Government Reform: Looking to the Future Based on Lessons from the Past

At any given moment in time, governments in the United States and around the globe are carrying out key missions in service of their citizens, learning from and engaging with partners in other sectors, and acting as cost-effective stewards of public resources. The countless positive daily actions of government leaders go largely unrecognized amidst a constant focus on the highly visible but far smaller set of challenges and problems faced by the public sector. However, stepping back to view progress over a span of decades reveals evidence of the sum total of this continuous evolution in government management—as well as providing perspective on the future of public service.

It is from this longer-term perspective about the performance and potential for government that the IBM Center for The Business of Government wrote the book *Government for the Future: Reflection and Vision for Tomorrow's Leaders,* highlighted in the Forum of this edition of *The Business of Government* magazine.

Painting a future vision through reflection on past progress raises key issues, starting with six significant and enduring management trends of the past 20 years:

- **Digital initiatives,** including mobile computing and cloud computing

- **Data initiatives,** including big data, analytics, visualization, and dashboards

- **Performance management initiatives,** addressing the evolution of the supply of performance management information, and creating a demand for its use

- **Social media-related initiatives,** following the impact of social media that has been evident at all levels of government and has become a major agency communication tool

- **Collaboration initiatives,** such as public-private partnerships, cross-agency collaboration, and inter-governmental collaboration

- **Risk Management initiatives,** including cyber, financial, and environmental risks

What does the implementation of management reform over the past 20 years teach current and future government leaders about how to proceed with these and other management reforms in the future? Several common themes emerge from our analysis of past management trends.

- **Management reform is not for the faint-hearted.** Management reform requires major commitment and staying power. In short, it's not for the timid or those with short time horizons. It takes a well-executed implementation plan and top-level commitment.

- **In launching management initiatives, government leaders should target key goals and not overload the "system" with too much reform concurrently.** Successful change leaders in government are selective about which management initiatives to launch.

Daniel Chenok is Executive Director of the IBM Center for The Business of Government. Email: chenokd@us.ibm.com.

- **Successful management initiatives require much time and effort, and a focus on implementation.** While less successful initiatives launched over the last 20 years may have been sound conceptually, many suffered from poor execution.

- **Effective leadership makes management initiatives succeed.** While it has become a cliché, leadership from the top drives success in launching a management initiative.

Based on lessons learned from the past work by the IBM Center and the research done for our forthcoming book, an outline of a vision of what government might look like in 2040 comes into focus. We see two sets of developments evolving. First, technology will drive the redeployment of resources—people, dollars, and organizational structures. Second, as a consequence of these technology changes, the way people work and interact will change, and this will reframe how government works—including service delivery, citizen involvement, and different business models.

We envision three technology-based drivers of change for government in coming years:

- **Artificial and augmented intelligence (AI) will change the game.** Advances in the use of AI will change roles, both within government and between government and citizens.

- **Data will drive progress.** The increased availability and use of data will reframe how government managers use knowledge and insight to analyze performance, make decisions, and deliver services.

- **Government services will become platform-based.** In this scenario, government will be more of a facilitator, creating the conditions for platforms that could be built in the private and nonprofit sectors collaborating with the public sector.

Moreover, the vision of our authors suggest that these technology drivers will have three broader impacts on the government of the future:

- **Government will be more citizen-driven.** Government in 2040 will be more citizen-focused, with people leveraging technology and data to interact with their government.

- **Government will become more network-based.** The role of government workers evolving within a network-based environment as a result of technology will change, becoming flatter, more open, and more collaborative.

- **Volunteer participation with government will increase.** Citizens will have more time to spend on volunteer activities in 2040—either as retirees or members of a 2040 workforce that benefits from technology.

This positive vision of a government for the future can be realized by leaders who continue to reflect on lessons from the past. We hope that the perspectives provided throughout this book help increase the likelihood that this vision can turn into tomorrow's reality. ◨