

Performance Reporting on United States Digital Government

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INTRODUCTION

Starting in the 1980s, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom faced serious economic problems, such as economies dominated by government spending and high budget deficits. Further, government studies in the four countries found that government organizations lacked accountability for achieving program results and that there were many constraints to increasing such accountability. In response to these problems, each of the countries embarked on comprehensive reforms intended to increase the accountability of the civil service for the effective and efficient management of government programs. In exchange for increased accountability for results, the countries provided program managers with more flexibility in their use of resources. The studies and subsequent reforms in these four countries proposed results-oriented management reforms that were subsequently adopted in the United States (U.S.).

The approaches these countries took to implement results-oriented management reforms included departments and agencies establishing and communicating a clear direction by defining their missions and goals through strategic planning, establishing annual objectives that were directly linked to missions and goals, measuring performance to assess how well objectives were being met, and reporting on progress. The countries derived a number of key lessons from their experiences in developing performance measurement systems. These lessons focused on enhancing the usefulness of performance information to management for improving program results. The countries sought to reinforce this focus on results by holding agency management accountable for the results that agencies were trying to achieve. For example, the countries used performance agreements between different levels of management to ensure accountability for achieving agreed-upon performance goals. Cunningham and Harris (2005) discuss how performance reporting has been implemented in Canada, the United Kingdom, and three states in the United States. This article discusses how performance-reporting requirements in the U.S. are intended to promote a results-oriented management and decision-making process within Congress and the executive branch, as well as accountability to the American public, specifically for digital government programs.

BACKGROUND

Recognizing the magnitude of modern challenges facing the federal government, Congress has encouraged a more performance-based approach to program management and accountability within the federal government, enacting the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), perhaps the best-known performance-based law. GPRA requires agencies to develop strategic goals, which explain what results are expected from agencies' major functions and when to expect those results. Such goals are an outgrowth of the mission and are very often results, or outcome, oriented. GPRA also requires agencies to develop annual reports to Congress. These reports include (1) strategic plans, which define missions, establish results-oriented goals, and identify strategies for achieving goals; (2) performance plans, which articulate goals for the upcoming fiscal year that are aligned with long-term strategic goals; and (3) performance reports, which measure performance toward the achievement of the goals in annual performance plans. To be most useful, program managers should consider the reports developed in response to GPRA when they write the performance reports required by specific information technology (IT) and e-government laws discussed in this article.

Some of the first IT performance-based laws, focusing on the importance of using IT to improve government operations, were the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 (reauthorized in 1995), the Computer Security Act of 1987, and the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996. Congress recognized the growing importance of e-government in 1998 by enacting the Government Paperwork Elimination Act. It requires federal agencies to use IT in order to provide the public, when practicable, the option of submitting, maintaining, and disclosing required information electronically. The E-Government Act of 2002 includes promoting the use of the Internet and other IT to provide government services electronically; strengthening agency information security; and defining how to manage the federal government's growing IT personnel needs. In addition, this law established an Office of Electronic Government within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), to provide strong central leadership and full-time commitment to promoting and implementing IT and e-government.

Table 1. IT performance-based laws and purpose

IT law	Purpose
Computer Security Act of 1987 (CSA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the security and privacy of sensitive information in federal computer systems
Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (PRA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize the public's paperwork burdens • Coordinate federal information resources management • Improve dissemination of public information • Ensure the integrity of the federal statistical system
Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996 (CCA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve federal programs through improved acquisition, use, and disposal of information technology resources
Government Paperwork Elimination Act of 1998 (GPEA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require federal agencies to provide the public, when practicable, the option of submitting, maintaining, and disclosing required information electronically
Government Information Security Reform Act of 2001 (GISRA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directs federal agencies to conduct annual IT security reviews • Inspectors general (IGs) to perform annual independent evaluations of agency programs and systems and report results to OMB • OMB to (1) report annually to Congress on government wide progress and (2) issue guidance to agencies on reporting instructions and quantitative performance measures
E-Government Act of 2002 (E-Gov)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the use of the Internet and other IT to provide government services electronically • Strengthen agency information security • Define how to manage the federal government's growing IT human capital needs • Establish an Office of Electronic Government, within OMB, to provide strong central leadership and full-time commitment to promoting and implementing e-government
Federal Information Security Management Act of 2002 (FISMA). (FISMA is Title III of the E-Government Act and updates GISRA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lay out a framework for annual IT security reviews, reporting, and remediation planning • Streamline the government's information resources, close security gaps, and create more public-centered Web sites

LAWS FOR PERFORMANCE-BASED MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

GPRA—or “the Results Act”—is a key performance-based law for management and accountability. Prior to enactment of GPRA, policymaking, spending decisions, and oversight had been severely handicapped by a lack of (1) sufficiently precise program goals and (2) program performance and cost information. GPRA sought to remedy that situation by following private sector best practices, requiring agencies to set multiyear strategic goals and corresponding annual goals, to measure performance toward the achievement of those goals, and to report on progress made.

Digital, or e-government, is the use of IT and the Internet to transform federal agency effectiveness—including efficiency and service quality. Several U.S. laws contain IT and e-government performance-reporting requirements, including the Paperwork Reduction Act, the Computer Security Act, the Clinger-Cohen Act, the Government Information Security Reform Act (GISRA), and the E-Government Act. In instituting IT performance-based laws, Congress followed private sector best practices, as with GPRA, enabling agencies to more effectively manage IT requirements. Under IT performance-based laws, agencies are to better link technology plans and IT use to program missions and goals. To do this, agencies are to (1) involve senior executives in IT management decisions, (2) establish senior-level chief information officers (CIOs) who are to evaluate IT programs on the basis of applicable performance measurements, (3) impose much-needed discipline on technology spending, (4) redesign inefficient work processes,

and (5) use performance measures to assess the contribution of IT to the achievement of mission results. In addition, laws such as the Computer Security Act of 1987, as amended in 1996, address the importance of ensuring and improving the security and privacy of sensitive information in federal computer systems. IT performance-based laws, including purposes, are summarized in Table 1.

The Clinger-Cohen Act (CCA), like the acts discussed above, imposes rather detailed reporting requirements on federal agencies (Mullen, 2005a, 2005b, 2006). The CCA requires OMB to do the following:

- Issue directives to executive agencies concerning capital planning and investment control, revisions to mission-related and administrative processes, and information security
- Promote and improve the acquisition and use of IT through performance management
- Use the budget process to (1) analyze, track, and evaluate the risks and results of major agency capital investments in IT and information systems and (2) enforce accountability of agency heads
- Report to Congress on the agencies' progress and accomplishments

CCA also requires additional reports to Congress from OMB, agency heads, and GAO.

The Government Paperwork Elimination Act (GPEA) of 1998 authorizes OMB to provide for acquisition and use of alternative IT by federal agencies. Alternative IT includes (1)

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