



CONVERSATIONS ON BIG DATA

A podcast series on putting analytics to work at federal agencies



MALCOLM BERTONI
Food and Drug Administration

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

The following excerpts are from a discussion with Malcolm Bertoni about the challenges, opportunities and lessons learned from his experiences managing analytics activities at the FDA, where he is assistant commissioner for planning.



Q: What are the important elements you need for a good analytics program?

A: You have to have some leadership support because it does require an investment.

You also need to have champions both on the analytical side and on the program side—some data junkies who really love measuring and understanding and analyzing how an organization ticks, and some program managers on the front lines who get it, who are willing to embrace it and work with the analysts and improve their organization to make that part of their organizational culture.



Q: What changes have you seen in FDA's culture?

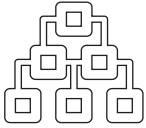
A: One is an expansion of an evidence-based program-management approach. They discovered the power of actually measuring and tracking something that they hadn't thought of really measuring and tracking before. And when all of a sudden you graph that trend and maybe some of the contributing variables, all of a sudden, they get an "aha."

Raising the general awareness about the value has been really important across the agency.



Q: Were there cultural barriers that you had within the organization around sharing data in a central repository?

A: Yes, very much so because people do feel some ownership of their data. It is human nature that they're responsible and accountable for their program, and they don't want people getting into their business who don't understand it, or causing trouble.



Q: What were some of the lessons learned and what advice would you give others starting an analytics program?

A: Line up measures so that they are clearly part of a logic model or results framework or strategy map—whatever term you want to use—so people can understand how their work relates to the larger organizational goals.

We learned that if the measure doesn't have value to the people who are doing the work, if they feel like it's a check-the-box exercise, then it just doesn't have the impact and it's not going to have the momentum and the sustainability.

Q: What challenges did you encounter, and then what were the successful strategies for bringing people along?

A: One of the things we hear all the time is, "Well yeah, I'd really like to measure that result or that outcome or impact, but I don't control that." However, certainly, the higher you rise in an organization, the more accountable you are toward results regardless.

So let's go ahead and, yes, measure your piece of it and we'll measure your colleague's piece of it, but we have to measure the end-to-end result because that's what really matters to the public health. That's what really matters to the overall efficiency of the program.

Another big challenge though, is this notion of, "Oh, geez, I don't have the time to measure this," or "This is a really burdensome kind of thing." I really try to turn that back on people and say, "Look, if it's burdensome, then we're probably not measuring the right thing or else there must be some gross inefficiency in how we're measuring it that you don't have the tools or the systems that you need to really do your job effectively."

Excerpts have been lightly edited.



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works.

ourpublicservice.org



**IBM Center for
The Business of Government**

The IBM Center for The Business of Government connects public management research with practice. Since 1998, the Center has helped public-sector executives improve the effectiveness of government with practical ideas and original thinking. The Center sponsors independent research by top minds in academe and the non-profit sector, and creates opportunities for dialogue on a broad range of public management topics.

businessofgovernment.org