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Context matters—different entrepreneurial approaches among street-level bureaucrats enhancing digital inclusion

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Abstract

Digital technology is frequently used in the delivery of public services. Since not everyone has the skills or digital access required to use such digital services, street-level bureaucrats must find new ways to support citizens to be able to enhance digital inclusion. In most public settings, these new practices of digital support need to be developed in parallel with the street-level bureaucrats' ordinary assignments. This article analyses the development of street-level bureaucrats' entrepreneurial and innovative practices in promoting digital inclusion in two spheres: conventional welfare service provision and in a project-based welfare service provision initiative explicitly intended to enhance digital inclusion. The article builds on qualitative case studies in municipalities in Sweden and demonstrates that there are more openings for innovative, entrepreneurial solutions among street-level bureaucrats in the more project-based setting than in the conventional welfare services. This implies that context matters for street-level entrepreneurial approaches.

KEYWORDS

digital inclusion, entrepreneurial approaches, municipalities, street-level bureaucrats, Sweden

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The internet and digital services are now commonly the default way public services are delivered. This can include, for example, applying for unemployment benefits, submitting annual tax returns, or accessing services such as e-health or online education. When public services are digitalized, it redefines how the services are delivered for all stakeholders in the service delivery process. The practitioners who refer clients to these services also have to support clients that are unable to access digital services. This puts new demands on street-level bureaucrats such as teachers or caseworkers. There is a need for street-level bureaucrats to be innovative when supporting clients to be digitally included, and we argue that this opens the way for different entrepreneurial approaches.

This article uses Lipsky's (1980/2010) concept of "street-level bureaucrats," that is, front-line public sector workers who are in direct contact with citizens and have considerable discretion in the execution of their work, to discuss how using their discretion can work together with the digital systems (Busch & Henriksen, 2018) to enable more inclusive digital service provision for citizens in their care.

In Sweden, with its extensive welfare state and mature digitalized public services, the challenges of digital inclusion are obvious for those working close to the citizens, such as library staff, as they meet and are struggling to support those falling outside digital systems (Gustafsson & Wihlborg, 2021). In the case of Sweden—a country with universal welfare—public services are expected to be provided impartially and equally to all citizens. Thus, if the services are offered through digital channels rather than at offices, street-level bureaucrats have to find ways to support the clients who face difficulties in using them. Common cases are teachers who have to support and guide legal guardians and parents on learning platforms (Pangrazio et al., 2022), and employment agency caseworkers who often have to guide clients in using systems to search for a job, participate in training and education online, or to apply for unemployment benefits (Bernhard & Wihlborg, 2022).

For the purposes of this study, we focus on street-level bureaucrats from two municipal contexts in Sweden: first, respondents working at Digidel centers, open public nodes for digital support that have been designed specifically to enhance digital inclusion; and second, respondents in conventional welfare services such as social services, labor market units, and education units who have to work to support digital inclusion beside their other assignments. Citizens need to be digitally included to be fully included in the welfare state (Sefyrin et al., 2021), and street-level bureaucrats have to address this need in new and innovative ways. This article theorizes such innovative approaches through reference to how developments in digitalization demands that street-level bureaucrats have a policy of entrepreneurial approach (Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Petridou & Mintrom, 2021). The street-level bureaucrats use their discretional opportunities differently within their daily routines and assignments (Buffat et al., 2016) but still with ambitions to sustain impartial and inclusive welfare services. To understand these differences further, we will compare how street-level bureaucrats in the two contexts are managing the demands for digital inclusion.

To discuss how context matters, this article aims to analyze entrepreneurial approaches among street-level bureaucrats when they are promoting citizens' digital inclusion, in two different contexts: conventional welfare services, and Digidel centers, settings formed with the specific aim to enhance digital inclusion. We raise the following questions:

RQ1. *How do the professional roles of the street-level bureaucrats in each context open for entrepreneurial approaches?*

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RQ2. *How do the street-level bureaucrats use their discretion to apply an entrepreneurial approach?*

RQ3. *What can be learned on how context matters for street-level policy entrepreneurs?*

2 | STREET-LEVEL POLICY ENTREPRENEURS IN A DIGITALIZED PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION—THEORETICAL FRAMING

As shown by Brodkin (2011), street-level bureaucrats can use their discretion to address the policy aims guiding their assignments in innovative ways, including other approaches than those initially intended. This theoretical framing builds on the claim that street-level bureaucrats can act like street-level policy entrepreneurs, trying to shape policy outcomes through notable investment of time, energy, and resources, as well as through a will to innovate and to spread these innovations (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021). By analyzing how and why street-level bureaucrats can use entrepreneurial approaches, we add to the understanding of their professional roles and discretion.

2.1 | Conceptualizing policy entrepreneurs in public settings

Entrepreneurs in public settings have their origin in the concept "policy entrepreneurs" formed by Kingdon (1984/1995), who described policy entrepreneurs as actors willing to invest resources (time, energy, reputation, or money) to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain of material, purposive or solidary benefits.

