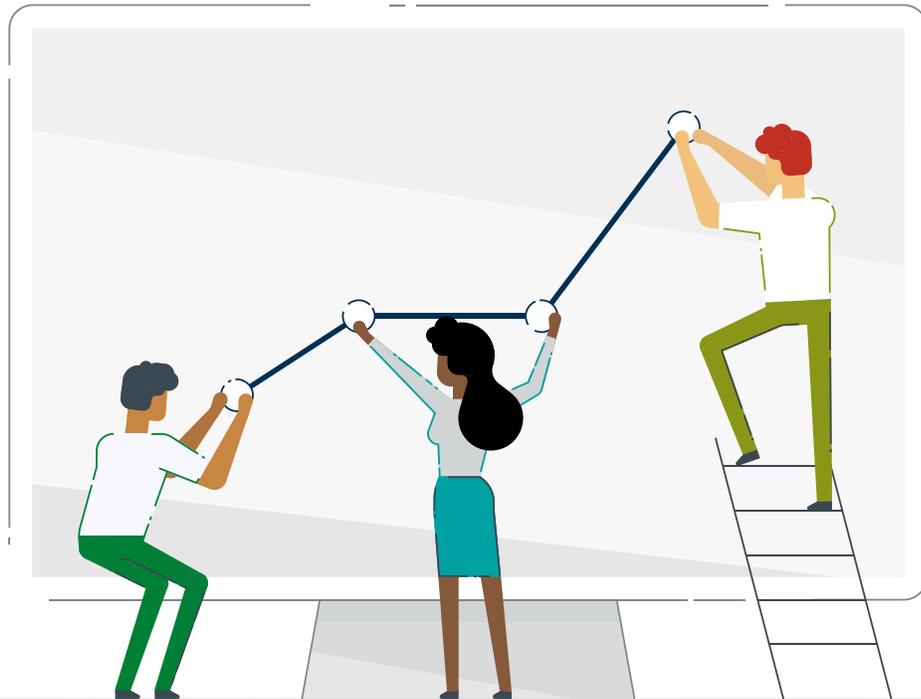


SEIZE THE DATA

USING EVIDENCE TO TRANSFORM HOW FEDERAL AGENCIES DO BUSINESS



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PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE



Grant Thornton

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Data and evidence can transform federal agencies, enabling them to identify what works, stop doing what doesn't, and improve important programs. That means better outcomes for the American people.

The use of data analysis, rigorous evaluation and a range of other credible strategies to inform decision-making is becoming more common across government. Even so, the movement is nascent, with leading practices implemented at some agencies, but not yet widely adopted. Much more progress is necessary. In fact, the recently enacted Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, as well as the recently released draft Federal Data Strategy Action Plan, both prioritize broader adoption of leading practices.

To support that effort, this report highlights practical steps that agencies can take to become more data-driven and evidence-based. The findings emerged from a series of workshops and interviews conducted between April 2018 and May 2019 by the Partnership for Public Service and Grant Thornton. From these sessions, we learned that the most forward-thinking agencies rely on multiple approaches, including:

- Using top-down and bottom-up approaches to build evidence-based organizations.
- Driving longer-term and shorter-term learning.
- Using existing data and new data.
- Strengthening internal capacity and creating external research-practitioner partnerships.

This report describes what these strategies look like in practice, and shares real-world and replicable examples of how leading agencies have become more data-driven and evidence-based.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in technology and statistical methods allow for the creation, combination and analysis of vast quantities of data. While some agency leaders and program managers have embraced the moment, others must begin the journey, thinking through how to harness these resources to improve the policies they implement and the programs they administer.

“Agencies have new opportunities to tackle the tough issues and get answers to their big questions using high quality data from multiple sources,” said Chief Statistician of the United States Nancy Potok.

When Congress passed the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, which President Donald Trump signed into law in January 2019, the federal government took a step toward institutionalizing the role that data and evidence play in informing policies and programs.

The new law requires the 24 CFO Act agencies to appoint a chief evaluation officer and a chief data officer; develop a list of research questions that, if answered, could improve their policies and programs; create and maintain a comprehensive inventory of the data they collect; and make this data more accessible to stakeholders inside and outside of government while complying with privacy safeguards. The draft Federal Data Strategy Action Plan, released by the Office of Management and Budget on June 4, 2019, moves agencies even further in using data to inform decision-making and helps support the new law’s vision.

