Is the Performance Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

Next year will be the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993. Has it achieved its goal of creating a performance culture within the federal government? In their article “Does Involvement in Performance Management Routines Encourage Performance Information Use? Evaluating GPRA and PART,” Professors Donald P. Moynihan and Stéphane Lavertu offer findings that are both discouraging and hopeful to practitioners. In their article, they assess “the relationship between results-based reforms and managerial use of performance data.” To do this, they analyze federal managers’ use of the performance information that was created in response to the act’s requirements.

The Three Phases

The implementation of GPRA can be divided into three phases. The first phase, from 1993 through 2000, involved the initial development of agency strategic plans, annual performance plans, and annual performance reports. By 2000, agencies had completed their first full cycles of their performance management systems. In effect, the initial phase could be characterized as creating a supply of performance information. But when the George W. Bush administration came into office in 2001, it characterized GPRA, according to the authors, “as a well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective tool for performance management.”

The second phase was an attempt by the Bush administration to create a demand for the use of performance information by assessing the performance of individual programs and linking how well they did to the budget process. This assessment process, called the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART), was completed for more than 1,000 programs covering virtually the entire budget. Each program was rated for its efficacy. However, the incoming Barack Obama administration decried the Bush attempt as an ineffective compliance exercise and concluded that the PART effort generated more performance measures but little use of them. So, it terminated the PART reviews.

The third phase, launched by the Obama administration in 2009, also attempted to create a demand for the use of existing performance information. Instead of trying to cover all programs, it narrowed the focus to a smaller set of priority goals in each agency, to be supplemented by quarterly reviews of progress toward these goals. This new process was enshrined in law by Congress in the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010. This third phase is not assessed by the authors, as data are not yet available. But their findings offer insights to those tasked with implementing the new provisions.

The Discouraging

The authors test several hypotheses regarding federal managers’ use of performance information in the first two phases, based on time-series data from surveys conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) in 2000 and 2007. They premise their assessment on the standard assumption in organizational theory that change among employees can be fostered by altering their routines. In a statistical analysis of the survey results, Moynihan and Lavertu conclude that the law’s requirements “have excelled at creating organizational routines for data collection and dissemination, [but] they have been less successful at creating routines for the use of these data.”

In addition, the authors observe that only 53 percent of managers surveyed by the GAO “reported that they had been involved in GPRA processes” and that even fewer, only 31 percent of managers, “had been involved in PART-related activities.” While this might be expected, given that not all managers are engaged in program performance measurement, it is seen as discouraging nevertheless.

Moynihan and Lavertu caution the implementers of the new law about being too optimistic about its chances of creating a new performance culture when they observe from the first two phases that “GPRA and PART have been most effective in encouraging passive forms of performance information use,” such
as complying with requirements to collect and report it. And they conclude that this “tell[s] us something about the limits of any formal government-wide performance requirements to alter the discretionary behavior of individual managers when such behavior is difficult to monitor.”

In fact, one surprising (but intuitively understandable) finding uncovered by their analysis is that “[a]dditional attention from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) actually seems negatively related to other forms of use, such as problem solving and employee management.” In other words, the more the OMB pressured agencies to create and use performance information, the more they shifted to a compliance mode as a response.

These certainly are not the kinds of conclusions anticipated by those of us who thought that the law would change behavior, not just create a new set of mindless paperwork requirements!

**The Hopeful**

If formal requirements and top-down attention do not work, what will get managers to use performance information to make data-driven decisions?

Here is where the authors provide practitioners a ray of hope. Their analysis identifies a series of organizational factors that influence the use of performance information: (1) leadership commitment to results, (2) learning routines led by supervisors, (3) the motivational nature of the task, and (4) the ability to link measures to actions.

This highlights areas to which the act’s implementers can pay special attention.

But the authors’ analysis is based on five-year-old data, and the technology in use by agencies has evolved dramatically since then. For example, the experience of using newer technology to track dollars and performance under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has resulted in enormous advances in the field of performance management.

The experience of the Recovery Act offers several new positive predictors of where and when performance information may be used, and implementers should focus attention on these, as well as the ones identified by Moynihan and Lavertu. First, are agencies creating real-time data? If data are a year old, then it is less likely they will be used in decision making. Second, are agencies creating greater transparency to these data, giving internal access to them by frontline employees as well as senior executives? Experience shows that sharing data broadly increases the chances that it will be used broadly. And third, are agencies using analytic tools, including geospatial mapping, to interpret these data and make them understandable to frontline employees as well as senior managers? Making data easy to use creates an incentive to actually use it!

These additional organizational factors may also be useful predictors, and maybe this will be demonstrated in future GAO surveys of federal managers on their use of performance information. But, in the meanwhile, the caution offered by Moynihan and Lavertu still applies: there is no magic bullet.