



Attaining Effective Outcomes

Supporting Program Performance and Performance Management Strategies

Governments are expected to deliver results. This expectation seems to have only grown in recent years. With uncertainty as the operational backdrop for most government agencies, the increased demand for transparency, accountability, and quality services has emphasized the continued need for government executives to measure, monitor, and track performance of its mission programs and activities. Program managers across government are indeed collecting and using program outcome data to make management decisions on how to best get results in delivering their programs. They are using performance outcome information to manage programs, trigger corrective actions, identify and encourage “best practices,” motivate employees, and make planning and budget decisions.¹

Performance management initiatives over the past two decades helped shift the conversation within and across U.S. government agencies—from a focus on measuring program activities and outputs to a focus on achieving mission outcomes. This refocus represents a fundamental shift in thinking, acting, and managing within the public sector, away from a focus on process and on what one needs to do, to a focus on benefits² and ensuring the desired impact of government programs. This is no small feat because technical discussions around outcomes are sticky. In the performance management discipline, focusing on outcomes is harder, more complex because the impact of a program may take years to materialize and many external factors outside the control of a program manager may come into play.³ Regardless, attaining effective outcomes simply means building the discipline and forging a process that drives one towards achieving a desired result. A successful outcome management program includes a process to measure outcomes plus the use of that information to help manage and improve services and organizational outcomes.⁴

1. Harry Hatry, Elaine Morley, Shelli Rossman, and Joseph Wholey, *How Federal Programs Use Outcome Information: Opportunities for Federal Managers*, IBM Center for The Business of Government, 2003. <https://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/how-federal-programs-use-outcome-information-opportunities-federal-managers>.

2. Burt Perrin, *Moving from Outputs to Outcomes: Practical Advice from Governments Around the World*, IBM Center for The Business of Government, 2006. <https://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/moving-outputs-outcomes-practical-advice-governments-around-world>.

3. Stacy Barr, *How to Measure Government Outcomes: White Paper*. August 2019

4. *Key Steps in Outcome Management: Series on Outcome Management for Nonprofit Organizations*, The Urban Institute. 2003.



This essay offers a firsthand account of the value of building robust performance management routines, how establishing “outcome brokers” in federal government grant programs can improve outcomes, how federal agencies are using emerging technologies to improve outcomes, and why putting customers first goes a long way to attaining effective government outcomes.

Build Performance Management Routines

Understanding whether government programs have achieved desired outcomes is facilitated and made possible using a robust performance management approach. The IBM Center report, *A Practitioner’s Framework for Measuring Results: Using “C-Stat” at the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS)*⁵ underscores this point and offers a first-hand account on how the department developed a new leadership framework called C-Stat to manage programs on a day-to-day basis. C-Stat is comprised of a set of routines for collecting, analyzing, deciding, and acting upon performance information on a regular basis. C-Stat routines changed how top-level and mid-level managers managed, and how county officials and contractors did their work. It incentivized leaders to focus on the use of data and learning strategies. It also helped top-level, mid-level, and frontline managers to be more strategic in measuring the outcomes and outputs that define success.

The department’s executive leadership team began to approach performance anomalies with a greater sense of urgency. They became relentless in collecting and analyzing data to diagnose and solve problems. “C-Stat is not an administrative function to comply with in addition to the ‘real work.’ C-Stat is about the real work.”⁶

As a result, the statewide performance for processing food and cash assistance applications exceeded the court-mandated 95 percent goal for the first time in April 2016. It also led to improved performance in other programs virtually eliminating the use of seclusion for mental health patients; it doubled the number of children receiving childcare subsidies; and it nearly doubled the number of timely monthly contacts for at-risk adults.

This example illustrates how important it is for government agencies to build performance management routines as a foundation towards improving outcomes. Identifying case studies of organization’s that have do this successful would be worthwhile. Such research may include focusing on identifying strategies and best practices to incentive behaviors and attitudes coming from the field of behavioral science. There is also a value in pursuing research that identifies industry benchmarks, measures, and tools (analytic, cognitive, or social) that best demonstrate effectiveness of outcome focused management. There is a value in pursuing best practices that help government agency develop “learning agendas” that prioritize the development and use of data and other evidence for decision making. There is also a need to identify how best to bridge performance management and program evaluation disciplines in a way that can create greater insights for agencies—providing agency leaders with more data to focus on near-term performance issues and longer-term program outcomes.