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act can elevate the role of data and evidence in decision-making across government. Ultimately, however, its success will depend on a learning culture taking root, where leaders and program managers eagerly “seize the data” and transform how their agencies do business.

Our hope is that this report serves as a catalyst and a guide.

“Agencies have new opportunities to tackle the tough issues and get answers to their big questions using high quality data from multiple sources.”

Nancy Potok, Chief Statistician of the United States



USING TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP STRATEGIES TO BUILD EVIDENCE-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

TOP-DOWN STRATEGIES

At organizations with a strong learning culture, the tone is set at the top. Leadership consistently communicates the importance of using data and evidence to make decisions about programs rather than relying on hunches or an inclination to preserve the status quo. Leaders encourage and empower staff to evaluate their programs using the best available data and evidence, identifying what is working well and where modifications might be made.

Setting Expectations

At the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, the federal initiative responsible for reducing the prevalence of global HIV/AIDS, every member of the staff is expected to become knowledgeable about data.

"Our leader, Ambassador Deborah Birx, expects 100% of the staff to have data literacy," said Kristine Clark, PEPFAR program manager. "Previously, we had two camps: data people and program people. But Ambassador Birx blurred the lines. She expects our technical experts to have the same level of data literacy as the 'data nerds' who make spreadsheets."

Empowering Staff

Top performing agencies make decisions based on the best available data and evidence—wherever that evidence points. Yet employees might be tempted to suppress valuable information when it makes their programs look bad. Leaders can help by creating a culture in which staff feel comfortable reporting bad news.

At the Department of Energy, encouraging employees to report incidents when they occur, even if the incidents do not result in an injury, is at the heart of an initiative to improve safety. In the past, the department realized that some employees were reluctant to report safety issues for fear of repercussions. Consequently, the department was not gathering as much data as it could on safety issues, limiting its ability to respond appropriately.

"We've focused on becoming more of a learning organization," said Josh Silverman, who oversees reporting activities within DOE's Office of Environment, Health, Safety and Security. "We've gotten people more interested in reporting issues at their sites so we can avoid incidents in the future. They're doing it for the benefit of others who

might learn from it and they're doing it without fear that they will be judged harshly."

To encourage learning, the office regularly publishes short reports describing safety issues that have been identified (for example, the improper handling of hazardous material) and discussing the lessons learned. This enables others doing similar work to learn from the experiences of their peers.

"Our focus on identifying and learning from low-level incidents has enabled DOE to maintain an extremely low rate of accidents and lost-time injuries," Silverman said. "Reporting and analyzing thousands of minor events is key to our success in preventing the major incidents from occurring."

BOTTOM-UP STRATEGIES

While clear and consistent messaging from leadership is essential, the best organizations also empower their employees to use data and evidence to improve their programs. These bottom-up approaches often involve program administrators working with agency data experts to identify areas for learning and improvement.

Developing Bureau-Level Learning Agendas

A learning agenda, which is required of most departments under the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, lists an organization's high-priority research questions. Answering these questions will fill critical gaps in an agency's knowledge, providing insight into how to improve its programs and better fulfill its mission.

Developing a department-wide learning agenda is a valuable way to build an evidence-based organization, especially when it is created—bottom-up—from bureau-level learning agendas. While bureau-level learning agendas are not required by the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, they can help facilitate close collaboration between an agency's program teams and research offices.

Effective learning agendas are designed to advance the main objectives of the organization, with questions often tied to the strategic plan. The process of building a learning agenda should be collaborative, with senior leaders, evaluation offices and program administrators all weighing in on which questions to examine. A learning

agenda should reflect the priorities of senior leaders, consist of questions that research and evaluation offices can answer, and be relevant to staff in charge of administering programs so they might do so more effectively.

In 2018, the Small Business Administration wanted to examine whether its programs were as successful as it hoped in helping small businesses thrive. Program administrators, evaluation experts and senior leaders worked together to identify questions that needed to be answered, including:

- How does technical assistance impact loan performance?
- How can the SBA best support small business growth in socially and economically disadvantaged communities?

“The learning agenda helped us think about the strategic plan and learning gaps in a more holistic way,” said Jason Bossie, director of SBA’s Office of Performance Management, which helps managers evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. “It started to drive a culture change where it’s okay to question, and it’s okay to say we don’t necessarily know how well certain policies or programs work when implemented. It starts the conversation to understand how to assess and improve them.”

