MONITORING IMPACT

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FOR LOCAL DATA INTERMEDIARIES

MARCH 2015

Jake Cowan
G. Thomas Kingsley
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are grateful to Director Kathy Pettit and Deputy Director Leah Hendey of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership for their double contribution: each reviewed and commented on multiple drafts of this guidebook, and their writing in other publications substantially informed its content and focus.

The Data Center, an NNIP Partner in New Orleans, LA, provided content in section 4 of this guidebook. Allison Plyer, Executive Director and Chief Demographer, wrote technical assistance protocols, and Denice Ross, formerly of the Data Center, wrote content on web monitoring techniques.

NNIP partners providing feedback on the review draft of this guidebook included Mark Abraham (New Haven, CT), Bob Gradeck (Pittsburgh, PA), Rebecca Hefner (Charlotte, NC), Sheila Martin (Portland, OR), Eleanor Tutt (St. Louis, MO), and Max Weselcouch (New York, NY). Scott Gaul of the Hartford Foundation also contributed valuable feedback.

NNIP partners who participated in a 2007 work group developed the initial content for this guidebook.

Copyright © 2015 by the Urban Institute.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.
# Table of Contents

**Section 1: Introduction**
- Local Data Intermediaries and NNIP ................................................................. 3
- This Guidebook ........................................................................................................... 4
- Structure ....................................................................................................................... 6

**Section 2: Framework**
- Why Implement Performance Management? .............................................................. 7
- The Goal of Local Data Intermediaries: Positive Influence ........................................... 9
- Approaches to Documentation and Monitoring .......................................................... 12
- What Needs to be Assessed: Types of Intermediary Activities ................................. 13

**Section 3: The Process Of Performance Management**
- The Management Context .......................................................................................... 18
- Getting Started ............................................................................................................. 19
- The Performance Management Process ................................................................. 20
- Regular Reviews of Performance Management Data ............................................... 22
- Roles in Performance Management .......................................................................... 23

**Section 4: Techniques for Monitoring impact**
- Website Analytics ....................................................................................................... 26
- Content Analysis ........................................................................................................... 32
- User Analytics ............................................................................................................. 35
- Surveys ......................................................................................................................... 41
- Collecting Data Through Meetings ........................................................................ 43
- Case Studies ............................................................................................................... 45
SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

This guidebook is written primarily for members of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) and other institutions that work as local data intermediaries. It outlines approaches and techniques for effectively monitoring the performance of their programs and activities. Organizations seeking to inform policies and action through data and community indicator projects will also find this guidebook valuable.

LOCAL DATA INTERMEDIARIES AND NNIP

Data intermediaries are organizations (or subunits within organizations) that help people find and use information to improve communities. Their activities may range from preparing analytic reports to inform discussions of the city council to working hands-on with grassroots groups, helping them collect and understand data to guide neighborhood improvement planning. These intermediaries build information systems containing data from multiple agencies on conditions and trends for small areas in their cities and regions. In many cases, the data pertain to blocks and individual land parcels at the neighborhood level.

Data intermediaries from more than 30 cities have joined to form NNIP, which is coordinated by the Urban Institute.1 Local NNIP partners include community foundations, university institutes, local governments, and other civic interest groups committed not only to building and operating neighborhood indicator systems, but also to advancing the state of the art in using data in the public interest. Working collaboratively with a range of other local organizations, NNIP partners are learning how to apply data in ways that can enhance the effectiveness of initiatives in many fields. They believe that data across topics at the neighborhood level can inform and motivate high-payoff applications in ways that would be impossible with single-topic or city-level data. Although much of their work addresses city- and metropolitan-wide issues, an NNIP partner gives priority to using data in ways that empower residents and organizations in low-income communities.2

---

1 See www.neighborhoodindicators.org for more information about the network and its partners.
2 More complete descriptions of NNIP and its work are found in Kingsley, Coulton, and Pettit (2014) and Kingsley and Pettit (2011).
Tracking changing neighborhood conditions is of obvious interest to civic leaders because it supports data-based decisionmaking. As a result, most local NNIP partners have been able to secure local funding to support their work, in many cases now for more than 15 years. However, local funders need to know, and can reasonably ask, “How do data intermediaries know their work is making a difference?”

NNIP partners and other data intermediaries can answer this question by carefully defining and measuring their performance and communicating their answers to their funders and constituents. This guidebook frames defining and measuring performance for local data intermediaries based on two key concepts: (1) impact through positive influence and (2) performance management.

