# *Cross-Agency Priority Goals*: Do They Matter?

*By John M. Kamensky*

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the iPhone. Over the past decade, it has dramatically revolutionized how the world works by offering apps that ease interactions among individuals and businesses.

At about the same time, Professor Donald Kettl of the University of Maryland highlighted in his book, *The Next Government of the United States*, a growing divide—the divide between how government is organized to deliver services versus how citizens want services to be more like the apps on their mobile devices. He also identified gaps in both the authority and capacity of government to act nimbly across organizational boundaries.

In 2010, with the passage of the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA), Congress granted the executive branch the authority to begin bridging this gap. Among a number of amendments to an earlier version of the law, Congress authorized a new tool for easier interactions between government agencies—and ultimately the public. This new tool was the authority to designate cross-agency priority goals in a small handful of areas for a four-year period, along with the designation of a leader and the requirement for quarterly progress reviews and public progress reviews posted on performance.gov.

The federal government has reached the end of the first four-year cycle of cross-agency goals. What's been accomplished? Has the use of this tool made a difference? Are there ways to improve its use as the new Administration develops its own set of priority goals?

While this new tool was not quite as dramatic as the introduction of the iPhone, it too improved interactions between agencies.

## Background

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) developed interim Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) goals during the fiscal years (FY) of 2012 and 2013, with the first full set of designated CAP goals established for FY 2014-2017 (see text box on page 66).

During the interim period:

- Fourteen goals were identified (seven mission-support and seven mission-focused)

- Five of these "interim" goals were carried over to the full set of CAP goals

- This resulted in fifteen designated CAP goals (eight mission-support and seven mission-focused)

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## Cross-Agency Priority Goals: FY 2014-2017

### Mission-Support CAP Goals

1. Delivering World-Class Customer Service

2. Delivering Smarter IT

3. Buying as One through Category Management

4. Expanding Shared Services to Increase Quality and Savings

5. Benchmarking to Improve Mission-Support Operations

6. Opening Data to Spark Innovation

7. Bridging the Barriers from Lab-to-Market

8. People and Culture

### Mission-Focused CAP Goals

1. Strengthening Federal Cybersecurity

2. Service Members and Veterans Mental Health

3. Job Creating Investment

4. Cutting Red Tape in the Infrastructure Permitting Process

5. STEM Education

6. Insider Threat and Security Clearance Reform

7. Climate Change (Federal Actions)

Source: performance.gov

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The Government Accountability Office (GAO) is charged with monitoring the implementation of the new provisions of GPRAMA. In a 2016 report, it observed that "CAP goal teams are meeting a number of GPRAMA requirements, including identifying contributors, reporting strategies for performance improvement, and quarterly results." It also noted that most of the CAP goal teams that it reviewed "have not established quarterly targets as required." However, CAP goal teams were reporting quarterly progress on activity-based milestones.

In addition to the processes developed to organize the CAP goals and monitor their progress, OMB undertook a series of initiatives to develop the capacity of the CAP goal teams. An article in the Summer 2016 issue of *The Business of Government*, "Creating a Cadre of Enterprise-Wide Leaders," describes these initiatives, including the creation of a White House Leadership Development Program which helps to staff CAP initiatives. Also, Congress provided OMB in March 2016 the authority to create a $15 million fund to support CAP goal initiatives.

## Have CAP Goals Made a Difference?

The wide range of initiatives undertaken makes it difficult to fully gauge the impact of the fifteen CAP goals. There is no single scorecard. The progress of each goal is typically described on performance.gov in qualitative terms, and there were no plans to sum up the status of the CAP goals at the end of the four-year period which ended September 30, 2017.

However, in a review of the publicly available status reports and discussions with CAP goal staff, there has been demonstrable progress across the board. Furthermore, it should be noted that assessing progress and outcomes differs between the mission-support vs. mission-focused CAP goals.

## Mission-Support CAP Goals

Mission-support CAP goals progress can typically be assessed in terms of achieving greater standardization, consolidation of services, and cost savings. For example:

*Smarter IT*. The CAP goal team set three objectives:

- Create a critical mass of IT talent

- Develop a digital IT acquisition community

- Develop accountability tools and processes

It met each of these objectives. It created the U.S. Digital Service—a cadre of nearly 200 top tech talent that works with agencies to resolve design and implementation problems. It streamlined IT purchasing from an average of 110 days to 35 to 45 days, and it provided a closer oversight of tech projects via PortfolioStat reviews, which led to savings of $3.4 billion since FY2012.