Recently, the SBA conducted an evaluation of its HUBZone program to better understand the factors that federal agencies consider when awarding contracts to small businesses in disadvantaged communities. Small businesses can become certified through the SBA HUBZone program, which gives them a leg up in the competition for federal contracts.

The SBA used the evidence from its evaluation to inform policy and strategy decisions that could help make small businesses more competitive at securing federal

contracts. The agency also used the results to inform the development of a second evaluation aimed at enhancing the HUBZone program.

Intra-Agency Collaboration

In 2006, the Department of Education established the EDFacts Data Governance Board to help the department manage and make use of its large collection of pre-kindergarten-through-grade-12 data.

The board meets monthly and includes representatives from offices across the department. The meetings provide program offices with an opportunity to discuss data not only with the National Center for Education Statistics—the research office responsible for EDFacts—but with each other as well. Every meeting includes time for program offices to share what they are working on and to inform the group about new data collections that will be available soon.

At one board meeting, the Office of Migrant Education delivered a presentation on its data-quality review process, inspiring other offices to make improvements to their own processes.

Ross Santy, associate commissioner in NCES’ Administrative Data Division, describes the value of the board this way:

“The Data Governance Board has enabled offices at Education to learn about data that’s available across the department just by coming to the meetings and by being part of a conversation. Someone from one office will describe a project they are working on and someone from another office might say, ‘Hey, I know of some data that could be very helpful.’ The board has been the only venue for these types of conversations within Education.”

Recommendations

Agencies should:

- Ensure leaders regularly communicate and reinforce the importance of making decisions based on data and evidence.
- Develop bureau-level learning agendas that facilitate collaboration between program teams and research offices.
- Find new ways to share information about the data that is available to program offices and how it can be used to tackle important challenges.

DRIVING LONGER-TERM AND SHORTER-TERM LEARNING

Some important research questions about a program's effectiveness may naturally take several years to answer—for example, whether a kindergarten program affects students' academic performance in third grade. Yet agencies often do not need to wait that long to gain important insights that can help them improve program results or cost-effectiveness.

In some cases, evaluating a project at its midpoint makes sense, as inertia can result in struggling projects continuing indefinitely. Rapid experiments also can help agencies determine if quick, often low-cost changes can boost results in the populations they serve. And agencies can use the time-tested approach of contacting their customers to ask how a program might be improved.

Continual Evaluation

At the Millennium Challenge Corporation, a U.S. foreign assistance agency that fights global poverty, data on project performance is published quarterly, and management uses this information to make decisions about the agency's investments.

In some cases, evaluations are built into an investment to determine if and how a project should be scaled.

In one instance, a project designed to reduce high unemployment among recent secondary school graduates in Morocco was ended early because a midterm evaluation did not show a statistically significant impact.

"The quarterly project touch points force our leaders to grapple with the outcomes and results of a given investment," explained Casey Dunning, MCC's director for results and learning.

Rapid Experimentation

Rapid experimentation is a low-cost, fast-paced way to compare the effect of different interventions on a specific objective. Private sector companies, for example, use rapid experimentation to test whether the introduction of a new product will boost overall store sales, or to test different versions of a webpage to see which is more persuasive with consumers. Government might use rapid experimentation to increase enrollment in its Thrift Savings Plan retirement program or persuade benefits-eligible citizens to apply for assistance.

In 2015, nearly 1 million people experienced threats or use of force by police. In response, Congress and the executive branch proposed that police officers wear body cameras, believing that officers would be more restrained if their behavior was captured on tape.

That year, 95% of the country's police departments were using body cameras or had announced plans to do so, including the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C.¹

While government officials extolled how the cameras would improve relations between communities and the police, the MPD wanted to test this assumption and better understand the effect of cameras on police behavior.

It conducted a rigorous, randomized evaluation at little added cost by gradually phasing in the body-worn cameras. This allowed the MPD to compare the behavior of officers with and without the cameras.

The study, conducted in collaboration with The Lab @ DC, the city's analytics and scientific unit, showed no discernable effect of body cameras on police behavior, including use of force and the frequency of citizen complaints. The result may have been unexpected, but it demonstrated the importance of testing assumptions.