What really marks the performance of data intermediaries—the way they create impact—is their influence. End outcomes (or results) such as improved housing conditions, young children better prepared to begin school, or reductions in the rates of teen pregnancy and crime represent commonly expected results from neighborhood improvement investments. Although NNIP partners contribute to such social change, they cannot be held accountable for achieving these results directly. Instead, data intermediaries provide data, analysis, and other data-related services with the aim of positively influencing the behavior of other local actors so they, in turn, can do a better job of achieving neighborhood improvement goals. The measure of success for NNIP partners, then, is having positive influence on outcomes. The work is successful when local actors, in response to the data and services NNIP intermediaries provide, have developed the capacity to use data and are making data-informed decisions on programs and policies to improve low-income neighborhoods.

How can NNIP partners enhance their influence? This guidebook suggests a performance management approach. Performance management can provide a framework for communicating to funders and other stakeholders an answer to the question “How do NNIP partners know their work is making a difference?” Successful performance management entails a deliberate effort to explicitly define the ways an organization is influential so that strategies can be adjusted and improved to help the organization serve its community more effectively. All NNIP partners monitor their own performance in some ways now. This guidebook suggests an approach to developing performance management that makes sense for NNIP partners and outlines ideas about how the approach can be implemented.
Performance measurement and management are normally commissioned and performed by the managers and staff of the agency responsible for implementing the program (Forsythe 2001). Performance measurement is conducted while the program is underway, typically using a broad array of output and interim outcome measures. It attempts to identify problems and opportunities as they emerge to serve as a basis for midcourse corrections.

A well-established body of methods and techniques is available for evaluating social programs in varying circumstances (Harrell et al. 1996). Performance management is usually conducted by program managers to effect short- and medium-term program improvements. Evaluations, in contrast, are generally commissioned by outside entities (funders or oversight bodies) and conducted consistent with the rigorous principles of the social sciences. Evaluations often occur after a program has been fully implemented; they attempt to measure changes in final outcomes to see how well the program has accomplished its goals.

Most institutions dealing with local policy issues need routine, ongoing performance measurement efforts integrated with periodic formal evaluations. Without sound ongoing performance monitoring, reconstructing enough information about the program’s history to support a good evaluation will be difficult, if not impossible. Because the data needed for both types of activities overlap, performance measurement and evaluation should be planned concurrently.

This guidebook is the starting point for performance management by NNIP partners and data intermediaries. Although evaluation should be a part of the agenda of local data intermediaries, it is not in the purview of this guidebook, which focuses on performance management techniques that can be implemented with little or no external assistance. The guidebook provides key advice and steps for getting started when performance monitoring is new to the organization as well as techniques that emphasize adapting and expanding monitoring activities already in place.

---

3 Harkness (2014) recognizes that although foundations that have funded community programs have often invested in outside evaluations, they have invested little in building the data-handling capacity of their grantees to conduct effective planning and performance management. She stresses the importance of expanding this type of investment in the future.

4 For further discussion of the differences between performance management and evaluation, see Walker and Moore (2011) and Auspos and Kubisch (2012).
NNIP partners, other data intermediaries, government innovation offices, open data organizations, and the civic innovation and civic technology community are invited to use this guidebook and participate in advancing the practice of performance management in the field of community information. The authors anticipate that NNIP partners will, in adopting performance management practices, create new techniques and tools that will be valuable to the goal of demonstrating positive influence.

**STRUCTURE**

This guidebook has two purposes. The first is to provide a conceptually clear framework to explain what it means to assess the performance of NNIP partners and other local data intermediaries. What exactly are these organizations trying to do, and what needs to be measured to assess whether they are achieving their goals?

The second purpose is to identify and explain the basics of techniques that NNIP partners and other intermediaries can use to document, measure, and assess their performance. Our purpose is to introduce these techniques and draw connections between the measurement approaches and local data intermediary functions. In most cases, the measurement approaches described in this guidebook are ready to use off-the-shelf. Additional resources on the measurement techniques are referenced.

The guidebook has four sections. Section 2 offers a framework that begins by giving more background on key concepts: the relationship between performance management and the intermediary goal of influence. It then introduces ideas about how influence can be measured for different types of tasks data intermediaries perform.

Section 3 offers suggestions about the overall process of performance management for data intermediaries. Finally, section 4 describes monitoring techniques for documenting and measuring influence in data intermediary work.
WHY IMPLEMENT PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT?

Implementing performance management requires an investment of staff time and expertise. Prioritizing this effort in a resource-constrained environment can be difficult, but it is essential work that builds internal capacity and makes stronger connections with partners. And in many cases these measurement techniques are already being applied in day-to-day work for specific programs, often related to reporting requirements by funders.

Performance management can result in improvements as simple as adding new measures to a community indicators report based on changing local priorities, developing new training programs based on user feedback and analysis of ad hoc data requests, or reaching out to a new set of stakeholders that has not been involved in deliberations about an important community issue. The following two subsections describe the internal and external benefits resulting from the time investment in performance management activities.

