



How should a delivery unit be designed?

This article is the third in a multi-part series describing how an innovative government management approach can help translate the promises of impact into reality for citizens.

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Delivery units are an innovative approach that help governments achieve outcomes for citizens. When governments decide to adopt the approach, three issues are critical: defining the unit's mission, building and branding the unit, and determining the unit's day-to-day activities.

Defining the mission

One of the key features of delivery units are that they focus exclusively on improving the performance of a select group of priority issues. While many issues may be important, this focus allows delivery units to use their full capacity to address a major public challenge.

Each delivery unit needs to be structured to support the specific objectives sought by its sponsor—typically, the senior-most leader at the central level, such as the president, prime minister, governor, or minister. It is also possible for agencies outside of the center to implement delivery units if they want to focus efforts on achieving outcomes in key areas.

Some governments have used tools to help define the mission of their delivery units. In Nepal, for example, a policy lab convened government and industry experts to provide input on the priorities. Other countries have chosen to support the implementation of priorities in national strategic plans.

Given their various missions, delivery units can differ vastly in scope. Under Tony Blair's administration, the UK focused issues for which citizens had demonstrated dissatisfaction, including hospital wait times, street crime, and train punctuality. In Malaysia, on the other hand, delivery units focused on both government transformation and economic reform, taking on a much broader, nationwide portfolio that served a diverse set of stakeholders over a longer period of time.

Building the delivery unit

Once the mission has been established, the sponsor needs to decide where the unit should sit within the system of government. Most delivery units derive their

authority from their close relationship with the sponsor, so proximity to that office is often integral to success.

A key decision for the sponsor is who will run the unit's work. The operational head should possess a diverse range of skills, an ability to see the big picture, and talent in the field of relationship management. The operational head must have an intimate understanding of how government works, with strong relationships across government. Most critically, the sponsor must trust the head and be available to him or her when necessary.

Once identified, the operational head has to make important decisions about staffing the rest of the team. The size of the staff should correspond to the size and scope of the mission and be big enough to get the job done, but small enough to do so nimbly and efficiently. Additionally, the staff must consist of strong performers who are highly-motivated and have a positive attitude. They should excel at analysis, evidence-based problem solving, and creative thinking. Soft skills necessary for diplomacy and behavior change are also integral.

Yet the qualifications, experiences, and personalities of the staff should be varied and complementary. Those with backgrounds in the private sector, industry, and government all bring skills valuable to the work of a delivery unit. When a delivery unit in Ontario, Canada, sought to implement full-day kindergarten and poverty reduction campaign platforms, for example, it employed a number of former Ministry of Education officials.



Questions to Guide Delivery Unit Measures

What is the purpose of the delivery unit?

- What priorities will the unit support?
- How are the priorities selected?

How will the delivery unit complement existing institutions?

- What existing structures/institutions/units are in place?
- What is the current capacity to drive this implementation?
- What type of talent is needed to support this mandate?

How will the delivery unit operate?

- At what point in the policy making process will the unit be engaged?
- What activities and level of intervention will the unit perform?
- To what degree will the unit communicate their work to citizens?

A delivery unit in Sierra Leone working on a strategic health project brought on staff with a mix of public and private experience, including those with extensive experience in the U.S. pharmaceutical industry.

Day-to-day activities

The day-to-day activities of delivery units may vary considerably in accordance with their mission and the maturity of the government they serve.

Regardless of the content of the work, delivery units usually employ a common methodology. After reviewing all pertinent data, delivery unit staff focus on asking line ministries about the goals they are trying to achieve and progress being made through activities currently under way. They help the ministries determine whether the activities are meeting their goals and how implementation may need to change. Much of the work of a delivery unit consists of these repeated cycles of data collection, analysis, and course correction.

Activity generally supports a continuum of work, from strategic guidance to implementation support to performance measurement. Strategic work generally involves identifying, analyzing, and prioritizing existing issues. In Sierra Leone, for example, a delivery unit helped ministries determine which priorities they could realistically achieve and assisted them in incorporating them into a strategic plan.

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Other delivery units provide implementation support to activities already underway, as did a delivery unit in Jordan that focused on initiatives outlined in the country's national 10-year plan. Because initiatives and intended outcomes were already identified, the unit was able to focus on implementation as opposed to strategic planning.

In the most mature environments, delivery units often focus on measuring the impact that project outcomes aim to produce. Delivery units in less mature environments may focus on output-oriented measures. In these cases, delivery units may monitor key metrics that reflect the internal functioning and performance of relevant government offices and projects.

Regardless of the work they support, delivery units abide by a universal principle: they should not actively assume responsibility for or directly intervene in projects. Accountability must remain with the ministry or department assigned to implement the project.

In the next article in our series, we'll provide an up-close look at the operations of one government office focused on delivery.



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