Evidence-based federal agencies can apply similar methods to test assumptions about their own programs.

In another case, the Center for Program Integrity within the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services wanted to know whether a simple, low-cost communication intervention could reduce the prescribing of unneeded and potentially dangerous antipsychotic medication.

Working with the General Services Administration's Office of Evaluation Sciences, CMS identified the top 5% highest-volume prescribers of quetiapine—a medication to treat schizophrenia and other mental disorders.

The Government Accountability Office estimates that Medicare spends roughly \$158 million a year on quetiapine prescribed without sound medical justification.²

1 The Lab @ DC, "Evaluating the Effects of Police Body-Worn Cameras: A Randomized Controlled Trial," October 2017. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2wFpJo3>

2 Government Accountability Office, "Antipsychotic Drug Use: HHS Has Initiatives to Reduce Use Among Older Adults in Nursing Homes, but Should Expand Efforts to Other Settings," GAO-15-211, January 2015. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2Wm7uPc>

“Quarterly project touch points force our leaders to grapple with the outcomes and results of a given investment.”

Casey Dunning, director for results and learning, Millennium Challenge Corporation

CMS mailed half of these prescribers a letter informing them that their prescription rates were higher than those of their peers, and sent the other half a placebo letter describing an unrelated Medicare regulation.

If the medical providers who were informed that their prescribing habits were above the norm began to prescribe less than those who received the placebo letter, CMS would know that it identified a valuable new way to rein in the overprescribing of quetiapine.

The intervention worked: The prescribers who received the letter comparing their prescription rates to those of their peers prescribed 11% less quetiapine in the nine months following receipt of the letter, with no adverse effects on patient health.

Today, a growing number of agencies are using low-cost, relatively quick experiments to learn what works, improving the performance of their programs.

Soliciting Customer Feedback

A simple way for government to quickly generate evidence that can improve its performance is to ask the people it serves for their feedback.

The U.S. Digital Services team at the Department of Veterans Affairs tried this approach and discovered that veterans were having trouble navigating the department’s many websites. Acting on this feedback, the USDS team

consolidated hundreds of online portals into a single website: Vets.gov, a one-stop shop where veterans could learn about and apply for benefits and services. Recently, the Vets.gov platform was folded into the department’s homepage, VA.gov, further streamlining the department’s online presence.

For several years, The Lab @ DC has hosted an event called Form-A-Palooza, a hackathon aimed at helping the D.C. government improve the design of its forms and applications.

Attendees, composed of citizens, design experts and D.C. government program administrators, gather to propose revisions to forms used for city programs, including applications for services.

“Low-income people—those who are the most vulnerable—are disproportionately likely to struggle with poorly designed forms,” said David Yokum, former director of The Lab @ DC. “But this effort is also for government folks—the people who have to put the data collected on forms to good use.”

Ultimately, the D.C. government modified several forms based on feedback from Form-A-Palooza participants, including the public-school enrollment form, and applications for child care subsidies and disability parking tags.

Recommendations

Agencies should:

- Consider whether it makes sense to evaluate program effectiveness at regular intervals rather than waiting too long to find out whether programs or interventions are working as intended.
- Leverage rapid experimentation as a quick and low-cost technique to identify what’s working and how to improve programs.
- Enlist stakeholder input and customer feedback as additional sources of evidence on how to improve programs.

USING EXISTING DATA AND NEW DATA TO IMPROVE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

Evidence-based organizations with strong learning cultures use the data they have already collected to inform their policies and programs, and they make that data easily accessible to program managers and other stakeholders.

Learning organizations also explore how they might partner with other agencies, linking data and expanding the types of analyses they can conduct.

MAKING EXISTING DATA ACCESSIBLE AND ACTIONABLE

Agencies collect a lot of data about their programs and the people they serve, but it often goes unused by program managers. While addressing concerns about data privacy and confidentiality can be challenging, leading agencies—with the help of their research offices—are showing that this data can be turned into actionable insights about program performance.

At the Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, research staff have made a concerted effort to translate complex data analysis and research results into easy-to-understand information. To do so, the research team uses infographics, interactive websites and GIS mapping to present its findings. It even hired a data visualization firm to help build the team's capacity.

