

Deploying behavioral insights

A new approach to effective government solutions is here

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This article is the sixth of a six-part series describing inexpensive, simple solutions to some of society's most seemingly intractable problems. These solutions don't involve billion-dollar investments or comprehensive tax reform. Instead, they're based on behavioral insights that seek to explain the way we make decisions, whether consciously or unconsciously.

From obesity to public safety, many of government's most pressing challenges involve individual or group behavior. Government can better address these challenges by using innovative methods grounded upon key behavioral insights. This six part article series has demonstrated how the private and public sectors have used low-cost, simple and effective interventions — *behavioral insights*— to powerfully impact these behaviors. By changing the context in which individuals make decisions, these behavioral insights enable citizens to make better choices and facilitate positive societal outcomes.

Behavioral insights can be powerful levers to help make government leaner and more efficient, driving increased results for every dollar

Behavioral insights are simple. They don't require legislation, technology upgrades, new regulations, or large budgets. They can make government leaner and more efficient, driving increased results for every dollar. They can be rapidly tested and implemented, addressing unintended consequences and complimenting programs and investments government is already making.

from data to impact
helping agencies harness data to transform government effectiveness

But where should an agency start if it wants to adopt a behavioral insight approach? We present a few key steps to getting you started in designing an effective solution.



Understand the population, challenge, and desired outcome

To effectively make improvements in an organization, it is essential to understand the nature of the underlying challenge, the population you are aiming to target, and define the desired outcome you are trying to achieve. In the case of problems related to behavior, at the most basic level, you should identify which individual decisions and behaviors are directly affecting the outcome in question. A wide range of individuals making a complex series of choices can contribute to a given outcome, as in the case of safe transportation. The outcome can also be driven by a distinct subset of the population making a very specific set of decisions, like when an individual is interacting with a specific online web portal. For example, if you would like to encourage healthy living, you could examine a number of behaviors within the whole population, including eating and exercise habits. On the other hand, if you are looking to increase retirement savings, you may want to focus specifically on employed individuals and their enrollment in retirement plans.

Focus groups, interviews, and observations can help you to understand the process and motivations behind each of these decisions. Take careful note of any background or information the individual is exposed to before they make a decision; the context at the time of the decision, and any feedback received after the decision. Mapping out the primary decision makers and the choices they face can help you to identify the most effective solutions.

Enlist necessary support and buy-in

To effectively design behavioral insight solutions, it is important to involve a diverse group of stakeholders. Developing a holistic picture of the context — from each stakeholder and their relative perspective — is critical to intervention identification. Behavioral insight solutions in particular might also require coordination of several levels of government in addition to private sector entities. If this is the case, it may be necessary to garner significant support in order to ultimately craft the most successful

policy response. Map stakeholders according to their likely commitment and disposition, and determine from whom you will need backing, resources, and support from in order to enact your solution. For example, if your proposed solution involves using visual cues to encourage individuals to throw away their garbage, you should enlist the support of local governments, and potentially private entities.

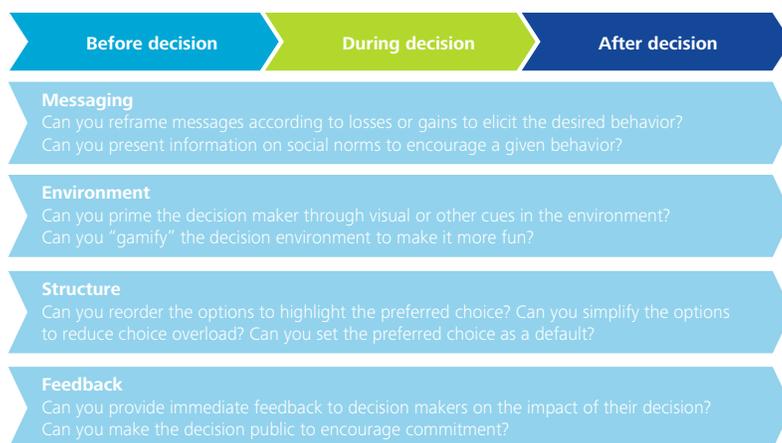
Determine the most applicable behavioral insight solutions

Not all problems respond to the same behavioral insights. Although simplifying options might be effective in helping people select more comprehensive health care plans, the way in which options are structured for public safety improvement could look very different.

A well-designed pilot allows you to explore options and quickly identify what works and what doesn't.

It is important to identify the behavioral insight levers available to you and which will most effectively address the bottlenecks in the decision making process. Specifically, consider the costs and the administrative feasibility of a given intervention as well as its ability to remove any barriers or make things easier for the decision maker. The following questions can help you determine which behavioral insights will be most effective given your understanding of the problem. Once this first round of solution prototypes are identified, you are ready to see what works.

Consider which behavioral insight solutions fit by asking a series following questions at each phase of decision



Evaluate impact of solutions through a pilot

Although there are an increasing number of examples of successful program designs using behavioral insights, much of the latest in research in social science and behavioral economics is academic in nature. The public sector, however, is increasingly focused on solutions and policies driven by data and evidence. To meet this challenge, design a pilot to identify successful interventions. A well-designed pilot allows you to explore options and quickly identify what works and what doesn't while using that knowledge in real time to implement impactful changes. Before investing the time and resources necessary to scale up a solution, rapid evaluation of pilot results allows you to determine which interventions are most effective and under what conditions. Conducting a rigorous pilot may also go a long way towards gaining support for your interventions from necessary parties. Understanding that a fully scientific experiment is not always plausible, adopting this mindset through approaches such as Rapid Results¹ (which structures testing solutions in 100 day increments) also provides a framework for organizing adaptable, data-driven implementation.

Sometimes the challenges we face can seem very complex — but behavioral insights can be powerful levers in driving success. With applications ranging from encouraging responsible financial behavior to making sustainable lifestyle choices to reducing traffic fatalities, behavioral insights are the future of federal innovation.

¹ Rosenberg, Tina. (Sept. 12, 2012). Teaming Up to End Homelessness. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/whe-one-fix-leads-to-another/?_r=0.

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