



CONVERSATIONS ON BIG DATA

A podcast series on putting analytics to work at federal agencies

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Data analytics offers a powerful way for federal agencies to target resources and improve decision-making.

The following excerpts are from a discussion of the challenges, opportunities and lessons Lisa Danzig learned from her experiences managing analytics activities at two different agencies.

Danzig is associate director for Personnel and Performance at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). She previously served as performance improvement officer at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), where one of her roles was overseeing the HUDSTAT program.



Q: What is your message to agencies embarking on the budget process and seeking to use analytics?

A: Engage a set of people who think this could be worthwhile and/or already have a problem or goal they're trying to achieve and that you could apply this to. This helps you avoid that cycle of collecting hundreds of metrics that aren't relevant to the problem. It helps tie together the people who ultimately are going to be the advocates, who are the people with the problems and the goals.

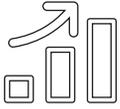
Create a culture of trust so the conversation is not just about a red/yellow/green rating on how well you're doing on meeting your milestones or your metrics, because then everyone's just going to focus on gaming the system and not actually getting to the end result.

[Develop] a set of relationships and a forum where people actually want to tell the truth and feel like there's something that could come out of it that's good for them.



Q: What do you see as the challenges for agencies?

A: There's a leadership challenge of how, with changing political leadership, you institutionalize this with career staff. Many program managers or directors or deputy assistant secretaries use a lot of these skills and tools but thinking about this at an enterprise level takes another level of commitment and investment.



Q: What important lessons about analytics did you learn from your time at HUD that are informing your new work?

A: I was struck at HUD with the challenges, just basic challenges around access to data or fear that people had in terms of having these kinds of conversations. So the first thing I learned was the largely cultural, but some technical, challenges that most agencies face in trying to set up similar quarterly data-driven reviews.

Another thing I learned was there's a fine line between focusing on accountability, which is part of the role of setting goals and having these conversations, and trust, where you're really trying to get people to be forthcoming about what some of their challenges are and candid about that. In some places early on, we probably erred on the side of accountability and that shut people down more.



Q: What's the biggest mistake that you see that people make?

A: Focusing on this as the process as opposed to focusing on the end result.

The second is not recognizing that people digest information in different ways so that they get focused on being very analytic and lots of tables and lots of numbers. Most people actually aren't that interested in that level of detail and would prefer more of a story.

The communication of the information is as important, if not more important, than the content in terms of people absorbing that information and actually making use of it.



Q: What did you learn while at HUD? What has changed?

A: The biggest change relates to how you do business. When you're running a program there's a lot of momentum to focus on doing it how you used to do it, and there's not a lot of opportunity to step back and say, are we doing the right things? Is this having the impact we're looking for? What is the impact we're looking for?

The principle change was really focusing on an explicit set of goals that had metrics associated with it or targets ... It gave us some specific ways to measure whether or not we were achieving that goal. It forced us to really reevaluate if we're trying to serve 200,000 more families with rental assistance, how are we actually measuring that ... and how can we evaluate whether or not we're being effective?

Excerpts have been lightly edited.



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