"Sometimes research folks struggle to boil down their work into an easy-to-understand format for policy folks who don't have a lot of time," said Melissa Abelev, the assistant deputy administrator for policy support at the Food and Nutrition Service. "It may be hard for researchers to translate a 500-page report—five years of work—into just a few pages, but sometimes that's what policy folks need. And when we have done it, we've had much more success helping people understand the point and convert the findings into program changes."

At the Mine Safety and Health Administration, analysts have made data on accidents and deaths more accessible to mine owners and other stakeholders, including legislators and industry associations.

In the past, MSHA's mine safety data—compiled in dozens of tables and uploaded to its website—proved difficult for stakeholders to analyze. Moreover, when MSHA made field visits to deliver safety presentations, the content was generic. Mine owners did not learn as much as they could about the safety trends at their mines.

To better inform mine owners and encourage them to make mining safer, MSHA made its safety data more user-friendly, building visualization and interactive capabilities into its website. The agency also modified its safety briefings, ensuring that they are tailored to specific mines or regions.

"The kind of data we present can reveal real insights into local conditions," said Wayne Palmer, MSHA's deputy assistant secretary. "If you're in the Wyoming coal industry, isn't it helpful to know that accidents spike on Saturdays? Or that injuries associated with the handling of materials—for example, loading, moving and unloading materials—is the most common type of incident? It prompts people to think about what might be happening on Saturdays, or what might be causing the incidents. The data is so useful because it is granular and customized."

USING NEW DATA TO ADD INSIGHTS

Sometimes, an agency's data cannot provide enough insight into how to improve a program or policy. Yet, when combined with data collected by another agency, a more complete picture might emerge.

Charles Rothwell, former director of the National Center for Health Statistics, described the value of linking data across agencies this way:

"If you are at the Department of Labor and you're trying to understand unemployment, there is a health aspect to that. Similarly, there is a health aspect to many issues that the Department of Housing and Urban Development works on. Often, understanding requires looking beyond your own little area."

While linking data to gain additional insight is underutilized in government, some agencies have done it successfully, improving the service they provide to citizens and helping advance their mission.

FEMA Used Data From Other Agencies to Help the Victims of Hurricane Harvey

In 2017, Hurricane Harvey struck the state of Texas, causing \$125 billion in damage. Following a disaster like Harvey, victims must wait for the Federal Emergency Management Agency to assess their homes or businesses for damage before they can receive compensation from the National Flood Insurance Program. The faster FEMA completes its inspections

and quantifies the damage, the sooner victims will be made whole.

FEMA had data on which structures were affected by the storm, but lacked insight into how much damage a building incurred until it sent an inspector to the site. Ordinarily, this would require FEMA to inspect every structure on its list.

To expedite the assessment process, FEMA used data from the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Geological Survey to estimate how high the water rose in each neighborhood. This enabled the agency to pinpoint which structures were so damaged that they would have to be demolished and rebuilt—all without doing an in-person inspection.

Supplementing its information with data from other agencies allowed FEMA to focus on 19,000 structures instead of the 100,000 it might have inspected. Bypassing thousands of structures cut the number of inspection days from roughly 200 to 40, saving the government approximately \$20 million in assessment costs and enabling survivors of the storm to receive insurance payments faster.

HUD and Education Share Data to Increase College Enrollment

In 2016, the Department of Housing and Urban Development began a campaign to inform HUD-assisted residents about the availability of financial aid for college, with the goal of encouraging more people to consider higher education.

To do so, the department sent letters to HUD-assisted residents informing them that they might be eligible for financial assistance and encouraging them to file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

To learn which type of letter would result in the most FAFSA applications being submitted, HUD tested several versions. One came from the Federal Student Aid office, while another came from then-

First Lady Michelle Obama with a personalized message. The former first lady also sent a generic letter that was not personalized.

To understand whether its campaign worked and which approaches were most effective, HUD teamed with the Department of Education's Federal Student Aid office.

To access student financial aid data and track FAFSA submission rates, HUD securely transmitted the personally identifiable information of its assisted residents to Federal Student Aid.

While the data returned to HUD was aggregated so individuals could not be identified, it allowed HUD to determine that messages from popular public figures are a promising approach, and even more so if the message is personalized. The data also showed that residents most likely to apply for assistance were not in their teens or early 20s as HUD expected, but young adults in their mid to late 20s—a reminder to the agency that slightly older residents are also interested in attending college and should not be overlooked in future outreach.