Policy entrepreneurs, actors in the policy formation phase of the policy process, focus on policy change, but other factors such as personal development or monetary gain can also be part of the incentives (McCaffrey & Salerno, 2011). Entrepreneurial profits are here seen in wider terms, including components such as goodwill, community trust, personal satisfaction, and local development (Mintrom, 1997; Mintrom & Norman, 2009). In local settings, the policy entrepreneurs are translating ideas and vision into local manageable projects (Wihlborg, 2018). The local policy entrepreneur has often been depicted as a local or regional politician, or someone acting on behalf of a business organization, a social movement or as an individual person (Olausson & Wihlborg, 2018). They obtain success in the form of (a) crafting of new rules and institutional arrangements that provide access points or direct benefits that were not previously available or (b) reaching out to individuals or groups who were not traditionally part of the new policy changes. Although they lack strong positions in the vertical formal bureaucracy, policy entrepreneurs can have symbolic legitimacy that enables them to reach policy change through a combination of formal and informal influence (Svensson, 2019).

Policy entrepreneurs use windows of opportunity, according to Kingdon (1984/1995), taking the opening to make policy changes when political conditions so permit. In the local setting, they can also actively enable windows of opportunity in political structures, since it is smaller scale and involves more interactions among policy-makers and street-level bureaucrats in local settings.

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2.2 | Street-level policy entrepreneurs

Recent research has identified how even street-level bureaucrats can be considered to act entrepreneurially (Cohen, 2018; Cohen & Aviram, 2021; Petridou & Mintrom, 2021). While street-level bureaucrats may have limited opportunities to initiate overall changes in policies and structures, they have an influence over the daily service provision to clients that can be used for making changes (Brodkin, 2011). However, Cohen and Aviram (2021) argue that street-level policy entrepreneurs not only implement policy but can also contribute to how policy is designed and interpretated. As mentioned above, earlier literature on street-level bureaucrats who act like policy entrepreneurs defines street-level policy entrepreneurs as invested and innovative front-line staff with a will to shape policy outcomes (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021). In Arnold's (2021) study of U.S. wetland policy, street-level policy entrepreneurs differ from other policy entrepreneurs by sticking to the policy goal for longer periods of time, being motivated by apparent threats and networking with less politically powerful supporters and peers. They also stand out as being challenged by balancing the potentially different agendas of external funding agencies and internal management.

In a study of how street-level bureaucrats use a neighborhood management system in Salford, United Kingdom, Durose (2011) showed that street-level policy entrepreneurs form the strategies networking, reaching, enabling, and fixing to achieve policy goals. They network with the local community and prioritize reaching out to citizens, especially excluded groups, with information about their services. They also try to both enable citizens by building skills and capacity in the local community, and to "fix" local problems by reinterpreting rules while taking community needs into account. This indicates that they extend their professional roles and use their discretion beyond the institutional framing they work within.

Street-level policy entrepreneurs are using what the new institutionalism identifies as a more independent role for political institutions and actors. Institutions constrain and shape behavior, providing logics of consequentialism or appropriateness (March & Olsen, 1984). The logic of consequentialism is related to the actor's perception of alternatives and consequences, while the logic of appropriateness is linked to the actors' perception of identity, situation, and, in combination, what a person like the actor should do in a situation like this. Entrepreneurial roles for street-level bureaucrats are more likely to occur under certain institutional circumstances, set by both organizational and policy-related conditions (Algotson & Svensson, 2021). In previous research, entrepreneurial approaches among street-level bureaucrats were to take the initiative and actively seek out opportunities for change, establishing new contacts, building, and coordinating networks. Organizational conditions that are likely to create demands for entrepreneurial behavior involve relatively high degrees of interaction with citizens, high discretion, and more projectification in administration (Olausson & Wihlborg, 2018). The individuals interpret the values in institutions and let them influence their behavior; thus, institutionalism can make room for both structure and agency and forms the discretion for street-level bureaucrats (March & Olsen, 1984; Olsson, 2016).

As summarized in Figure 1, street-level policy entrepreneurs have more direct client contact than bureaucrats in general and are more innovative in their practices than street-level bureaucrats in general. Thereby they are identified by their closeness to clients and ambitions to support them in innovative ways, in our case by enhancing their digital skills and use of digital public services.

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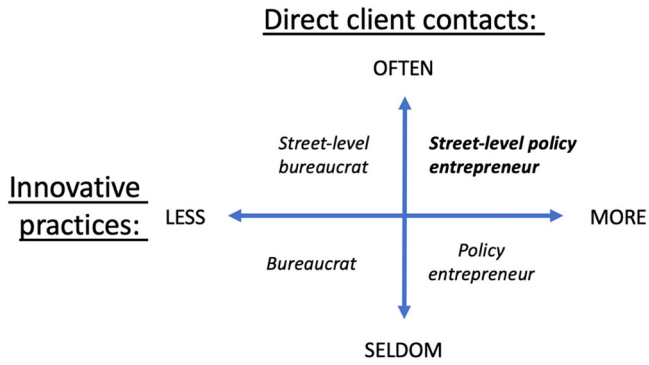

FIGURE 1 Conceptualizing the street-level policy entrepreneur.