**Internal Benefits of Performance Management**

Common language and shared understanding. Performance management helps create a shared understanding of program goals and activities across an organization’s staff and board through the sharing of data collected about programs and activities using performance measurement techniques. Best practice is to review performance data in regular management meetings and make them transparent and accessible throughout the organization. This practice helps create clear expectations for each program and activity area that staff can use in their management, and it also helps them to understand clearly how their work supports the rest of the organization.

Program planning and improvement. Performance management provides regular information about how a program is working, what needs to be continued and enhanced, and what needs to change. Performance management produces a record of recent and past activities that can be easily referenced when planning, implementing, and making decisions about new work. Knowing what activities have been tried in the past, what worked, and what needs to change are key benefits of implementing performance measurement techniques. These data create
opportunities for local data intermediaries to make adjustments that will extend influence and increase effectiveness in the present and lead to better results in future evaluations.

Development and justification of budget needs. In addition to informing program planning, performance management data can be used to develop and justify budget needs. Data that explain the level of use of intermediary services can be used to inform future projections of need for the service in the budget. In addition, performance data on the effectiveness and value of the service can help justify the investment with decisionmakers.

Identification of staff training needs. Performance data can reveal areas in which improvements are needed, which may also suggest needs for training or professional development for staff. For example, performance data that reveal a new community priority may suggest the need for building capacity among staff to provide technical assistance to support work on the new issues. Similarly, if performance data reveal areas in which intermediary services are not used as expected or are poorly rated, training and professional development may be solutions for making improvements in subsequent performance data reports.

**External Benefits of Performance Management**

Improved community impact. Performance data can also be used to improve the impact of the intermediary in the community. Performance data describe the importance of local data intermediary work: what the work is, what it is accomplishing, and why it is valuable to the community. Performance data make for good public relations! They help external partners, particularly funders, better understand the activities of local data intermediary work, and they create opportunities for new partners to engage. In addition, funders are increasingly expecting their grantees and contractors to provide evidence of their results. Performance management data provide local intermediaries with a tool for reporting data to funders, and it also signals to funders that the organization is investing in management tools that improve effectiveness. Such communication puts local data intermediaries in a stronger position to compete for resources, as organizations consistently managing toward higher levels of performance are more likely to get funded than those that do not.

Regular data for communication and reporting. Enhanced access to management data is another key benefit of performance management. Like most organizations, local data intermediaries are constantly faced with reporting and communication requests and requirements. Performance measurement techniques produce regular data that can be used for these purposes.
Strengthened credibility. Local data intermediaries can also use performance data to reinforce transparency and objectivity with external stakeholders. Sharing performance data externally creates opportunities for partners to better understand the work of local data intermediaries and find ways for them to support or participate in activities. Data sharing creates opportunities for new collaborations that extend the influence of local data intermediaries.

The theme that emerges from these internal and external benefits of performance management is that generating and sharing performance data improve program effectiveness while increasing knowledge and understanding about local data intermediary activities across internal and external stakeholders. The performance management techniques described in this guidebook may be new to some organizations, but most cannot afford to miss the benefit of using them. Performance management is a powerful and essential tool for the maintenance and growth of local data intermediaries.

THE GOAL OF LOCAL DATA INTERMEDIARIES: POSITIVE INFLUENCE

Before we can examine the influence of local data intermediaries, we must first be clear about the intermediaries’ goals. Following the approach suggested by Reisman et al. (2004), we recognize that, as pointed out in section 1, data intermediaries are not the kinds of organizations that try to affect final outcomes directly; that is, they do not provide workforce training, build shelters, or operate childcare facilities. Rather, the goal of these organizations is to provide objective information and facilitate its use in ways that will influence the behavior of other institutions and individuals whose purpose is, in turn, to directly affect final outcomes. The type of influence sought is influence that creates positive changes in communities. In other words, simply assembling data is not enough. Data intermediaries ensure that community information is analyzed and applied in ways that ultimately lead to changes in someone else’s behavior that result in improvements in the quality of life in the communities they serve. That is the test.

Data intermediaries seek two types of influence. The first is influence that causes a direct behavior change. Examples of this type of influence could include:

- Analyzing the relationship between the locations of crimes and vacant housing to help community policing programs geographically target their efforts more effectively and address contextual factors;
• Providing information on recent home sales to housing investors in order to develop housing strategies that work to both improve the quality of housing and limit the ability of "slumlords" to purchase property; and
• Developing a report on recent trends in social and economic conditions in a neighborhood and working with residents to assist them in setting their programming and advocacy improvement priorities and building their capacity to use the trend data on an ongoing basis.