5. Melissa Wavelet, *A Practitioner’s Framework for Measuring Results: Using “C-Stat” at the Colorado Department of Human Services*, IBM Center for The Business of Government, 2019. <https://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/practitioner%E2%80%99s-framework-measuring-results-using-%E2%80%9Cstat%E2%80%9D-colorado-department-human-services>.

6. Ibid.

Think Outside the Box: How “Outcome Brokers” Can Improve Outcomes

From a state agency effort to improve outcomes to a focus on improving outcomes in federal grants management, the IBM Center always seeks to connect research to practice. Given the priorities of the Biden-Harris administration and the enormous influx of grant dollars to address the health and economic impacts of the pandemic, Dr. Shelly Metzenbaum sees this as an opportune time to rethink and reframe how the federal government manages grant programs.

Grant programs need to set outcome-focused goals and objectives guided by enabling law and informed by evidence about what is happening in the world. In her IBM Center report, *Federal Grants Management: Improving Outcomes*, she argues that the federal grants management system needs to shift from an emphasis on administrative matters to one on improving outcomes. She recommends the establishment of “outcome brokers” for every grant program’s objective. They would be responsible for coordinating and, where necessary, catalyzing efforts that inform where to focus, find ways to improve, and successfully encourage adoption of increasingly effective practices.⁷ In addition, designating outcome brokers—and where appropriate, outcome improvement teams—for grant programs would support cross-program collaboration and learning, both to improve grants outcomes and to improve grant efficiency as well as other aspects of operational quality.

It is critical when focusing on meeting effective outcomes that government executives find new and innovative ways of doing business. This approach would be complemented with further research in what readily available innovations exist to propel effectiveness in delivering targeted outcomes and optimizing return on investments. Such research may involve focusing on barriers to achieving efficiencies, economies of scale, and benefits of specialization with the ultimate goal of overcoming these barriers.

Leverage Emerging Technologies to Improve Government Outcomes

In *Delivering Outcomes, Building Trust*, the American Council for Technology and Industry Advisory Council (ACT-IAC) states that federal agencies can leverage emerging technology, such as intelligent automation and other emerging technologies, to deliver better outcomes for the public they serve.⁸

The IBM Center and the Partnership for Public Service conducted a series of webinars, titled, *Improving Outcomes in Government through Data and Intelligent Automation*,⁹ with government leaders to discuss how they are using these technologies to improve both how they work internally, how they provide services externally, and most of all how these technologies can help them meet mission outcomes. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has been using intelligent automation and intelligent workflows to improve grants management through its ReInvent Grants Management initiative.



7. Dr. Shelley H. Metzenbaum, *Federal Grants Management: Improving Outcomes*, IBM Center for The Business of Government, 2019. <https://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/federal-grants-management-improving-outcomes>.

8. Agenda 2021: Delivering Outcomes, Building Trust, American Council for Technology-Industry Advisory Council (ACT-IAC), October 2020.

9. *Improving Outcomes in Government through Data and Intelligent Automation*, IBM Center for The Business of Government and the Partnership for Public Service, 2021. <https://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/intelligent-automation>.



About 70 percent of federal grant funding comes from HHS—the department distributed almost \$500 billion in grants in fiscal 2017. So, the department’s efforts to make grants management more efficient could substantially benefit federal grants management overall.¹⁰

HHS leaders recognized that even small changes could save time and taxpayer dollars. For example, the department is working to improve the customer experience by reducing the time it takes for grantees to access information about the grants process. One improvement is a single sign-on process—a single credential users can use to log into the many grants-management systems with one username and password, rather than having to log into multiple systems using different login information.