2.3 | The encounter of the client

The model above points to the importance of the public encounter, as formed in the interplay among the citizens or clients, on the one hand, and the street-level bureaucrats as an interface of the government, on the other. There are many ways to describe the relationship and the public encounter between bureaucrats and citizens. Rice (2012) identifies key factors defining the encounter between the street-level bureaucrats and the clients, ranging from actors to the organizational setting (e.g., organizational politics, economy, and culture) as well as to the wider context where society's political, social, economic, and cultural setting influences the encounter. The role of the street-level bureaucrat is formed from professional identity, education and training, personal experiences, and frequency of interaction with individual clients. This may pave the way for entrepreneurial problem-solving in the encounter with the client.

The street-level bureaucrat's encounter with the client changes when digital public services are introduced (Lindgren et al., 2019) and new forms of data mining, machine learning, and service automation have potential to further reduce the role of human street-level bureaucrats. However, Lindgren et al. identify and point to the importance of further addressing ethical concerns, issues regarding accountability, and reskilling of citizens and public officials in the digital encounter, by focusing on the digital discretion of street-level bureaucrats.

2.4 | The discretion of street-level policy entrepreneurs in digital public administration

Although laws and goals shape boundaries for street-level bureaucrats, the outcomes for the individual clients who turn to a public institution for support or service can still differ. The discretion of the bureaucrat affects the public encounter, the outcome for the client and, in a wider perspective, possibly society as well (Lipsky, 1980/2010). Street-level bureaucrats have specific professional training and assignments in public services; thus, their discretion is framed by general policy as well as specific rules, instructions and guidelines, management decisions, competences and, in many cases, digital systems and digital governance (Peeters & Widlak, 2018). These discretionary boundaries are not necessarily concurrent. Lipsky highlighted the dilemmas of working with vague and conflicting goals as well as of balancing these organizational goals with the perceived needs of the clients (Lipsky, 1980/2010). Though

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street-level policy entrepreneurs might lack some of the power associated with more centrally placed policy entrepreneurs, they have context-based knowledge and power over decisions in specific cases at the street level (Arnold, 2021).

As shown in a qualitative study of street-level bureaucrats in the Swedish employment agency, increased experience of face-to-face meeting with clients increased caseworkers' perceived confidence, skills, and problem-solving (Assadi & Lundin, 2018). It indicates that personal meetings between clients and street-level bureaucrats are important, even when the services are highly digitalized. A similar conclusion was drawn in a study by Jansson and Erlingsson (2014), who concluded that street-level bureaucrats complement digital services with human competences to sustain legitimacy for the public services. While Lipsky argued for the bottom-up approach by emphasizing that public policy is brought into life "in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers" (1980, p. xii), recent street-level research has questioned the existence of those crowded offices in modern public service (Busch & Henriksen, 2018; Peeters & Widlak, 2018). The increasing use of digital public services, as in our case studies, has resulted in street-level bureaucrats spending more time with computers and less time with clients, which often requires them to educate clients on how to use the technology (Lindgren et al., 2019). Rather than remaining street-level bureaucrats, they are sometimes referred to as "screen level bureaucrats" (Peeters & Widlak, 2018).

This digitalization of public services has also disrupted the balance of different professions within an organization. When digital services created by other professions partially replace public servants and caseworkers, it can become unclear how core knowledge and values are transmitted within the organization (Lindgren et al., 2019). Thus, there is even an extension of street-level bureaucrats' discretion—"digital discretion"—describing how street-level bureaucrats utilize and interact with digital services (Busch & Henriksen, 2018). The term points to how the varying digital competences of these bureaucrats affect their perceptions of whether digital tools enhance or constrain their discretion, shaped by their interactions with clients. This shows, according to Busch and Henriksen (2018) that the street-level bureaucrats balance different policy goals and interests in the design of the digital systems.

More advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and automation increase the distance between the street-level bureaucrats and the clients even more. When such technologies are introduced, the street-level bureaucrats' discretion is constrained and replaced with centralized manufacturing logic and standardization of cases (Busch et al., 2018). These new arrangements are changing the balance of power between the clients, the technical systems and the street-level bureaucrats (Gustafsson & Wihlborg, 2019).