The second type of influence causes a mind-set change. A mind-set change reflects a change in position that enables action. For example, the intermediary issues a report that causes the public and key policymakers to be more aware of an issue (e.g., the loss of affordable housing) such that they are more prone to change their behavior relative to that issue in the future (e.g., they may support expanding the budget for housing programs).

The theory of change approach is also relevant for assessing the performance of data intermediaries. The effects of their work often occur through a sequence of mind-set and behavior changes that result in changes in final outcomes. Figure 1 shows an example adapted from a “so-that” chain presented in Reisman et al. (2004) showing how a series of changes can work.

As they develop their strategies, data intermediary managers should think through similar so-that chains to be sure they make sense before they act. These chains can provide guidance as to what changes in mind-set and behavior are to be expected and these changes, in turn, can be documented and monitored in performance monitoring and eventually in evaluation.
Figure 1.

So that chain of excessive tax preparation costs.

Strategy

- Provide data and analysis on the amount of money low-income families and individuals pay to the tax preparation industry for tax preparation and how this reduces the benefits they receive from the Earned Income Tax Credit and other tax credits.

So That

- Public awareness of the issue increases (*mind-set change, an influence outcome*).

So That

- Policymakers increase knowledge of and interest in the issue after meeting with the data intermediary to review research findings (*mind-set change, an influence outcome*).

So That

- Policies are changed to require the tax industry to provide appropriate disclosures (*behavior change, an influence outcome*).

So That

- Families have increased ability to make choices (*a final outcome*).

So That

- Families retain more cash to meet their needs and increase their assets (*a final outcome*).

Source: Adapted from Reisman et al. (2004).
APPROPRIATE TO DOCUMENTATION AND MONITORING

Too often in the past, agencies have counted their outputs but neglected the resulting outcomes. In contrast to this practice, an increasing emphasis is being placed on a “results orientation” in performance monitoring [see for example, Friedman (2005)]. In some cases, particularly in complex initiatives, program outputs that managers think are beneficial do not adequately contribute to the final outcomes the program designers had in mind.

Certainly, outcomes ought to be directly measured and cause-and-effect chains clarified to the extent possible. This emphasis does not mean, however, that managers should give up on counting outputs. Good data on outputs are still essential to reasonable interpretation. These include activities such as posting data to your web site, sending out an e-newsletter, creating reports and briefs and making community presentations. Sometimes (again, particularly in complex initiatives) reliably measuring the impact of a specific program on a desired set of outcomes proves difficult or impossible. In these cases, output data may be all you have to demonstrate your agency’s accountability.

For local data intermediaries, the necessity of measuring both outputs and outcomes becomes clear when considering the four stages (listed below) in the process of reaching the general goal of influence that positively impacts quality of life in communities. And to understand performance, certain outputs must be measured or documented at each stage, and the chain must be followed to the subsequent results.

- Information reaches intended users. The target audience has found and accessed information. Example evidence could include the number of press releases and media hits; number of visitors to the website; or number of signups for an e-newsletter.
- Users interact with the information. In this stage, the target audience is engaged with using data in their work. Example evidence could include website statistics indicating duration of audience engagement with content; government agencies and civic partners discussing data in meetings; neighborhood groups publishing data through the distribution channels; or number of technical assistance requests or participants in training.
- Users adopt a new or changed mind-set. In the third stage, the target audience has used information from the data intermediary to better understand the nature of a problem or how policies and programs can improve community conditions. Example evidence
could include general population and/or specific groups changing support for policies or programs addressed by the data intermediary’s analysis; or neighborhood groups or training participants having a new understanding of the drivers, or spatial patterns of a community issue.

- **Users take action.** In the fourth stage, the target audience has used information to take action. Example evidence could include decisionmakers providing new funds or shifting existing funds (federal, state, or local government; philanthropic) to support policies or programs informed by the data; neighborhood plans and priorities informed by data are changed; technical assistance recipients or training participants using data to develop program strategies and tactics; new partners connecting and agreeing to work together based on common interests identified through working with data; or government agencies making data-informed policy changes.

**WHAT NEEDS TO BE ASSESSED: TYPES OF INTERMEDIARY ACTIVITIES**

The local partners in NNIP perform a wide mix of activities in fulfilling their missions. The components of the work need to be understood in order to determine the most effective approaches to monitoring influence for each one. A starting point before undertaking any data intermediary activities should be defining an intended audience. Staff at nonprofit organizations, local government leadership and staff, community residents, and other policy organizations all may represent potential users for data-oriented projects. To reach the target audience, NNIP partner organizations engage in three main activities: they (1) assemble and transform data; (2) democratize data and apply them for impact; and (3) use data to strengthen civic capacity and governance. These activities are described in the three subsections below.

