With growing pressure from citizens, shrinking budgets and more and more data, public service leaders are looking to drive productivity and unleash higher performance through analytics – delivering public service for the future.

Too often, big data in public service means lots of talk and wasted energy, with few scores on the board. The potential for big data to become a serious player will remain untapped without the correct planning and actions from the top. Public service leaders must adopt an enterprise-wide strategy and practical structures to build talent, gain investment and engage users if they are to improve transparency, reduce costs and deliver more insight-driven services.

In our previous article, ““Moneyball” Under the Dome: Government Analytics for Public Officials’, we explored the importance of visible, executive leadership in driving big data. We next looked at the importance of choosing the right analytics talent in ‘Most Valuable Player: Building the Right Government Analytics Team’.

Here, we explore three major challenges for public service leaders in getting analytics off the bench:

- Determining the right talent
- Creating a clear business need to apply analytics
- Assuring organizational take-up of analytics
Stuck for talent? Explore all your free agent options

One key lesson from business is that the right analytics talent is crucial for success, making it critical to attract and retain star players. Today, demand for analytics expertise is high, creating a war for talent. Accenture estimates that in 2015, the US will generate 44% of the demand for analytics jobs, but only 23% of the supply.

Given this shortage, public service leaders will need to develop their ability to attract, create, and retain analytics talent. By thinking creatively, leaders can also draw on a broader-than-typical pool for that talent. For example, one analytics organization for a US state government has hired a staff member with a PhD in French literature – skills training ideally suited to analytics and data interpretation. Determining the required skills and competencies for this workforce will help leaders think more broadly about who to target for recruitment.

Because skills are in short supply, leaders seeking to embed high performance analytics operations in their government must also nurture and pool existing talent into analytics ‘Centers of Excellence’. These centers should provide leadership throughout the organization on analytics best practice and implementation, technical assistance and hands-on consulting, enabling the whole organization to benefit from dedicated analytics expertise.

Successful governments also need to draw on outside help. Doing so provides leaders with access to the skills and experience of dedicated analytics providers, enabling them to augment existing staff during peak times such as budget preparation. By integrating support from third party organizations, leaders can effectively complete the analytics work required to deliver tangible citizen outcomes.

Know your opponent: the importance of clearly identifying a business priority

For agencies with tight budgets, it’s imperative that they demonstrate the return on investment (ROI) of analytics programs. Experience shows that such programs are likely to fail without a clear business focus. Indeed, analytics that lack a business focus, or that do not solve particular issues, risk becoming a solution without a problem.

To succeed, leaders must consider the challenges they face and identify the specific outcomes they require. Only then should they explore how analytics can help. Clarifying a business need for an agency’s analytics program will increase the chances of public service leaders delivering the right outcome, such as lowering costs or improving customer relations.

Rio de Janeiro provides a model of this approach. City leaders focused on faster delivery of municipal requests as the desired business outcome when gathering data from Rio’s 1746 (1-Rio) call center program. As a result of the program, the city outperformed its goal of resolving citizen complaints within four hours from 65% to an astounding 99%. By clarifying its business priority first, the city was able to harness analytics to deliver tangible and impressive citizen outcomes.

Coaching your team to deliver big data adoption

Even governments that understand the potential of analytics require leadership to demonstrate that potential and drive internal adoption. Instead of thinking ‘if we build it, they will come’, government leaders must act to increase analytics uptake and understanding among their teams.

With a Center of Excellence in place, public service leaders must consider how analytics can help create business outcome goals for departments. Internal training focused on typical business use cases can explain the capabilities a Center of Excellence provides, while partnering with delivery teams to drive meaningful outcomes will demonstrate the potential of analytics.

New York City’s Mayor’s Office of Data Analytics reflects this approach. By creating a central resource that can work with many agencies, it is improving operations and reducing waste. Its collaboration with citizen-facing agencies has led to impressive results, including an improved ‘hit rate’ for stores selling bootlegged cigarettes (up from 30 percent to 82 percent) and the identification of the 1 percent of pharmacies that account for almost two-thirds of Medicaid reimbursements for Oxycodone.

Operations teams also need clear incentives to use a Center of Excellence. Simply expecting teams to adopt analytics Centers of Excellence is a sure route to failure; instead, government leaders must incentivize teams to use them.

Conclusion

The current hype around big data and analytics exists for a reason. Businesses have already seen how the proper use of an analytics function can deliver improved commercial outcomes. Now, public service agencies must recognize the value of analytics adoption if they are to improve their own game and deliver required citizen outcomes in the face of tightening budgets.

But for those responsible for embedding public service analytics programs, several challenges remain. A war for analytics talent, the need for a clear business case and a lack of internal take-up are the primary challenges threatening the viability of analytics adoption.

Leaders who recognize these challenges and address them at an enterprise level will be best placed to deliver very real improvements in citizen outcomes. For these leaders, big data provides a powerful opportunity for peak team performance. To deliver real results, it’s now time for agency leaders to swing for the fences.
References


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What does it take to deliver public service for the future? Public service leaders must embrace four structural shifts—advancing toward personalized services, insight-driven operations, a public entrepreneurship mindset and a cross-agency commitment to mission productivity. By making these shifts, leaders can support flourishing societies, safe, secure nations and economic vitality for citizens in a digital world — delivering public service for the future.

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