3 | METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is formed around the street-level bureaucrats working close to clients in need of support to manage digital services for public and private reasons. We apply an ethnographic toolkit since this is a suitable method to capture the complexity and contextual factors when street-level bureaucrats and new digital technologies meet (Buffat, 2015). This analysis focuses on the street-level policy entrepreneur in the context of enhancing digital inclusion and clients' use of digital services. The theoretical approach outlined above will here be used to compare and analyze interpretations from two qualitative field studies (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015), including document studies, interviews, and some observations.

The analysis includes two case studies that explore how street-level bureaucrats operate in different settings. The first case study examines the Digidel centers, a project-based initiative

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funded by several municipalities in Sweden, partly in collaboration with the Swedish Internet Foundation. The second case study is a field study of how digital inclusion is addressed by the conventional welfare services. The choice to include these two case studies was founded on interest in whether the different settings produce different logics of appropriateness that, in turn, could result in different entrepreneurial approaches.

While the focus of both studies is on the organization and street-level bureaucrats, we did not include clients. When the interviewed street-level bureaucrats and others referred to clients or visitors, no individual references, nor personal data was included. Also, our observations were limited to brief periods when the informants showed us around the Digidel center or their workplace, and we had no interaction with clients or visitors. The interview questions and research design did not fulfill any of the conditions that require ethical review as specified in the Act Concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans (2003:460). In analyses of the street-level bureaucrats, we use their statements as illustrations to provide a more general impression from the field studies, and we do not refer to them individually.

3.1 | The field studies at the project-based Digidel centers

To understand the street-level bureaucrats' work toward digital inclusion of citizens at the Digidel centers, a sample of 10 centers of the existing 26 were selected. These centers are geographically spread and, with a few exceptions, located in smaller municipalities. All the selected centers were informed of the study design and further use of data before choosing to participate in the field study.

The data here consists of 10 semistructured interviews with street-level bureaucrats at the Digidel centers. The interviews followed an interview guide that focused on their work, the organization and outcome of what they do. The focus was on how they tackle digital inclusion. More precisely, the questions used for this analysis were about their discretion and its perceived boundaries, whether emanating from regulations, management, the public or digital tools or systems. All interviews were conducted in Swedish as recorded online interviews and have been transcribed word for word. The quotes used in the article are translated by the authors.

3.2 | The field study in the conventional welfare services

For the second case study, the research team was invited to contribute to a project funded by the European Social Fund. The project aimed to map and analyze how street-level bureaucrats in municipalities organized their work to enhance digital inclusion and increase use of digital services. Our research approach was inspired by participatory action research (Brulin & Svensson, 2016), since we, through the fieldwork, got both data from informants and supported the project team with research-based knowledge of digital inclusion. Initially, we presented a review of research on digital inclusion (Iacobaeus et al., 2019), co-designed the study of interviews and a survey and supported the analysis. Together we formulated a questionnaire with open-ended questions on specific key issues, based on the research review that was sent out to municipalities to be answered by key actors: both street-level bureaucrats and first-line managers. Before the survey was sent out it was tested by three people in similar positions in other organizations.

The survey had 18 open-ended questions on how they interpretated and addressed digital inclusion, in addition to some background questions. Among the sampled 26 municipalities, 23 provided answers from all included sectors: strategic policy-making, adult education, social

services, labor market and employability, library services, public communication from the municipality, and finally, training and support to enhance digital inclusion for the street-level bureaucrats in these areas. The most common positions of the coordinating respondents were managerial positions at municipal departments related to employment and/or education.

In addition, there were 10 semistructured interviews with key actors conducted by the project leader based on an interview guide designed in collaboration with the research team and the project leader. The researchers also participated in several project meetings, with both presentations and as observers.

3.3 | Analytical approach and limitations

Both case studies generated text material, through documents, interviews, and fieldnotes from observations at the Digidel centers, and through the survey from the conventional administrative units, and these were analyzed as text documents. The analyses focused on how they talked about the street-level bureaucrats' daily activities and how they could enable or constrain them to use entrepreneurial approaches. By using NVivo, we categorized and identified patterns in line with the theoretical conceptualization discussed above: roles, discretion, and entrepreneurial approaches. The backgrounds of the cases are summarized in Table 1.

The outcomes of our analyses are impregnated by the overall context: an advanced welfare state with a high general use of digital services that may constrain comparisons with other contexts. Additionally, the field studies were conducted during and just after the global Covid-19 pandemic, which led to an increased use of digital services to prevent the spread of the infection. This may have created a more general entrepreneurial attitude among professionals to solve problems in the absence of personal interaction, and because of physical distancing measures, even if pandemic effects were not in focus in any of our case studies.

TABLE 1 Case description and background.

The two contexts	Case 1: Digidel centers	Case 2: Conventional welfare services
Roles and assignments for the street-level bureaucrats	Generally, to support clients with enhancing their digital skills and solving problems with digital services.	Assignments within each silo of public services, where digital services are seen as tools.
Legal framing	Relating to policies on digital inclusion, especially national library law.	Each silo of welfare services is governed by specific legislation and policy.
The street-level bureaucrats' discretion	To support with a wide variety of digital issues, except for questions that threaten the personal integrity of the citizen.	To support clients with issues within the specific silo.
Our material and data	Ten in-depth interviews, on-site observations, and analyzed policy document.	Participatory research from the project, 23 responses to extensive opened survey questions, 10 semistructured interviews.