**Assemble and Transform Data**

NNIP partners recurrently collect neighborhood data across many domains. Partners access raw administrative data from multiple local agencies through data-sharing agreements or open-data portals. They build and maintain the data holdings over time in response to local priorities and the overall mission of the partner organization. The partners clean the data and translate

---

5 For more detail see chapter 2 of Kingsley, Coulton, and Pettit (2014) and Kingsley, Pettit, and Hendey (2013).
them into forms that are easier to use and more directly applicable to program planning and policymaking.

This activity serves as part of the information infrastructure in a community and provides the foundation for the other two activities. Performance measures for this type of work include whether the data collected reflect the breadth of neighborhood conditions and are timely and relevant for the target audiences. It also includes measures of data and analytic quality.

**Democratize and Apply Data**

An NNIP partner’s most important activity is to apply the data to address local community issues, with a particular focus on the opportunities and needs of distressed neighborhoods. A basic function of all NNIP partners is to make the raw data they have assembled and transformed available to the public in a manner that is easy to understand and use. Some of the key dissemination activities of this work include the following:

- Most commonly, data intermediaries release data directly to the public over one or more websites in different forms. Often their websites have a section on “neighborhood profiles” where users can select a specific neighborhood and then access recent and historical data (in the form of maps, charts, and tables) on specific conditions.
- Data intermediaries sometimes share their underlying datasets (on specific topics or for specific communities) with local planners and researchers in ways that are consistent with any agency data-sharing agreements. This data sharing may include providing structured data files for download.
- Some NNIP partners also develop community indicator projects that include preparing reports on indicators of neighborhood well-being in their cities and fostering a broader conversation about monitoring trends and setting priorities.
- They often prepare special reports as new information becomes available. These reports may take the form of brief data updates (accompanied by news releases) on specific topics with some interpretation.

These data intermediary activities create positive influence through connecting users with information they can use to create positive outcomes in the communities and policy areas in which they work. Data collection is typically done with multiple audiences in mind. For the purposes of monitoring influence, if the data are topical, such as on affordable housing, you may narrowly define your intended audience as nonprofits, policymakers, and other
stakeholders working on affordable housing. For a data brief on a specific neighborhood, the audience may include stakeholders in the neighborhood from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors; residents; and citywide leaders. Follow these users along a so-that chain to identify the mind-set changes and actions that can be associated with users if the information reaches them. If these defined users (e.g., stakeholders in affordable housing policy) are reached, their awareness and knowledge will increase and the data intermediary will have achieved a positive influence on community outcomes.

In addition to defining users for each product (web profiles, policy or data briefs, indicator reports, other data products), targets should be set for each user group. These targets can be used to monitor and measure the influence of intermediary products. For a data brief on affordable housing, for example, how many housing advocates, policymakers, and funders were reached? How much do website visits increase after a presentation to an affordable housing audience?

After a data intermediary implements this approach for the first time, staff can use subsequent measurements to track increases or decreases from the established baseline, as well as to adjust targets in future years.

NNIP partners often work actively with individual neighborhood associations, community development corporations, other nonprofits, and government agencies in helping to apply their data in support of comprehensive community improvement initiatives, including planning, implementation, and subsequent evaluation. They are also frequently asked to undertake studies of specific topics relevant to policy for citywide or metropolitan-wide entities, such as the mayor’s office or city council, specific local or state agencies, and civic leadership groups like United Way or community foundations. Unlike the simple provision of data, these studies require interpretation and analysis.

In response to some requests for data development and analysis, the NNIP partners do much of the work themselves and present their findings to those that commissioned the work. But many times, they coach their clients to engage directly with the data so the clients can develop their own findings and conclusions and a sense of ownership for the final products.

NNIP partners also catalyze new collaborations. In releasing new data and helping local organizations with program planning, NNIP partners bring groups together from across sectors to review data that also cut across sectors. As a result, groups find new ways to collaborate and partner on the basis of shared interests revealed in the data.
When performing these functions, data intermediaries can monitor and measure their influence. Performance management data can provide evidence, for example, of whether users are engaged with using data. Users include stakeholders directly involved in the work, as well as the stakeholders the work is intended to influence. For example, in working with a group of parents to analyze student achievement and community indicators for the neighborhood school, the user group might include the parents as well as teachers, school administrators, and elected officials. Are each of these groups of users engaged with using the data products created through the project? Are they seeking assistance with interpreting them and applying them in their work? Are they actively discussing and using data as evidence in planning or decisionmaking discussions? Are the data referenced or attached to meeting reports generated by stakeholders? The monitoring techniques described in section 4 outline approaches for documenting answers to these influence questions.

