

LETTER OF THE DAY

When 'online' still means follow-up: Rethinking Uganda's E-service promise

Uganda has made visible progress in digitising public services. Over the years, government institutions such as URSB, Passport Control Office, URA, NIRA and Uneb, among many others, have launched online portals, digital payment platforms, and electronic application systems.

On paper, this signals modernisation and reflects ambition and suggests efficiency in service delivery.

But the critical question remains: when we say a service is "online," what do we really mean?

An electronic service should allow a citizen to complete a process from start to finish digitally, from application to payment to tracking and final delivery. The promise of e-services is simple: save time, reduce physical movement, increase transparency, and make systems predictable.

When done properly, digital services reduce queues, minimise paperwork, and remove unnecessary human bottlenecks. They build trust because users know what to expect and when to expect it.

However, there is a growing experience among many Ugandans that some services described as "online" still require offline effort to function.

Take document certification services such as those offered by Uneb. The application process is presented as digital. Forms are submitted online, and payments are made electronically. Upon submission, feedback is expected in five days, and the system is expected to take over.

Yet in practice, applicants find themselves making follow-up calls, sending reminder emails and/or physically checking in to ensure progress is made. Updates are not automatic, and timelines are unclear. What was

expected to be a seamless digital experience turns into uncertainty, and you will find people in long queues at Uneb following up on the progress of their certifications.

This is not necessarily a question of negligence or unwillingness to deliver. Rather, it reflects a broader implementation gap in our digital transition.

A service is not fully online simply because the entry point is digital.

True e-governance requires end-to-end automation where internal workflows, approvals, verifications, and communications are integrated into a system that moves without external prompting.

When back end processes remain manual, the burden shifts back to the citizen.

The consequences may appear small, but they accumulate. Students applying for scholarships or jobs operate within

strict deadlines.

Employers verifying academic documents work within recruitment timelines. Delays in certification by even days can result in missed opportunities.

More importantly, repeated follow-ups undermine the very purpose of digitalisation. Instead of reducing stress, the process creates anxiety. Instead of saving time, it demands additional effort.

Digital transformation is not about creating portals. It is about creating reliability and efficiency.

If Uganda is to benefit from its investment in e-government systems fully, institutions may need to move beyond surface digitisation and strengthen backend capacity.

This includes automated status tracking, clearly communicated turnaround times, integrated processing systems, and responsive digital support channels.

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Citizens are ready for digital systems. In fact, many prefer them. But expectations must align with functionality.

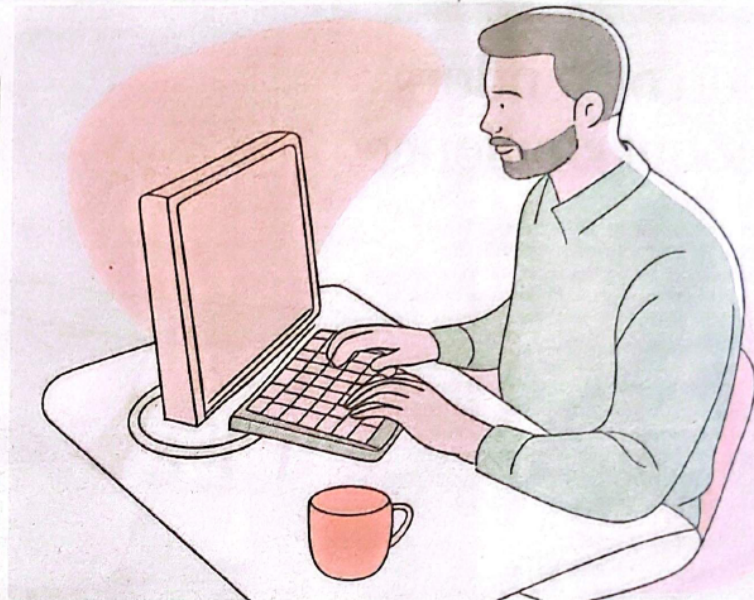
If there is a requirement for follow-up and physical visits, this information should be detailed on the online application portal.

Calling a service "online" sets a standard. Meeting that standard requires more than technology—it requires process redesign, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Uganda's digital journey is commendable. The progress is visible. The ambition is clear. The next step is ensuring that every service labelled "online" truly delivers on that promise.

Digital transformation should remove friction, not relocate it.

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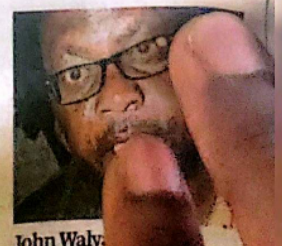
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