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4 | DIGITAL GOVERNMENT AS A FRAME OF THE CASES—BACKGROUND

Digital government and the use of online public services is just one aspect of a wider societal change, a digital transformation that changes our way of life, relationships, interaction, and how we structure our societies.

The growing use of digital services is spreading globally, and in public services the new digital interfaces are commonly emphasized with arguments of efficiency, accessibility, and transparency (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019; Twizeyimana & Andersson, 2019). Alongside this development, the disadvantages of those excluded by the digital divide have been on the agenda since Norris (2003) drew attention to digital inequalities. As the digital transformation proceeds, the theories on digital inclusion have been developed further (van Dijk, 2020).

A transformation of this magnitude brings us to the question of possibilities for participation. According to the European Digital Economy and Society Index, only 54% of Europeans have at least basic digital skills (European Commission, 2022). In this index, the Nordic countries stand out with populations with high digital competences and offering many public services through digital channels.

Digitalization in the public sector in Sweden is regulated by laws and policies emanating from several decision making levels and it aims for a sustainable digital transformation (Government Offices of Sweden, 2017). Within a framing of extensive digitalization, inclusion becomes a key issue to keep up impartial and inclusive public services, as expressed in the Accessibility to Digital Public Service Act (SFS, 2018:1937). Despite these policy ambitions, there are studies pointing at the need to further support clients to use digital services (Bernhard & Wihlborg, 2022; Gustafsson & Wihlborg, 2021).

The gap between those who have access to and use digital technologies and those who do not is sometimes conceptualized as a digital divide (van Dijk, 2020). van Dijk argues that the digital divide is not just a matter of access to technology, but also encompasses differences in the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that people bring to the use of digital technologies and the situation they are in. He identifies four stages to becoming digitally included (van Dijk, 2020): to be motivated to use the technology, to have material access, to have sufficient skills, and to use it frequently. Among the digitally active, there are still differences in use and capabilities to use digital technologies to empower oneself (Bernhard et al., 2019).

Our case studies were in municipalities that address and manage most of the welfare services, like urban planning and local development, and are implicated in delivery of public welfare services (Sellers & Lidström, 2007), such as education (other than university-level education), social welfare and care. The municipalities differ in size, and the rural, less-populated municipalities face several disadvantages compared to those in urban areas, since they have to provide the same public welfare services but to a smaller population.

The Swedish welfare state is characterized by its universalism and values aimed at preventing social stratification (Rothstein, 2013). Thus, digital inclusion becomes a key to keep up the basic values of the welfare state. Scandinavian welfare states emphasize values as social rights, solidarity, redistribution through social policy, and gender equality. The legitimacy of the welfare system is grounded in the interplay between citizens' democratic rights and the citizens' interpretations of the quality of public administration and welfare services. Digital public services thus play a crucial role for the legitimacy of the welfare state, and their design must be usable and trustworthy (Lindgren & Jansson, 2013).

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5 | FINDINGS ON HOW STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS CAN ENHANCE DIGITAL INCLUSION AT THE PROJECT-BASED DIGIDEL CENTERS

The Digidel centers are nodes for digital inclusion sprung from the collaboration in the national Digidel network, a politically independent democratic network for digital inclusion founded in 2013 (Digidel, 2018). There are currently 26 Digidel centers run by the respective municipalities. The funding sources vary but it is mainly public funding and from the independent Swedish Internet Foundation (Digidel, 2022). The centers are meant to be accessible and manned nodes where citizens can get support with digital tools free of charge. Although the concept of Digidel centers is supposed to be recognizable regardless of location, the activities of each center should be needs-driven at the local level. Drop-in services, personal tutoring appointments, lectures, courses, and collaboration with other actors are common, but the centers also have various local solutions like digital outreach vehicles or maker spaces.

The Digidel centers work with a wide range of questions from the public, spanning from requests for support with simple tasks such as printing, to more complicated issues, for example, public digital services, online banking, job applications and integrity online. They deal with questions related to the public sector on a municipal, regional, and national level but also with questions related to the private sector, mainly digital banking services.

To solve the visitors' problems and to be proactive in their work toward digital inclusion, the Digidel centers collaborate with other actors in more entrepreneurial ways. One of the respondents describes the collaborations as three pieces of the same cake; the library is one piece, but it is equally important to collaborate with the rest of the municipality and with civic and private actors outside the public sector. Within the municipal organization, the Digidel centers collaborate with parts such as the employment unit, social services, and retirement homes. Regarding the private and civic sectors, many centers work together with senior citizen associations, study associations, associations that support the homeless, banks, and sometimes stores like pharmacies or food chains. Apart from this, it is common to collaborate with public organizations at state level such as service offices, the employment agency, the Swedish social insurance agency, and the police. The collaborations take different forms, but they are often channeled through knowledge exchange, visits, mutual courses, and exhibitions.