When engaging directly with other organizations and interests as part of a community improvement initiative, NNIP partners can also positively influence the behavior of their collaborators on the initiative. As with policy reports, the information produced by a data intermediary often sheds new light on areas of interest and concern to communities. Performance monitoring techniques can provide evidence for whether users adopt a new or changed mind-set or take action as a result of working with the data and collaborating with data intermediaries.

**Use Data to Strengthen Civic Capacity and Governance**

NNIP partners enhance the capacities of stakeholder groups to use data through their interactions with stakeholders (as described above) and by providing training and technical assistance services. The work to apply data for action should enhance the capacity of local institutions to understand and use data. But some audiences, including community groups, staffs of nonprofit agencies, government employees, and others who want to learn about their cities in more depth and about how to use data to accomplish their own missions more effectively may benefit from direct training and technical assistance. Training on data sources, uses of data, and data portals may be provided as part of this work.

Training may be designed for a particular neighborhood, a particular set of content experts, or for practitioners seeking skills in accessing and using data. Training registration can be monitored to determine if marketing and promotional activities can be adapted to attract the intended audience. Another important influence measure tied to training is whether the people
participating in your data training are engaged with the content you provide. Are they actively discussing using their new skills in their work? Can a posttraining conversation identify uses or applications of skills developed in training? Is there evidence of users adopting a new or changed mind-set or changing their behavior? Performance data about training can also be used to understand the demand for future training programs.

Defining a targeted set of users and monitoring to what extent those users are reached is a key component of managing the performance of technical assistance activities. Some requests for technical assistance may represent target audiences such as nonprofits and government, but other requests might come from private-sector companies not conducting mission-oriented work or from university students not in the targeted user group. If not carefully managed, these requests can drain resources from the intended users for technical assistance resources.
SECTION 3: THE PROCESS OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

THE MANAGEMENT CONTEXT

Almost all organizations (including NNIP partners and other data intermediaries) manage their work via a process that entails four basic management tasks, as outlined in figure 2.

Figure 2.
Management cycle.

1. Establish desired goals
2. Develop a strategy (and more detailed plans) for achieving goals based on lessons learned
3. Implement the strategy and plans
4. Monitor performance and make in-course corrections to strategies and plans for achieving goals based on lessons learned

The fourth task represents the basic concept of performance management. As noted in section 1, all NNIP partners already undertake this activity in some form (although in some cases it is done informally, occurs in other contexts such as communications, or goes by other names such as storytelling, end of project reviews, or measuring impact). This guidebook, therefore, is not advocating that NNIP partners take on something totally new. Rather, we suggest that if data

6Learned by way of the authors’ regular work with NNIP partners since the late 1990s.
intermediaries want to achieve their goal (i.e., if they want greater impact through positive influence), then most of them need to conduct the performance management task in a more regular, thorough, and systematic manner.

Actually, we do not recommend that only the performance management task be addressed. Achieving maximum influence is likely to require similar improvements in the conduct of the other three basic management tasks. Although this guidebook focuses on improvements to performance management, we recognize the need to work with NNIP partners to develop similar advice on conducting the other management tasks more effectively in the data intermediary context. Interested staff at data intermediaries can draw on resources NNIP partners have recently begun to use, such business model planning tools.7

The four management tasks represent a continuous feedback loop. Performance data inform adjustments to goals, strategies, and implementation tactics in tasks one to three. In turn, performance management techniques evolve continuously in response to these adjustments. The overall goal should be to work toward systematically aligning intermediary goals and strategies with output and outcomes measures.

Conducting performance management in a manner that is more regular, thorough, and systematic may require a culture shift for some organizations. Laying the groundwork for this commitment must be done carefully and sensitively. Some agencies will begin the discussion at a regular management or staff meeting; others will call a special meeting with staff on the topic (it may be appropriate for some board members to participate). The benefits of a more formal approach to performance management and the other management tasks, and how they help support each facet of the work of data intermediaries, should be outlined and made clear. Most preliminary discussions, for example, will draw on the internal and external benefits of performance management noted in section 2. A clear value proposition for increasing the organization’s attention to performance management that is understood and invested in across the organization will provide a solid foundation for change.

GETTING STARTED

Most new performance management processes don’t start at scale. They start with a small step such as testing performance management with one program and one technique to build

---

7 See http://businessmodelgeneration.com/canvas/bmc.
organizational awareness and culture. Starting small provides an opportunity to test the process internally, calibrate which team members will be involved in the work, what formats reports with performance data should take, and which current or new regular meetings are best suited for discussions. Starting with one or two programs or activities also decreases the likelihood that performance management will be viewed as a burden. If performance measurement is ramped up methodically over time, when it is at full scale it will already be a normal and regular approach for conducting business whose value is understood.

