in the knowledge you need to pick a tool that's good enough for your purposes. Write down everything you know - and need to know - about the three elements below. Ask others and do research to get the information you're missing.

- ▶ the goal or problem you expect the tool to address
- ▶ the interests and needs of the people you want to use the tool, including their current technology use and habits
- ▶ the tool options that are available

Think twice before you build

Building new technologies from scratch is risky and complex. If your organisation doesn't already have a lot of experience and skills in using technology, or sufficient resources to manage these risks, looking for existing tools first is likely to increase your chances of success.

Get a second opinion

Whatever you're trying to do, someone else has probably tried the tools you're considering, or tested out a similar approach. Finding out what has been done before (even in other sectors) and talking to others can help you learn from similar experiences.

Always take it for a test drive

Trialling a tool helps you to understand its strengths and weaknesses. It can help you realise what you really need, and what you can do without. It may also provide important insights into what your potential users want. To get the full benefits of trialling, it's essential to try out a tool in the context that you plan to use it, with the users you hope will adopt it. If you can, trial more than one tool, so that you can compare them before making a decision.

Plan for failure

Manage the risks of failures by planning for them. Most implementations will need many changes and adaptations. Don't expect to get it right first time: plan and budget to adjust the tool during the project.

Reflect on what you're doing

While choosing and implementing a tool, keep thinking about how it's going - what are you doing, and is it working well? Apply this back to your project, and keep it in mind for next time you choose a tool. Look for chances to share this knowledge with other organisations, networks or researchers - they may be able to help you in future.

Recommendations for donors or others who want to help organisations choose better tools

Our research revealed many reasons why organisations are making a turn to technology – of which donor influence was only one. However, donors are well positioned to shape the conditions in which organisations make tool choices because of their role as funders and providers of information to grantees. In general, they could contribute to improving tool choices and outcomes by acknowledging that the organisations they support are on a ‘learning trajectory’.

1. Help organisations do more research

Allowing organisations to search widely for alternative tools could help them to define and identify an appropriate tool. However, their original project plans and budgets rarely allowed for this. Donors and advisers have an opportunity to ensure that organisations have the flexibility to build more thorough research into project design.

2. Give the space to trial and iterate

Organisations that trialled tools (particularly with their intended users) were more likely to be satisfied with their eventual choice. Donors should encourage organisations to include structured trialling phases, and giving them resources to adjust accordingly. Since the first version of any tool is unlikely to be the most successful one, donors can have a significant impact on outcomes by enabling organisations to budget and plan for trialling, and possible changes in response to the results.

3. Support networks that provide face-to-face advice

There are growing efforts to build networks among organisations working on transparency and accountability. Some are also fostering connections between technologists and activists.¹ Our research suggests that there is an opportunity to do more. Participants frequently said that they would have liked to have had advice from someone “like themselves” who had had similar experiences, suggesting that they thought existing advice was not sufficiently tailored to their needs. Many participants reported significant problems in finding suitable technology partners, and in working well with the ones they found. Others spoke about their limited access to “tech” networks.

Creating spaces for organisations to share their learnings (without penalising them for sharing negative findings) would allow them to learn and improve from others’ experience. Donors and support organisations are also well positioned to convene open conversations on practical issues identified in this and related research.

1 For example, the Making All Voices Count *Communities of Practice* in South Africa and Liberia, and the *Buntwani* meetings in Kenya and South Africa.

4. **Make research more accessible and actionable**

Organisations often experienced problems that had already been identified as common issues in previous research. This gap in learning suggests that they may not have found this material during their planning, or found it hard to use. Highlighting to organisations the importance of this research – and investigating and supporting alternative, relevant ways to present it – could help it to be used more widely.

The Tool Selection Assistant (toolselect.theengineerroom.org), which presents our research findings in the form of an online guide through the tool selection process, is one attempt to meet this need, but further efforts are required to understand how organisations find and use research effectively.



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If you would like to read more about the initiatives we studied and our analysis of how they chose technologies to support their work, read our research report '*Sometimes it is about the Tech: choosing tools in South African and Kenyan transparency and accountability initiatives.*'