Benchmarking Program Performance
The Role of Data Integration & Analytics

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INTRODUCTION

Benchmarking is key for quality assurance and program improvement. Programs can be meaningfully evaluated for their effectiveness in serving targeted groups by collecting data, comparing to previous service periods, and identifying opportunities to improve. Benchmarking satisfies mandates for greater efficiency and transparency and supports a cycle of continuous improvement.

INSIGHTS

While most organizations understand the value of data insights for improving the impact and efficiency of their programs, some resist transitioning to a benchmarking model due to fear of program disruption or lack of resources. While it may be relatively painless to continue with the status quo in the short term, programs that choose to "fly blind" will suffer without the data insights that recipient feedback and service benchmarking provide. With the data to back up their grant proposals, organizations can differentiate from competition, leading to expanded opportunities and greater program impact.
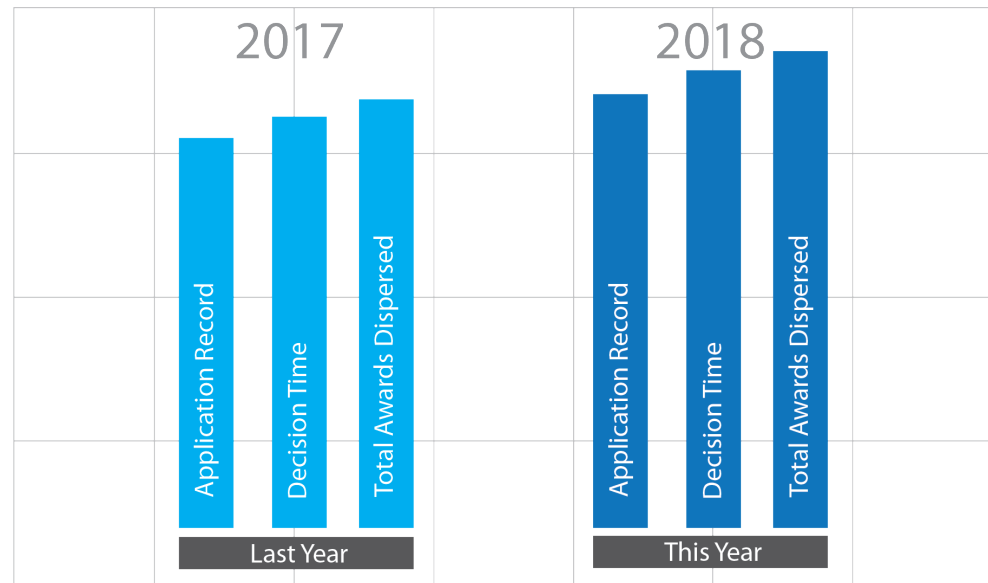
Among the most critical data insights for government programs are sign-up and participation rates, application review performance, and grant awards. Analyzing demographic data helps program managers understand who is applying and whether participation is increasing, decreasing, or remaining steady. Understanding review performance provides a more complete picture of overall average decision times for applications, as well as minimum and maximum times.
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By analyzing the different steps in the review process, managers can identify bottlenecks and reallocate resources as necessary. Insight about award rates, acceptance and rejection rates, and award amounts helps organizations refine their approach to grant applications and to build on successes.

Program Performance and Analytics (PPA) technology offers the ability to gather and analyze program data through cost-effective analytical tools. As electronic systems and devices replace manual applications, forms, and information storage, the ability to collect and analyze data becomes easier and more affordable. Sophisticated analytical tools are now available to enhance program performance management.

Having these insights helps pinpoint areas of improvement and impact. With the use of benchmarking, quantifiable data provides measurement of program components such as the ease of the application process, the turnaround time for reviewing applications, the average time for a review task, and the percentage of repeat applicants. Organizations can target improvements to leverage limited funding for the greatest impact, better serving recipients and satisfying program sponsors.

