

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

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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.

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

- **Digital innovations**, including mobile computing and cloud computing.
- **Data growth explosion**, including analytics, visualization, and dashboards.
- **Performance management improvements**, addressing the evolution of the supply of performance management information, and creating a demand for its use.
- **Social media usage**, evident at all levels of government, has become a major agency communication tool.
- **Collaboration** expansion, such as public-private partnerships, cross-agency teaming, and inter-governmental agreements.
- **Risk management complexity**, including cyber, financial, and environmental risks.

These trends suggest significant change for government, especially as it relates to addressing how the government works and the impact of artificial intelligence, citizen engagement, data, and analytics.

The research that frames these topics was based on a review of the academic literature and perspectives from multiple authors, participants in small roundtable discussions among experts, and a broader canvassing of perspectives from the public. Our research shows that each major topic of government reform has followed an innovation lifecycle that informs future progress:

- **Early action:** This phase is generally categorized by extensive experimentation. A new management initiative is deployed, usually on a pilot basis, by entrepreneurial agencies that volunteer to serve as early innovators and adopters. As would be expected, this phase is characterized by successes to build on and failures to learn from. In many instances, agencies benefited from the experience of the early adopters.
- **Expansion:** Based on successes during the first stage and additional attention given to a new initiative, the second phase is characterized by an increased adoption. More agencies implement the new innovation with more learning taking place—a “let a thousand flowers bloom” attitude often prevails. During this phase, individuals from different agencies often collaborate through formal or informal communities of practice to share knowledge.
- **Institutionalization:** The following actions, or some combinations of these actions, are usually taken during the institutionalization phase of an initiative: passage of new legislation, integration into annual budget planning, issuance of new regulations and guidance documents, and development of norms and processes that sustain the initiative. These activities lead to standardized practices across government, as well a governance framework that provides ongoing leadership and direction.

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

- **Management reform is always difficult.** Management reform requires major commitment and staying power. In short, is 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 need to be selective about which management initiatives to launch.
- **Successful management initiatives require much time and effort, and need a champion focused on implementation.** While less successful initiatives launched over the last 20 years may have been sound conceptually, many suffered from poor execution. In evaluating the impact of initiatives, government leaders must assess implementation—including training as well as timing.
- **Effective leadership makes management initiatives succeed.** While it has become a cliché, leadership from the top drives success in launching a management initiative. This leadership comes from an effective combination of career and political leaders.

Based on lessons learned from the past work by the IBM Center and the research done for our forthcoming books, 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 technology-enabled platforms that will be built as a part of public private partnerships. Services will be based on digital platforms using principles such as Agile, modular in nature, and rooted in peer networks of partners or communities of interest; indeed, government may move from being organized around agencies and programs to a network of services focused on sets of results.

Moreover, the visions 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. There will be greater citizen involvement in co-creating policy and co-producing more citizen-centric personalized services.
- **Government will become more network-based.** The role of government workers evolving within a network-based environment as a result of technology will change, including becoming flatter, more transparent, 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 which reduces the need to work as many hours. Advances in behavioral science may be used to incentivize greater volunteer participation around project-based tasks, which may blur the lines between government employees and citizen volunteers.

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.