Selecting a starting point—that is, choosing which activities to measure first—can be challenging if performance management is new. One approach is to start with a program or activity that relates to key intermediary priorities. Internally, is there a program or initiative that has major questions associated with it that performance monitoring techniques can help inform? Externally, where will applied performance monitoring practice and data help build relationships with key partners or funders? By selecting a starting point that is connected to a current organizational priority, the value of performance management is reinforced early.

A specific way to start with performance management at a small scale is to select an ongoing program or a recent one-time project for review. At the next team or management meeting, ask the staff to identify the program’s objectives. Ask if they think objectives were achieved (pre- and postretrospective) and how they would create measures to support their observations. Asking such questions is a simple way to introduce the notion of discussing “how are we doing?” The resulting discussion serves as a starting point for layering on more performance management activities and making these discussions regular. Although performance management is most effective when integrated with regular management processes (see below), it is more important to get started, even when initial discussions are brief and informal.

THE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

Most organizations manage their operations through a series of meetings in which they perform all four of the management tasks. As figure 2 suggests, some of those meetings must be devoted to steps one, two, and three (clarifying goals, designing a strategy and planned activities, and implementing the plan to achieve the selected goals, respectively) before moving on to develop a more formal performance management process.

Once goals and strategies have been developed and the implementation structure has been defined, the performance management task can be developed. The starting point for this step is
identifying specific indicators by which you will measure the success of each activity you have undertaken as a part of your strategy.

Approaches will differ depending on the nature of the activity at hand. Some activities of NNIP partners are regular and continuing, such as the recurrent updating and release of neighborhood statistical profiles and maps. In these cases, the performance measures selected can be monitored regularly over the long term. Most activities of NNIP partners, however, are projects or initiatives that occur during a fixed interval, such as coaching a neighborhood group on using data to prepare a quality-of-life plan or developing a special report on the adequacy of child care facilities in neighborhoods across the city. In these instances, you need to measure the influence of the initiative only for a relatively short period. In the latter case, for example, performance measures might be needed for only a few months after the report has been released.

At any particular point in time, then, the organization’s performance management program will involve monitoring some metrics for ongoing activities on an ongoing basis, and other metrics whose duration depends on the particular set of initiatives that are underway.

Selecting the best success measures will be challenging. First, for any activity, it may be necessary to select a cluster of measures, rather than just one. A cluster could include, for example, measures that show the extent to which information has reached the users, the extent to which they are engaged with using data, the extent to which the activity has changed their mind-set, and the extent to which they have taken new actions based on what they have learned.

Second, just thinking through what indicator would be ideal in each case will not be sufficient. It will be necessary to consider exactly how the indicator can be measured on a regular basis. Some techniques may yield a useful indicator at a low cost (e.g., the number of website visits), but for others the cost can be high (e.g., if a special survey is required). A budget for measurement must be considered. When measurement costs are very high, it may be necessary to use a proxy measure instead of a metric that is conceptually more ideal. Over time, the indicators selected need to be reconsidered and updated to keep pace with changes in goals and strategies. The six basic measurement techniques (which are explained and illustrated in section 4) are as follows:

1. Website analytics
2. Content analysis
3. User analytics
4. Surveys
5. Collecting Data Through Meetings
6. Case studies

**REGULAR REVIEWS OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT DATA**

When the indicators have been selected and the measurement systems are in place, performance management then requires a series of regularly recurring management review meetings. Prior to these meetings, staff need to update the data and prepare analyses assessing trends for each measure and the implications of these trends. These data and analyses are then reviewed and discussed explicitly in the regular meetings with all relevant managers and staff.

A point that cannot be emphasized too strongly is that these reviews must be built into the organization’s regular management tasks rather than being held separately. Most organizations hold regular management meetings with the primary purpose of assessing how their situation has changed and considering their next steps; they revise their plans and strategies as appropriate to address an updated view of their problems and opportunities. The new evidence collected as a part of the performance management system can become the most important basis for these reassessments.