2017

Application Record
Decision Time
Total Awards Dispersed

Last Year

2018

Application Record
Decision Time
Total Awards Dispersed

This Year

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CHALLENGES

There are a number of challenges to program performance benchmarking. One of the greatest obstacles is a lack of resources. Keeping program overhead to a minimum means having a lean organization. Allocating essential resources to benchmarking efforts is not always an option. Another powerful barrier to benchmarking are processes that rely on paper applications and surveys. If your organization is still using paper to collect data, it is time to transition to online forms. *Read our paper on the benefits of digitizing paper forms.* As program processes become automated, obstacles to benchmarking are eliminated.

| Program Performance Roadblocks	Description
Limited Resources	Operational tasks for programs take priority over collecting benchmarking data. Without the ability to analyze program performance, an organization may be forced to continue to do what has been done before, without knowing whether the program is effective.
Paper Applications & Forms	Paper-based forms are cumbersome and expensive. Upgrading to electronic forms provides improved data quality, enhanced workflow and audit capabilities, better participant experiences, and cost savings.
Legacy IT Systems	Older technology can hamper analyzing performance because of the time and energy required to accomplish tasks that newer technology delivers quickly and seamlessly.
Scattered Data	Data residing in many different places must be located and consolidated before it can be analyzed. For programs with extensive history, the likelihood of incomplete data presents serious challenges.
Historical Data	Minor changes to programs year-to-year may result in a cumulative effect that makes aligning data more difficult, requiring extensive time and energy.

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Another major obstacle to measuring performance can be legacy IT systems and the absence of centralized data warehousing. When data is located on disparate systems, the task of bringing it together for analysis requires more time and effort, slowing the pace of improvement. Programs that have been running for a number of years generate historical data that may not align easily when attempting to benchmark.

In addition to infrastructure and process challenges, failure to define the benchmarking process in a structured and systematic manner can hamper analysis. If performance management is fundamentally reactive in nature, driven by a crisis or impending failure, the results do not deliver the impact of a well-planned PPA effort. Successful benchmarking requires a comprehensive understanding of critical success factors and subsequent measurement of those factors. The use of root cause analysis for performance issues and searching out and implementing best practices can maximize the impact of program enhancements.

SOLUTION

With these points in mind, the solution for improved performance lies in making benchmarking an underlying strategy in program design and a priority in program objectives. Benchmarking provides the efficiency and transparency needed to continuously improve and provide greater value for program participants.

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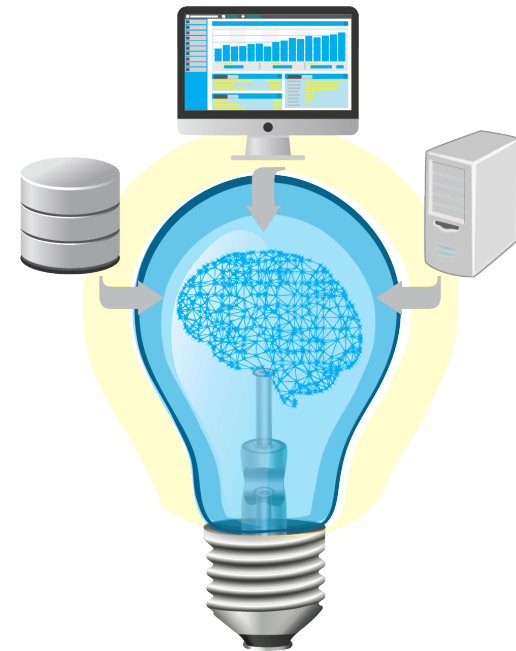
Demonstrating the value of program outcomes to government sponsors helps to secure follow-on grants. By incorporating benchmark capability into systems and processes, organizations are no longer locked into rigid repetition of previous efforts. Instead, they are free to innovate and evolve program offerings while ensuring comparability with prior results. The following table details several of the most important features for benchmarking solutions.

Benchmarking Feature	Description
Historical Data	Ability to integrate historical data so it can be analyzed against current data.
Workflow Definition	Ability to define steps in the program that are then tracked. Documents, information, and tasks are passed from one team member to another, according to a set of procedural rules.
Reports and Analytics	Visually appealing, easy-to-read charts and graphs that show program metrics and exception situations.

