

GOVERNING

THE STATES AND LOCALITIES

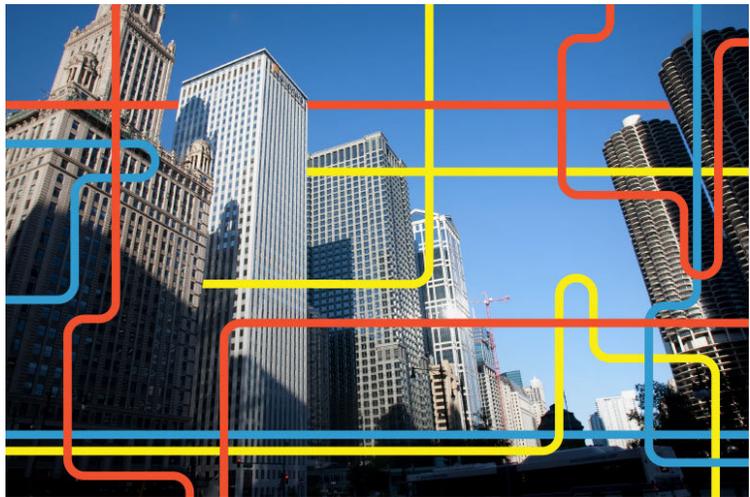
7 Ideas for Using Government Data More Effectively

From city managers to auditors, local officials offer ways to fix data collection.

BY KATHERINE BARRETT & RICHARD GREENE | DECEMBER 2015

(Photo Illustration by Kelly Martinelli)

When it comes to delivering services, the proverbial rubber meets the road at the local level. So what do local government practitioners struggle with when trying to use data to deliver services? And when a locality uses data to improve efficiency and effectiveness, what kinds of problems stand in its way?



In August, the Governing Exchange, a research arm of *Governing*, sent out a survey to executives and senior

managers in cities, counties and special districts. Unlike our [July cover story, “Bad Data,”](#) which focused on information gathered from state officials, this survey concentrated on locals. The July article targeted oversight and performance officials who routinely work with data. Not surprisingly, then, data quality issues loomed large in their minds.

With a wider range of local officials included in the follow-up survey -- city managers, division heads, department heads, agency directors, program heads, and some auditors and controllers -- the data concerns were more varied. On data quality, however, 70 percent of the 160 respondents reported problems (sometimes, frequently or often) with the accuracy and usefulness of the documentation, as well as timeliness.

The most interesting results from the survey came from a question designed to create a wish list for data: If you could do one thing with your data that you’re not doing, what would it be?

Here are some of the frequent points the respondents, who were promised anonymity, made:

Integrate and/or share data. This has proven to be the biggest hobgoblin in preventing the effective use of data in government. There is a mindset among many department heads or managers that the data they collect belongs to their team -- not to the city or county as a whole.

Yet the utility of data grows dramatically the more it's shared. Consider social services and the benefits that can come when the departments of mental health, education and corrections can easily share information about individual clients. As one city manager noted, it is important to "integrate the various data sources into an overall platform to consolidate it and make it easier to access."

Make data more understandable. A number of respondents called for better graphic presentations of data in order to communicate it more easily to both managers and policymakers. As one department head wrote, "Making data visual often makes it more useful and easier to see relationships and outcomes." This also helps in getting everyone who can utilize the information to understand it similarly. One department head reported that it's important to "visualize it more easily from disparate points of view -- policy community, manager, etc."

Do more data analysis. A number of respondents thought more analysis of the data would make the information more useful in decision-making. It seems to us that this is particularly crucial when it comes to using data to measure performance. Heaping piles of spreadsheets on city council and county commission desks, without any idea what they're supposed to prove, is a route to a bunch of very messy inboxes. Sadly, thanks to the recession and its pressure on budgets, the analytic capacity of many cities and counties has been diminished or cut from the brains of organizations rather than from direct services.

Have access to better training. An adjunct to the above admonition was the need for more sophisticated training of existing staff. Once again, one of the big cuts in recent years has been in training local government staff. This means that a growing number of men and women who are using data have less capacity to use it well, and that can easily lead to problems with accuracy.

Define terms for greater comparability. One business manager recommended that his city "mandate that the organization develop a comprehensive data dictionary that must be adhered to by all departments, and which clearly defines all data fields and values." This ties back to the first of the wish list items: sharing data. When individual pieces of data have different meanings from place to place in a city, it's extremely difficult to share it across agency and department borders. To expand on the cliché, when you can't compare apples to oranges, but mix them nonetheless, you wind up with a bunch of soggy, acidic apples.

Improve quality. This category included improving current problems with both the accuracy and timeliness of data. Respondents called for the need to devote more resources to quality control. One department head wished they "would have the manpower needed to scrutinize the data closer and more often."

Get with the digital era. One surprise for us was that a fair number of respondents commented on the need to stop using so many old-fashioned systems. There's "still too much paper," said one respondent who classified himself as "auditor or comptroller."

Clearly just getting things into digital form leaves local governments with a fair amount of work to be done.