Although the Digidel centers are generally located in public libraries, not all the respondents are librarians. Some of them have backgrounds in IT, either from the private or public sector, and a few respondents come from the education sector or have backgrounds from settings where they worked with residents with special needs. Thus, the professional competences here stretch over a wide area. The respondents told us about how they had actively sought to work at the center, and that they had a portfolio of competences they considered as suitable for the task. In our analysis, we could also see that the professional competences of the staff at each center also guided the focus of the center. For example, when the center was run by a librarian, there was an emphasis on media and communication competences to enhance digital inclusion.

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6 | FINDINGS ON HOW STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS CAN ENHANCE DIGITAL INCLUSION IN CONVENTIONAL WELFARE SERVICES

Our second field study was more extensive and focused on street-level bureaucrats that have other main assignments rather than primarily supporting digital inclusion. In this group, the street-level staff meet clients in conventional welfare services such as social services, teaching, family care, or language courses for immigrants. In addition to these main tasks, they add support regarding digital services and work to increase digital inclusion in general.

Many of the questions they address concern digital issues outside their responsibilities such as banking, postal services and issues relating to the employment agency. Common ways to address these challenges are to provide public computers and service desks. Keeping traditional channels as an alternative to the digital channels is also often mentioned as a solution—calling instead of emailing, printing, and posting forms instead of referring to websites or summarizing digital information in printed form.

In the conventional welfare context, the respondents show a similar understanding, as expressed at the Digidel centers, of which groups are at risk of digital exclusion and similar examples of the practical implications of digital exclusion. According to the respondents, digital exclusion limits contacts with authorities and can cause difficulties, for example, when applying for work, benefits, education, and civic registration. As one of the respondents phrases it:

> ... there is a risk that you do not get what you are entitled to on time according to social service law because of lack of ability to apply.

Since many aspects of society presume a digital competence, the respondents see an increased need for support, which, in turn, requires more resources at various units at the municipal level. The overall impression from the conventional welfare services is that the street-level bureaucrats are struggling to manage the inclusion of clients and support them to access and use public services. Instead, clients must ask for digital support from civic actors such as local associations, churches, senior citizen associations, and local branches of NGOs like the Red Cross, or the specific civil society organizations targeting the elderly's digital inclusion, like SeniorNet. When asked to describe digital competence among municipal staff in general, respondents gave scattered responses, from high competence both in digital and pedagogical aspects in some cases, to others who brought up a lack of sufficient digital competence and need of further training.

7 | ANALYSES OF DIFFERENT ENTREPRENEURIAL APPROACHES AMONG THE STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS ENHANCING DIGITAL INCLUSION

Both the studied contexts had the same policy ambition—to support clients to become more digitally included—and here we analyze the different outcomes in line with the research questions set out above.

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7.1 | The roles and assignments of the street-level bureaucrats

Our first research question was how the professional roles of the street-level bureaucrats in each context open for entrepreneurial approaches. There are some important differences between these contexts. First, the staff at the Digidel centers do not make any decision regarding the clients, such as access to services or other benefits. The street-level bureaucrats here were more resorting to subversive action (March & Olsen, 1984) and used the organizational potential for more entrepreneurial practices.

At the Digidel centers, the street-level bureaucrats had their focus on the clients and their problems. They used the digital systems and both parties' competencies to solve the problems. They could, to some extent, compensate for system design that might in some cases not be appropriate for some users. On the other hand, in the welfare services, the street-level bureaucrats' discretion was limited by strict assignments, and they had to follow rules and make formal decisions. There were few opportunities to compensate for unsuitable system design, and support clients in these contexts.

Those working in the conventional welfare services have more direct decision making power. However, both groups strive to support the clients in their everyday lives. In the literature, a key component of policy entrepreneurs is that they bring the agency to structural account and, by showing the structural impact, even from a local level, help explain the dynamic political change (Arnold, 2021). In these two case studies, we identified very few examples of how challenges from the street-level bureaucrats led to more general policy implications or even organizational changes, as seen in other studies of street-level entrepreneurs (Cohen & Aviram, 2021). Instead, we can see a lack of channels to include the voices and experiences of street-level entrepreneurs in the general organizational development or policy-making.

