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Commentary: Quarterly reports would enhance performance, accountability

By PAUL R. LAWRENCE
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Throughout the fall campaign, both presidential candidates called for increased government performance, increased accountability, and elimination of ineffective programs.

Previous administrations have voiced similar goals and have made some, although modest, progress toward achieving those goals. The Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) pushed government toward pursuing performance goals by requiring agencies to develop and publish strategic plans and program plans and to report on their results.

The challenge for the next administration is to strengthen and speed up the trend toward performance management. While the Bush administration did develop a scorecard to rate agency progress in areas such as human resources, information technology and financial management, the scorecards were focused internally. They did not focus on government's external performance — how well government was delivering the performance it promised the public.

The next administration should consider requiring agencies to report quarterly on metrics about their performance related to delivering services to citizens. Such reports would be analogous to the quarterly reports companies issue to their shareholders, stock analysts, the media and the public. Publicly held companies present quarterly results and hold conference calls to discuss how they have done and answer questions about performance from analysts. These calls are open to the public and transcripts from the calls, often as podcasts, are available via the Internet. The issuance of corporate quarterly reports provides transparency that helps individuals judge the effectiveness of companies, which then affects individuals' decisions about buying or selling stock.

The goal of the quarterly government reports would be to increase agency focus on management and let taxpayers know who is accountable for agency results. Agencies could follow a similar process to that of publicly held companies:

- Announce the agencies' performance targets for which they wish to be held accountable at the start of the year.
- Present a quarterly report on how they are doing in achieving those targets.
- Hold conference calls to explain their performance results and to answer questions. Agencies might also hold Webcasts in which they present their quarterly reports. They also could unveil new or modified initiatives that affect citizens.

The Environmental Protection Agency has already developed a similar approach. Its EPASat Quarterly Report provides timely performance information on key EPA indicators. Managers within EPA use the

information to review results and deliver better environmental results to the public. The report complements the existing budget, performance and financial management tools that make up EPA's performance management system. All the reported activities are linked to outcome-oriented goals in EPA's 2006-2011 Strategic Plan. According to EPA, the quarterly report is "intended to improve efficiency, identify best practices and increase agency accountability."

By introducing quarterly agency performance reporting, the government could further its progress in management and performance. Clear, timely quarterly reporting from all agencies would identify which government programs are performing well and which are not. The reports should be written in plain English and clearly communicable to the public.

Such reports hold the promise of enhancing accountability for government performance. Properly done, this effort could position government as a leader in transparency and accountability.

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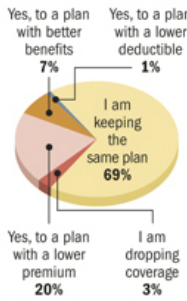


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