*Category Management*. This initiative encourages agencies to buy common items or services from common contracting vehicles. By managing purchasing decisions more centrally, specialists can leverage the government's buying power and therefore reduce contract duplication. Ten "super categories" were created for services such as travel, medical supplies, and IT products. For example, by standardizing the purchase of desktops, commercial software, and mobile devices, prices have dropped by 50 percent for personal computers, and savings are estimated to be $3.5 billion by the end of 2017.

*Shared Services*. This is where agencies move their common administrative or operating functions to a provider that already performs those functions for other agencies. Typically, they focus on administrative services that are common across agencies such as financial management, human resources, payroll, and travel.

Shared services exist in different forms in different places across the government and the aim is to dramatically scale up such initiatives. The CAP goal team formed a government-wide governance council, and developed policy guidance and a framework for best practices for migrations. Currently, more than thirty agencies are going through a system and/or service migration, with a 2015 report estimating potential savings of up to $47 billion over the coming decade.

## Mission-Focused CAP Goals

Mission-focused CAP goals progress and outcomes tend to be more diffuse, but measurable in some cases. For example:

*Cybersecurity*. The 2015 data breach of personnel records at the Office of Personnel Management put this CAP goal in the spotlight. It focuses on three risk management initiatives that are a subset of a broader set of cyber efforts. The performance metrics for these three initiatives are tracked by each agency and used by the Department of Homeland Security to monitor statutory risk requirements. This effort resulted in the appointment of a federal chief information security officer and the hiring of an additional 6,000 cybersecurity specialists in 2016 alone. Furthermore, this CAP goal contributed to the latest presidential directive on cyber strategies.

*Job-Creating Investments*. A 2011 executive order created an initiative to attract high-impact investments from foreign investors that drive the creation of jobs, R&D spending, and exports in the U.S. Designating this initiative as a CAP goal in 2014 provided much needed high-level visibility, and the opportunity to focus attention on a smaller set of priority goals among a handful of agencies. It also contributed to a shift in strategy from chasing individual investments to creating greater policy coherence across government. As a result, this led to more agency collaboration and contributed to a record increase in foreign investments of $23.1 billion.

*Infrastructure Permitting*. Efforts to untangle thirty-five sets of statutory permitting and review responsibilities across eighteen agencies began in 2011, but the focus was one-off "heroic efforts" for individual projects. The CAP goal designation of this effort in 2014, along with a strategic effort to create a more systematic approach, led to the creation of a program management office and governance framework, with legislative support by early 2016. The capacity is now in place to streamline permits and reviews, but the metrics are still being developed to determine whether this is sufficient to meet the expectations of the new Administration.

## How Can the CAP Goal Process Be Improved?

Based on reviews of the progress of the CAP goals as well as reports from GAO, academics, and insights on similar approaches being taken in other countries, four areas for potential improvement stand out.

*Goal Setting*. Consider bigger, bolder goals that capture the imagination of leaders and the public. To date, the criteria for selecting CAP goals has focused on those areas where progress has been slow or floundering, and additional resources and attention would increase performance. So, areas such as improving infrastructure permitting or foreign investment were selected. Progress was made in some cases, but not big enough to be noticed. For example, customer service improvement initiatives were fairly small pilot efforts.

*Leadership*. Designate someone to provide overall leadership of mission-focused goals. Currently, OMB and the President's Management Council are closely involved in leading the mission-support CAP goals, but there is no overall leadership for mission-focused goals; their leadership is dispersed among various White House policy councils. However, their core strength is in policy development, not policy implementation.

*Authority*. Areas designated as CAP goals should have some "authority" behind them to establish legitimacy to act by the agencies involved, and be reflected in ongoing plans of key stakeholders. Each of the first round of CAP goals had at least an executive directive supporting their efforts. Some had legislative mandates, but few had any direct appropriations. Furthermore, agency strategic plans, and the strategic plans of the cross-agency councils (e.g., the Chief Human Capital Officers Council), typically did not incorporate these initiatives into their mission.

*Capacity*. OMB and the President's Management Council should continue capacity-building at a government-wide, cross-agency level—such as the Performance Improvement Council and the White House Leadership Development Program. In addition, more capacity and best practices should be developed at the CAP goal team level—such as the development of collaborative relationship skills among stakeholders, program management skills, and a full-time program management office.

## Conclusion

The new statutory tool for increasing collaboration across federal agencies to address complex challenges that span organizational boundaries works. The elements of the tool—a governance system, administrative processes, resources, and staff developmental capacities—have taken years to put into place. The efforts to date have resulted in demonstrable improvements in challenges that have been facing federal agencies for years, such as improving federal buying strategies and cutting red tape in infrastructure permitting and review processes. The processes and capacities developed to support this new tool can now be applied with greater confidence to a new set of challenges to be defined in coming months by the new administration when it proposes its set of cross-agency priorities goals in early 2018. ◘