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BRITEPROGRAM PERFORMANCE ANALYTICS

WSI understands the full spectrum of government programs. Our philosophy is to help organizations realize continuous improvement through analytics designed to integrate with existing tools and processes. A mindset of continuous improvement permeates every aspect of our business: product design, the strategic approach of our program advisors, and even the way we run our helpdesk services.

When we implement our product, significant attention goes into integrating past program data to ensure comparability. We understand the value of this data for demonstrating quantifiable program improvement.
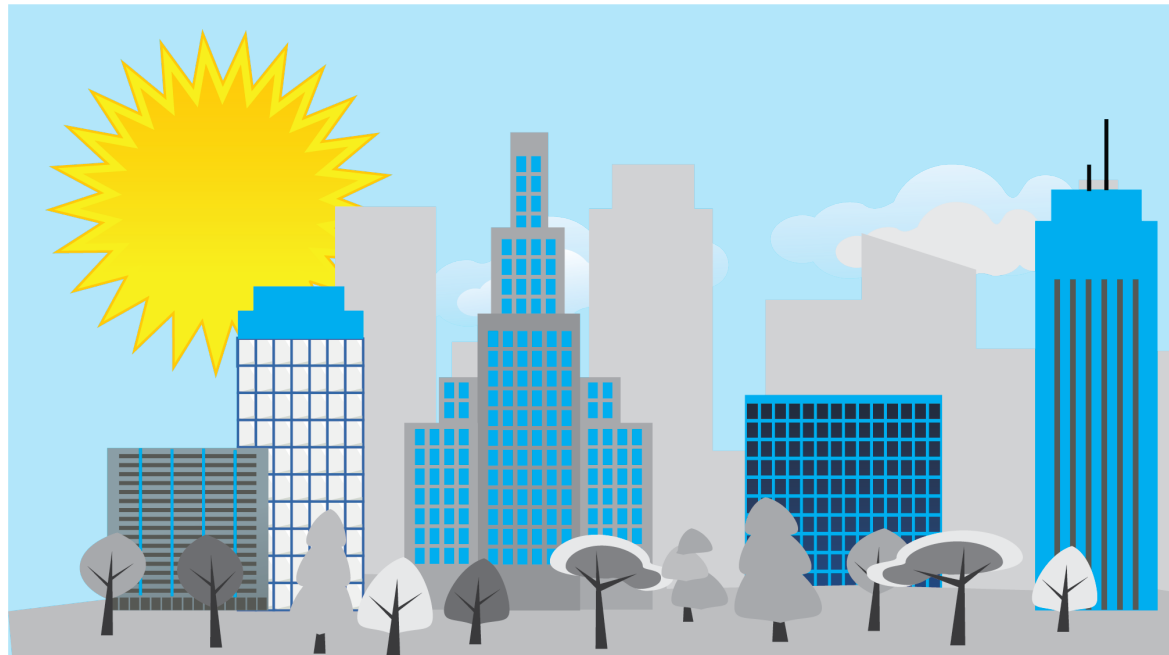
CONCLUSION

Programs can be meaningfully evaluated for their effectiveness in serving targeted groups by collecting data, comparing to previous service periods, and identifying opportunities to improve. Benchmarking satisfies mandates for greater efficiency and transparency and supports a cycle of continuous program improvement.

Better program results do not happen by chance. Plan on better results in 2018 by incorporating benchmarking analytics with current program delivery software or selecting new software so you have the data and analysis capabilities that support ongoing program improvement.

As more organizations compete to administer government programs, the need to measure program performance becomes critical to success. Without the ability to collect and evaluate performance data using benchmarks, organizations may struggle to pinpoint what is working and what needs to be improved. They may be forced to operate "in the dark" due to staffing limitations, continued use of paper forms, or reliance on outdated technology and data collection systems. Over time, these challenges to measuring program performance may jeopardize grant renewals and winning new grants.

If you are considering new technology, please give us a call. WSI offers clients flexible, user-friendly solutions for data collection and analysis. We'd love to learn more about your program objectives and discuss how we can assist.

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ABOUT WASHINGTON SOFTWARE (WSI)

WSI makes BriteProgram, an innovative software product that empowers governments and enterprises to achieve lasting benefits for program participants and their communities. The WSI brand stands for efficient results, proactive customer service, and technical excellence.

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