HUD's partnership with the Department of Education enabled the agency to answer important questions that it could not answer on its own.

Calvin Johnson, deputy assistant secretary for HUD's Office of Research, Evaluation and Monitoring, described his broader approach to seeking out and sharing data across agencies:

"It takes keeping your eyes and ears open at meetings. It takes seeking people out and taking advantage of every opportunity that presents itself. For example, if you're asked to participate in an interagency meeting on youth violence, you say yes. And then you talk to the other participants and identify your shared interests. You find yourself handing out business cards, telling people that you're interested in their work and would like to explore opportunities to share data. It's really informal, but that's what it takes."

Recommendations

Agencies should:

- Make as much data as possible available to program managers, policymakers and other stakeholders—in an easily accessible format—while ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of that data.
- Support efforts by evaluation and research staff to help program managers analyze, understand and act on the data they have.
- Encourage program managers to look for data outside their agencies—and link that data with their own—to provide new insights into program dynamics and effectiveness.

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY INTERNALLY AND CREATING RESEARCH-PRACTITIONER PARTNERSHIPS EXTERNALLY

Leading agencies build their own capacity to bring data and evidence to bear on decision-making, but they also draw on outside expertise, including university researchers.

BUILDING INTERNAL CAPACITY

One step that agencies can take to build internal capacity is to create well-staffed research and evaluation offices, and empower them to conduct independent program evaluations. Agencies with the strongest learning cultures have leaders who take the results of program evaluations seriously, scaling up programs that are achieving their objectives and modifying or eliminating programs that are not.

Training employees to understand how data and evidence can be used to inform their programs is also a smart idea.

For example, the Department of Health and Human Services has an initiative called the Data Science CoLab, run out of the Office of the Chief Technology Officer. The CoLab is an eight-week training program geared toward employees with different levels of knowledge about using data. After learning the fundamentals of data science, CoLab participants complete a capstone project in which they use data to answer key questions about HHS programs.

And recently, the Economic Research Service at the Department of Agriculture partnered with New York University to make its confidential consumer and food industry data more accessible. One goal was to enable federal, state and local agencies to evaluate the effectiveness of their food assistance programs.

To do so, ERS securely housed its food acquisitions and purchases data on New York University's Administrative Data Research Facility. The virtual "facility" is a platform that allows agencies to securely share their data in a common area in the cloud. Agencies can bring their data to the research facility, partner with other organizations that have made their own data available, and then work together to link the data and answer big questions about their programs.

ERS and Food and Nutrition Service, a sister agency that administers food assistance programs, collaborated

with the facility to develop an intensive mini-course to help state and regional agencies use the data to improve their programs.

"The idea here is to expand the data user community," said Mark Denbaly, deputy director for food economics data at the Economic Research Service. "Program administrators in the states have limited time and resources, and can use some assistance analyzing the data and teasing out the results of their work. People who have learned how to use ADRF have stuck with it, brought in even more of their data, and are discovering very interesting insights about their programs."

CREATING RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER PARTNERSHIPS

When federal agencies and researchers outside of government collaborate, both sides stand to gain. Agencies can benefit from the additional intellectual muscle, getting new insights into how to address key challenges. For university researchers, partnering with a federal agency can mean access to data that might otherwise be off limits and the potential for jointly published research that can advance a career.

One example of a successful researcher-practitioner partnership is the collaboration between University of Texas economist Dayanand Manoli and the Internal Revenue Service. Manoli, who spends part of his time at the IRS in Washington, D.C., has worked with the agency on a multifaceted project to improve outreach around the earned income tax credit.

Recently, Manoli and the IRS identified people who might be eligible for the EITC but did not file a tax return. Even if someone does not owe taxes, they may be eligible for a refund due to the EITC. Failing to file a return can leave money on the table.

Manoli worked with the IRS staff to design and test a postcard that reminded non-filers to submit their returns and claim the EITC if eligible. A randomized trial was conducted, with some non-filers receiving the postcard and others receiving nothing. Findings revealed that the postcard had its intended effect: Those who received it were more likely to file a return than those who did not.

Manoli helped the IRS identify how it can come closer to achieving one of its goals—ensuring that tax returns are filed accurately—and underscored the key role of collaboration in the process.

“I think partnership really is the key word here,” Manoli said. “While I was able to provide some insight on design or data analysis, the IRS was already collecting the earned income tax credit data. Without all of us at the table, this project couldn’t have happened.”

