

Germany's aging bureaucracy risks undermining ambitions

Steven Beardsley in Berlin

From immigration to the energy transition, the success of Germany's biggest economic priorities relies on an increasingly older, paperbound bureaucracy getting its act together.

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Britta Uebel is accustomed to Berlin's creaking bureaucracy, but the past year has been especially trying.

The funeral home director regularly waits two months to get a death certificate back from the local registry office. With family members unable to tap into their insurance without the document, Uebel said she bears funeral costs upfront.

"It's the only option," she said. "Or should I leave the deceased in the cooler for 10 weeks?"

A combination of growing caseloads and low staffing has lately put the brakes on Berlin's public offices. Visa appointments are almost impossible to find. Birth certificates and marriage licenses often take months to arrive. Cremations can take weeks due to delayed paperwork.

The city's pandemic daze is a warning for [Germany's public administration](#), where almost one out of every three employees is due to reach retirement age in the next 10 years. The labor pool to replace them is shrinking, and the [transition to digital is severely lagging](#). Despite the government setting aside billions to move more services online, many offices still rely on personal appointments and work primarily on paper.

The pressure on the bureaucracy is increasing. More companies are relying on it to help speed up foreign hires amid a nationwide workers shortage. Germany, meanwhile, risks falling behind [its climate plans](#), such as its goal of doubling electricity from [renewable sources](#) by the decade's end.

"It's going to take time before the political will reaches the public administration and the state agencies," said Hermann Albers, president of the industry group German Wind Energy Association. "And time is exactly what we don't have when we look at the goals for 2030."

Germany's civil servants are aging

Planning and approval for wind turbines now stretch between five and six years in Germany, according to the industry, driven largely by local concerns over construction plans.

Albers faults previous German governments for failing to prioritize the buildout of wind, allowing state agencies to move slowly on approvals. Because the agencies never emphasized staffing or digitizing project applications, he said, they're now unprepared for Berlin's new push on wind and reluctant to move fast.

"More often than not, the state agencies responsible for the actual approvals say, 'We'll have to see if we have the capacity to meet federal goals'," Albers said. "They don't just immediately say, 'Understood, we're reforming the administration to get it done.'"

German companies have had a similar experience with immigration: Despite a 2020 law calling for faster approvals for overseas workers, companies still complain that local agencies are moving forward too slowly.

Albers estimates agencies will need to double or even triple their current approval teams to meet Berlin's goals — a tall order given recent trends.

Although Germany's public sector is growing again after years of post-reunification cuts, it's competing with the private sector for a smaller pool of workers. It's also aging out faster than the private sector. More than a quarter of its more than 5 million civil servants and employees — a group that includes teachers, firefighters and police officers — are 55 or over. Some subgroups, like public administration, trend even older.

"The real mountain is the next five to six years," said Frank Zitka, a spokesperson for the German Federation of Public Employees. "We've been seeing it more and more over the last 10 years, that more people are going into retirement and that, because of demographics, fewer young people are coming into the labor market."

'German bureaucracy loves paper'

Aging staffs put another kink in the country's efforts to digitize. Older employees need more training, experts say, but few public agencies make in-house training a priority or have a designated position for digitalization, according to a recent survey by the digital association Bitkom.

Whether they have the software to train on is another issue. Electronic files remain rare across the country, while paper enjoys wide resonance. When the state of Brandenburg announced the approval of Tesla's new German factory, officials proudly lined up 66 file folders filled with documents as a sign of their thoroughness.

"German bureaucracy loves paper and doing everything with a stamp," said Christiane Flüter-Hoffmann with the Cologne Institute for Economic Research. "The stamp is a signal — 'We've processed it, and we've held it to be good or bad.' And that, in a manner of speaking, is the reliability of public administration."

The pandemic exposed the downside of paper. **Health agencies ended up faxing COVID-19 figures** to the infectious disease center in Berlin because they lacked a common data system. On the local level, the postal system became the primary way of moving applications once public buildings closed.

In theory, past and present German governments already had a plan. The parliament passed the [Online Access Law in 2017](#), setting aside €3.3 billion (\$3.5 billion) for public administration to digitize a list of 575 services and make them accessible via portals by the end of 2022. By the arrival of the deadline, less than a third of tasks — 105 in total — were fully available across the country.

"I consider it a disaster," said Flüter-Hoffmann. "It's absolutely unacceptable. When compared internationally, countries like Finland, Denmark or the Netherlands are at the top [of digitalization]. At best Germany is in the middle."

Berlin's pandemic daze

At the Marzahn-Hellersdorf registry office in the German capital, where Uebel awaits her death certificates, most applications and processing is still done by hand. The office closed its doors completely during the pandemic and required all submissions be made by mail.

A spokesperson for the district said that nine of the 10 registry positions are technically filled, yet only two to three workers are consistently available in the office. Four workers are on "permanent absence," she said, and a new hire has yet to formally arrive.

Filling out the vacancies hasn't been easy.

"The candidate pool has been thin lately," the spokesperson, Antonia Paskalski, said in an email. "And even after a hire it still takes at least six months for a new registry officer to actually begin working."

Berlin's problems stretch beyond a single district, however. The city is growing quickly, and many new arrivals speak little German. The decentralized governing structure is often faulted for many of its inefficiencies, often duplicating services among 12 different districts.

"Over a year ago, Marzahn was the very best of the registry offices," Uebel said. "It was a model office."

She expects little progress in the months ahead, however. She and her partner recently sought a marriage certificate at the same registry office and were told it would be a six-eighty week wait just to register, after which they'd need an appointment for the actual date.

"So we went to Denmark and were married within four weeks," she said.

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