Additionally, HHS found that artificial intelligence and blockchain can improve how grant administrators evaluate risks in awarding grants. AI could potentially save the agency about \$142 million annually.¹¹ And as AI tools analyze more and more information, they could identify patterns in data that could predict if grantees are engaging in fraudulent behavior and thus ensure that this program more effectively serves stakeholders and meets program outcomes.

The HHS example illustrates the need for further practical and actionable research on how emerging technologies can help government agencies realize greater efficiencies, use resources more effectively, and ultimately leverage these benefits to achieve mission outcomes. This research may include how best to employ intelligent automation to transform how agency work is done by eliminating repetitive processes and freeing up staff to focus on more value-added activities. Agencies would benefit from research that documents case studies and highlights critical success factors and best practices in the evolving use and application of artificial intelligence and other emerging technology in government.

Focus on the Customer

Customer-centric design is integral to any strategy that focuses on outcomes. Government programs impact those they are intended to service. The Biden administration has recognized the importance of putting emphasis on the customer. It has made it one of its three key priorities in its President’s Management Agenda¹² as well as an Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government.¹³ The administration acknowledges the challenge that some federal services have not always been designed with the public’s needs and priorities in mind, nor have these services always kept up with these needs. Poorly designed, out of date, and inequitable government services are a cost to the nation.

John Kamensky, emeritus fellow of IBM Center, outlines key aspects of the administration’s customer experience priority.¹⁴ The directive requires the State Department to design and deliver a new online passport renewal experience that does not require any physical docu-

10. Dan Chenok, *Successful Adoption of Intelligent Automation in Government: Insights from HHS’ ReImagine Grants Initiative*, IBM Center for The Business of Government and the Partnership for Public Service, January 8, 2021. <https://www.businessofgovernment.org/blog/successful-adoption-intelligent-automation-government-insights-hhs%E2%80%99-reimagine-grants-initiative>.

11. *Improving Outcomes in Government through Data and Intelligent Automation*, IBM Center for The Business of Government and the Partnership for Public Service, 2021. <https://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/intelligent-automation>.

12. https://assets.performance.gov/PMA/Biden-Harris_Management_Agenda_Vision_11-18.pdf.

13. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/13/executive-order-on-transforming-federal-customer-experience-and-service-delivery-to-rebuild-trust-in-government/>.

14. John Kamensky, *Can Biden Deliver Better ‘Customer Experience’ for Americans Than His Predecessors?*, Government Executive, December 17, 2021. <https://www.govexec.com/management/2022/01/govexec-daily-customer-experience-under-biden-administration/360259/>.



ments to be mailed. This effort focuses on organizing around “life experiences” using industry best practices such as “journey mapping” and “human-centered design.”

Understanding the customers’ needs through gathering feedback, conducting research, sharing insights, and testing new approaches will help government executives design programs and services with customers in mind every step of the way, better positioning these programs to deliver on outcomes and attain desired results.

Government agencies would benefit from further research into the most effective ways to organize mission delivery around “life experiences.” This research would include but not be limited to documenting cases studies of government and industry success stories in using customer centered design to better target program populations and ensure target outcomes.

Integral to this line of research would be to identify recognized industry best practices in the use of such tools as journey mapping, design thinking, and human-centered design to help government agencies develop the most effective ways to service their constituents.

CONCLUSION

Government has made substantial progress over the past twenty years in shifting the conversation within and across U.S. government agencies—from a focus on measuring program activities and outputs to a focus on achieving mission outcomes. Some of the progress has been iterative, with some setbacks. If the future is anything like the last decade, then according to *Results for America: A Decade of Progress and Impact*,¹⁵ there’s much to be positive about going forward. However, given the size and complexity of government and its various programs, a cautious optimism may be warranted. Here are some things to keep in mind: these efforts take time, effort, and commitment; linking performance information to decisions is less a technical issue than a human behavioral issue; and performance information is increasingly used by a broader set of government and public users. For these reasons and more, the IBM Center identified attaining effective outcomes as one of eight key research areas.

15. <https://results4america.org/tools/a-decade-of-progress-and-impact/>.