Finally, Manoli emphasized the value of his short-

term assignment through the IRS’ Joint Statistical Research Program, which allows him to work directly with IRS employees on a temporary basis.

“The JSRP has been essential for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. I can pop my head into people’s offices and we can talk through strategy in person, rather than sending an email and receiving a response some time later,” Manoli said. “When you don’t have that opportunity for face-to-face contact, some exchanges might not happen or gears can get messed up.”

“I think partnership really is the key word here. Without all of us at the table, this project couldn’t have happened.”

Dayanand Manoli, professor, Department of Economics, University of Texas

Recommendations

Agencies should:

- Fully staff and empower research and evaluation offices to conduct (or contract for) independent, rigorous research, and help program managers develop the skills to analyze and use evidence and data to improve their programs.
- Partner with university researchers and other outside experts to supplement their evidence-building capacity and help solve key challenges.
- Encourage and help program managers to use rapid experimentation to test potential ways to improve programs—especially low-cost experiments that use existing agency data.

CONCLUSION

An effective and efficient federal government depends on its leaders using data and evidence to inform decision-making. Leading federal agencies systematically identify what does and does not work, and how to improve existing programs to better achieve their missions and use taxpayer dollars wisely. Indeed, a push toward more informed decision-making is at the heart of the recent Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act.

While the practice of using data and evidence to drive decision-making is not as widespread as it should be, there are areas of excellence across the federal government.

Those forward-looking agencies and offices understand that there is no silver bullet for creating an evidence-based organization. It requires a multifaceted approach, including:

- Leaders who set the tone by communicating the importance of data and evidence-informed decision-making, and by empowering employees at all levels to improve their programs.
- Making use of insights from long-term research studies about program dynamics and effectiveness, while also applying shorter-term strategies like rapid experimentation and seeking customer feedback to continually strengthen results.
- Using existing data, making it actionable and accessible to program administrators and policymakers, and linking it to other data housed outside the agency to gain additional insights.
- Building agency capacity to use data and evidence to make decisions while also looking for and drawing on outside expertise.

This report provides examples of what a multifaceted approach looks like in practice. And it serves as a guide for leaders and program managers who want to take the next steps in developing a learning culture and improving the way their agencies do business.

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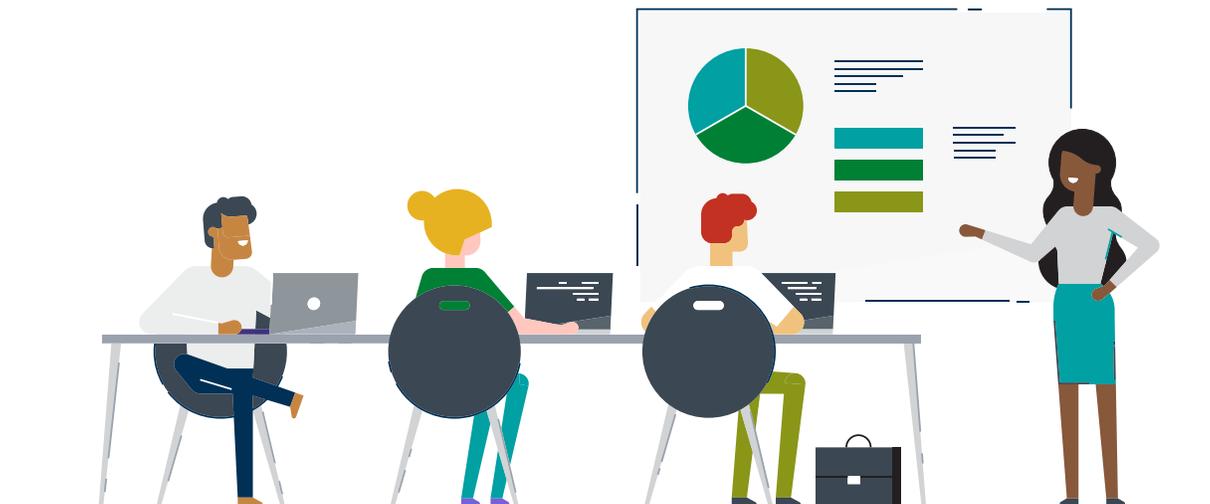
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