7.2 | Street-level bureaucrats' entrepreneurial use of their discretion

Our second research question concerned how the street-level bureaucrats use their discretion for entrepreneurial practices. Our overall impression of our two case studies is that it was clear that the street-level bureaucrats at the Digidel centers included more diverse assignments and had a broader scope in what they considered to be relevant to support clients with, such as printing tickets and logging in to their medical records. This can be seen as an entrepreneurial practice. In addition, they used their discretion in more entrepreneurial ways, as they tried innovative outreach solutions like digital support box bikes. In line with what Arnold (2021) concluded as a street-level entrepreneurial trait in her study of wetland policy implementation in the United States, they also entertained wide networks of peers in public and private sectors to achieve digital inclusion policy goals. When the format is more open, flexible and with less need to deliver specific and predesigned decisions, street-level bureaucrats have more openings to be entrepreneurial.

The interviewed Digidel street-level bureaucrats are generally under the impression that their managements expect them to collaborate with other actors to provide the public with relevant support. As exemplified in this quote, many of them emphasize their discretional freedom to form the daily work and collaboration in ways that they find suitable: “we don't really have a lot of policies and regulations and written papers on this and that. We work in a very process-oriented way.” This indicates a generally high level of discretion. On answering

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the question of what values guided and motivated their work, they frequently responded like this person:

> Autonomy. I used to say to the boss that the less you meddle in my work, how I perform it, the better. It is, like, personal, like I am, and since I have such a lot of experience, I would rather not have too much poking in what I do or how I do it.

In addition, several of the respondents spontaneously brought up in the interview that a visitor might get different kinds of help, not only at different centers but also at their local center, depending on whom they meet that day. This is both a question of skill and of what kind of support the individual bureaucrats are comfortable with supplying, which indicates that there is a considerable level of discretion among the colleagues at the Digidel centers.

Like the staff at the Digidel centers, the respondents in the conventional welfare services identify challenges related to discretionary boundaries, for example, when the bank sector and insurance companies close local offices and refer customers to their digital services or to libraries for digital support. Helping residents with digital systems that contain sensitive private information is described as both depleting resources and posing integrity challenges. A few respondents also question the logic behind certain national digital systems such as the employment agency's activity report system:

> There is still a huge problem with illiteracy among newly arrived immigrants who, among other things, are supposed to submit activity reports [digitally] each month despite not being able to read or understand the language. It is also important to point out that they basically are taught to lie, since they are expected to apply for a certain number of jobs every month although they cannot write, read or talk Swedish.

There are clear limitations in their discretion, and no openings for entrepreneurial solutions in these services, since they are constrained by the digital systems of national agencies. Although the street-level bureaucrats here express that they try to help, the respondents emphasize that the staff in some cases "lack the resources to provide digital support to the requested extent." In addition, they mention that cases that are out of the ordinary, for example, citizens with protected identity, are still further beyond their discretional practices. When these clients are excluded by the design of the systems and must be handled manually, the street-level bureaucrats have few options to handle their cases and cannot approach them in entrepreneurial ways.

On the other hand, our respondents at the Digidel centers network with the local community, in line with Durose's study of street-level policy entrepreneurs (Durose, 2011), to enable citizens to manage the digital services themselves and to enhance their digital skills. In this, they also try to reach marginalized groups with targeted activities such as beginner courses in immigrant languages. The open setting at the Digidel centers, which responds to the issues and problems brought in by visitors, made the staff's discretion wide, and they used their professional competences and former experiences to form the focus of the center, as is common in former studies in line with studies on Norway (Busch et al., 2018). Since the centers are project-based, they were also partly outside the ordinary roles and arrangements of discretion for street-level bureaucrats (Rice, 2012), opening the way for more entrepreneurial approaches in the public encounter between bureaucrats and citizens (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021, p. 962).

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7.3 | Analyses of entrepreneurial approaches

To conclude the first two research questions, we will further discuss their different entrepreneurial practices. The street-level bureaucrats in the conventional welfare services were, at a general level, much less entrepreneurial despite their similar overall assignments—to support clients to get access to public welfare services. They kept their focus on the core assignments and issues to address and seldom stretched their scope into other domains, even if it could have helped the clients and made their own work easier and more caring. Thus, the context here defined the degree of entrepreneurial practice among street-level bureaucrats who are supporting clients to get access to and use digital welfare state systems (Table 2).

The lack of digital competence among the clients is widely described as costly, in time and resources, for public service providers, but there are still few openings to address the problem in entrepreneurial ways. There were some examples of targeted activities in the second case, such as offering digital guides who make house calls for citizens over 75 years, an IT café, and a technology bus that "visits certain addresses on set times, like the ice cream truck" to support seniors. To sum up, there were entrepreneurial solutions to the problem of clients being digitally excluded in this context as well, but to a lesser extent than in the Digidel context.

In addition to earlier studies (Algotson & Svensson, 2021; Svensson, 2019) we can see that the project-organized context of Digidel gave more space for entrepreneurial behavior among the street-level bureaucrats, despite the similar overall assignments in the two contexts. The Digidel centers were in the project organization outside the conventional assignments of their municipalities; they had a limited time frame; and they could adjust to the professional competences and earlier experiences among their staff.

