

DIGITAL ETHICS

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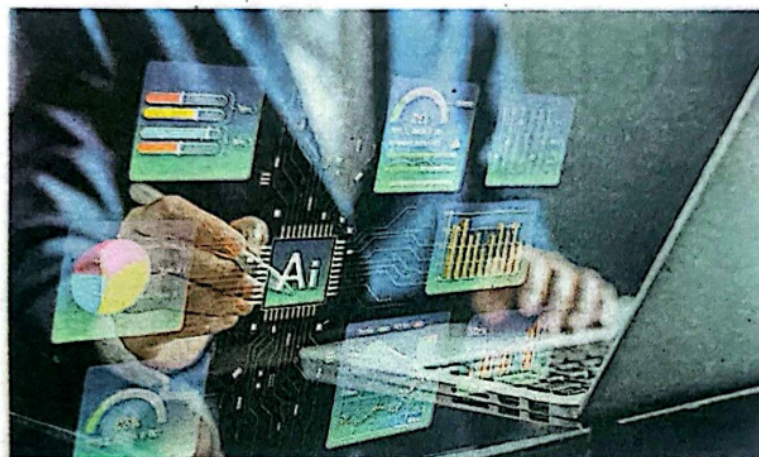
Can digital ethics beat corruption?

Digitalisation is increasingly used to reduce opportunities for fraud and corruption. However, without a strong ethical foundation, technology may not eliminate corruption but rather shift it into digital channels, where it can occur at a greater scale, scope and speed. This is not unique to Uganda. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its Anti-Corruption and Integrity Outlook 2024 warns that digital tools alone are insufficient. Ethical governance, institutional accountability and effective monitoring are essential to prevent corruption from adapting to systems.

Uganda's FY2025/26 Budget Speech shows the government is prioritising digitalisation as a central strategy to address corruption. It outlines tools to improve transparency, including the Electronic Government Procurement (e-GP) system, Online Business Registration System (OBRS), automated tax platforms, and self-service portals for passports, national IDs and driving licences. These systems aim to limit opportunities for manipulation by reducing face-to-face interactions and human facilitation in critical processes with benefits like faster issuance.

Fraud risk

However, as the operational and control environment changes, fraud risk



Ethics has been built into digital systems in ways that strengthen public trust.
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evolves, often shifting into the digital processes behind the interface. For example, staff with more access than their role requires can advance a decision before the necessary checks take place. Externally, weaknesses in public-facing systems can expose sensitive government or personal information to unauthorised users. These risks create new avenues for abuse. Uganda's experience with mobile money fraud demonstrates how quickly fraud schemes can be executed, across multiple layers of the ecosystem, leaving little trace of responsibility. This underscores the im-

portance of accountability and transparency in how systems are designed and operated. If segregation of duties in e-procurement is unclear or audit trails in automated tax platforms are incomplete, decision paths can be obscured, leaving institutions exposed when errors or misconduct occur.

Therefore, digitalisation cannot replace ethical judgment or the leadership example that shapes behaviour and upholds integrity.

The World Bank's Project Information Document for the Uganda Digital Acceleration Program (2021) acknowl-

es this challenge, noting that governance and institutional capacity should evolve alongside technology to manage emerging risks such as cybersecurity and data protection.

Clear accountability structures ensure that faster processes do not blur responsibility or weaken oversight, especially when data is shared across institutions. Without such safeguards, it becomes harder to trace who initiated a decision or how an outcome was reached.

Global experience

Global experience shows how ethics has been built into digital systems in ways that strengthen public trust. In Estonia, digital platforms like X-Road are backed by legal safeguards that ensure exchange of information is secure and fully logged, so it is clear which institution accessed what data and when. This traceability promotes transparency and discourages misuse of sensitive information. Canada's Policy on Service and Digital requires public institutions to design services that are fair, transparent and accountable, and appoint officials responsible for ensuring these principles guide data management and how digital systems operate. These examples show that technology does not automatically close governance gaps but requires accountability to be embedded at the design stage.

Uganda can integrate these models by ensuring that the ethical considerations guiding public service delivery also reflect how digital systems operate. The Directorate of Ethics and Integrity (DEI), which coordinates the National Anti-Corruption Strategy, Zero Tolerance to Corruption Policy and promotes ethical governance, is central to this conversation. The DEI advocates for electronic systems such as e-procurement and is well placed to work with agencies implementing e-GP, OBRS and tax platforms. This collaboration ensures that questions such as who can access what information, how decisions are recorded, and how sensitive data moves across institutions, are handled in ways that reinforce fairness, transparency and accountability. Clear audit trails, traceable decision paths and bias checks can support this, especially for systems like e-procurement, where risks of bias or exclusion can have serious consequences.

Embedding ethics into Uganda's digital anti-corruption strategy requires ongoing monitoring to ensure these principles are effective in practice. A good approach is to monitor whether ethical safeguards are working as intended by using preventive tools that address risks before they materialise.

The writers are employees at PwC Uganda.