TABLE 2 Results from the two cases—how did context matter for entrepreneurial approaches among the street-level bureaucrats?

Results in the two cases	Case 1: Digidel centers	Case 2: Conventional welfare services
Ways to enhance digital inclusion	A combination of courses, lectures, and individual tutoring. Working close to each client's needs to enhance their digital skills and, as a long-term result, to enable citizens to manage the digital services themselves.	Supporting the clients to solve the digital challenges related to the specific silo errand.
Use of discretion for entrepreneurial approaches	Openness to entrepreneurial approach to support citizens to become more digital included in general. Use of networking, wide and varied interpretation of what they can assist with, innovative and targeted outreach activities.	Constrained by limited discretion to extend beyond their designated tasks within each silo. Some exceptions to this were the use of alternative channels and innovative outreach activities.
How did the context matter?	High level of flexibility and openness to entrepreneurial approaches.	Strict legislation in each silo of welfare services hampered entrepreneurial approaches.

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Here we have shown how the street-level bureaucrat in conventional welfare services operates with limited discretion, often confined within the constraints of specific service silos. This constrained environment leaves little room for entrepreneurial approaches aimed at facilitating digital inclusion among clients. Conversely, at the Digidel centers, street-level bureaucrats enjoy greater discretion in their interactions with citizens, enabling them to provide comprehensive support for broader digital inclusion. Here, their role extends beyond addressing specific issues and problems. Instead, they can educate citizens on the broader use of digital services.

8 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main conclusion we can draw from comparing the entrepreneurial approaches among the street-level bureaucrats at Digidel centers and in conventional welfare services is that context is key to how and why street-level bureaucrats are entrepreneurial. Put simply, in the more project-based and open context of Digidel centers, the street-level bureaucrats find more innovative approaches in their public encounters by searching for new solutions, targeted outreach, and in networking to extend their discretion. On the other hand, in the conventional welfare services, the contexts are formed by the silo-focused legislation, and thus their discretion is limited. In their public encounter, they can mainly address clients' digital problems within the silo and there are no openings to enhance digital inclusion more broadly. This indicates that they follow different logics of appropriateness.

Regarding our third research question, the analysis shows that, in the more project-based settings at the Digidel, there are openings for street-level policy entrepreneurs, and their creativity and support seem to be appreciated by the citizens. However, since the street-level policy entrepreneurs still have limited influence or access to most of the digital services that they provide support with, the long-term impact is limited on a general level, and the systems are not made more accessible. On the other hand, those working with similar assignments in conventional settings have less space to be entrepreneurial, and even if they want to support and find solutions around the clients' problems, they are constrained by the organizational context.

In both cases, the respondents highlighted several examples of potential system and service design implications, indicating that, though they are not stretching all the way to contributions to policy design as defined by Cohen and Aviram (2021), they try to stretch beyond their discretion to attain policy goals. The respondents at the Digidel are more consistent with Arnold's (2021) definition of street-level policy entrepreneurs by investing a lot, adapting their working methods, using peer networks, and seeking new opportunities, for example, expanding resources by applying for additional funding. The context of the Digidel supported a more entrepreneurial approach and thus extended the discretion of the Digidel respondents.

It should be noted that we did not consider the possibility that people with a more entrepreneurial personality might be more interested in working in entrepreneurial contexts like Digidel. Thus, it is possible that the context is shaped by and also shapes the people working as street-level bureaucrats in more entrepreneurial settings. Further studies are needed to measure the impact of context on professionals with similar attitudes and ambitions. A limitation of our study is our lack of voices from the users of the digital services, and experiences of getting support to solve digital problems in public services. Thus, we see a potential for studies addressing this new public encounter between citizen and screen-level

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bureaucrat to build further on the work by Peeters and Widlak (2018) and add to the knowledge of digital inclusion in relation to public services.

Opening the meaning of the context more, we have identified that the discretion of the street-level bureaucrats is what matters the most for the space to be entrepreneurial. In relation to the types of assignments in focus here, the discretion opens the possibilities for entrepreneurial approaches in three respects: first, what the context allows them to do and asks them to do—the organizational discretion defining how entrepreneurial it is possible to be. Second, how they do it is based on their professional competences and experiences in the field—a competence-based discretion defining how entrepreneurial the person can be. Third and finally, in a more project-based and flexible context at the micro-level of the welfare state there is more potential for and acceptance of entrepreneurial approaches. This study was set in Sweden, which has an advanced and comprehensive welfare state, and thus we can predict similar outcomes in related institutional structures, but there is also a need to conduct similar studies in states with different welfare structures and lower access to digital services. The street-level bureaucrat can probably be more creative and innovative in how they support citizens and clients to be digitally included and empowered if adapting to their context. Taken together, this study shows that context matters for the entrepreneurial approaches among street-level bureaucrats, in this case when enhancing digital inclusion in Sweden.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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