The usefulness of the performance management data to the reassessment process implies that the meeting in which the performance management review takes place should not be devoted to handing out praise or blame for performance results. Rather, it should focus on using the data as the basis for creative thought about what is working, what is not, and why (explicitly referencing and possibly amending the organization’s strategy and theory of change as appropriate), and then making midcourse corrections to the plan of action based on that analysis. Because the work of data intermediaries often evolves as it is being performed, indicators may vary significantly from initial targets. Careful attention must be paid to ensuring that the focus remains on using performance data to improve, including, when necessary, resetting indicators to appropriate levels. Thoughtful analysis of shifting indicators and their appropriate measures requires creative dialogue. These discussions contribute to building a culture of learning in organizations. Public-sector performance management has in fact been criticized for not devoting enough time to the innovative thought that is needed to improve program plans (Poister 2010, p. 246).
Management review meetings that assess performance management data should probably take place on a monthly basis in most organizations. This does not imply thorough reviews of all activities every month. In general, the meetings would begin with a summary review of how all the organization’s performance measures have changed since the last meeting, followed by a more thorough analysis and replanning for a few selected topics that warrant the highest priority. Examples of questions to guide the analysis and interpretation of performance data in regular review meetings include the following:

- What are we doing well? Why?
- What are we not doing well? Why?
- What has happened with the program or activity being measured? How have indicators changed since the last measurement period (increase, decrease, or the same)? How do these recent measures compare to the last quarter and year?
- Were these results expected? Are there surprises in the data?
- What can we do to improve the results?
- Are there differences in outcomes for different users?
- Are we using the right measurement techniques?

**ROLES IN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT**

**Staff**

Performance management is a total team effort. In the most effective teams, leaders strongly support and endorse performance management, and staff from across the organization have roles in producing, reviewing, and making decisions based on performance data as part of their regular management tasks. Performance management is a process that embraces transparency and cannot achieve its fullest potential when it is managed tightly by just one or two staff members (unless one or two is the size of your staff!).

When implementing performance management, involve multiple staff members from the beginning in selecting metrics and producing and reviewing the data both internally and externally. Building familiarity and capacity across staff will aid in the work to apply performance monitoring techniques across the organization’s functions and programs. Staff should also be included early in the planning for performance management so that expectations about how performance data will be used are collaboratively developed and clearly understood. Staff
may be reluctant to set ambitious targets for outcomes, for example, if they perceive negative consequences if those targets are not achieved.

If performance management is not seen as valuable and prioritized, there will always be something more important to do. Many well-intentioned performance management processes are short lived when value is not established. Including organizational leaders in performance management sends a clear signal that performance management is a priority.

**Partners**

Performance data provide a tool for engaging partners such as the organization’s board and key local leaders in the core work of data intermediaries and developing their understanding of how the work creates positive influence locally. Moreover, boards frequently look for data to support their understanding of the work of the organizations they serve. With a stronger understanding of why the performance data matter and how they contribute to positive influence, leaders and partners are more engaged in shaping and supporting the work of data intermediaries.

**Funders**

Funders also expect their grantees to demonstrate why their work matters and why it should continue to receive funding. When performance management techniques are implemented across programs and activities, funders will see more clearly that NNIP partners and data intermediaries are evidenced based in delivering programs and services. With better data and evidence describing what they are investing in, program officers at foundations will be able to make a stronger case with their own boards for funding data intermediary work.

**Users**

Local stakeholders and users are also a key audience for performance data. Often they are also partners in generating performance data as the users of data intermediary products and services. Consider sharing performance data with local stakeholders and users as thought partners and collaborators who may have input into how to improve performance, assess priorities, and create influence.
SECTION 4: TECHNIQUES FOR MONITORING IMPACT

Successful performance management efforts by data intermediaries spark conversations that improve programs and activities, demonstrate positive influence, and engage stakeholders. Most NNIP partners and data intermediaries already have existing capacities to do performance management work, particularly the technical work to create measures. A danger in performance management is focusing too much on easily measured indicators such as number of website visits or technical assistance requests. Although these measures are important building blocks in the so-that chains described in section 2, they are insufficient to demonstrate data intermediaries’ breadth of influence. It is just as important to capture the stories generated through qualitative data collection techniques, a process that often requires documenting outcomes more difficult to measure.

This section suggests six monitoring techniques that capture the breadth of influence data intermediaries seek to have. Each technique can be used to measure the types of influence of the data intermediary activities outlined in section 2. The many techniques available to document influence are adaptable to fit the capacity of intermediary organizations of different sizes. The general literature also provides useful suggestions on these topics. The techniques (see below), which reflect both formal and ad hoc approaches, often contain a mix of qualitative and quantitative information.

1. Website analytics
2. Content analysis
3. User analytics
4. Surveys
5. Collecting Data Through Meetings
6. Case studies

These suggestions are starting points. The practice of performance management among NNIP partners and data intermediaries is still being developed, and we expect other valuable techniques are already in use. This guidebook will help to grow the practice of performance management among NNIP partners and data intermediaries and ultimately generate additional techniques, as well as more examples of the techniques outlined in the following subsections.
WEBSITE ANALYTICS

Website analysis is both a science and an art. It is relatively low cost to implement and use, but it can be challenging to interpret accurately. The techniques in this section present a sampling of types of data that can be gathered about a website and the strengths and limitations of those data. Data intermediary organizations can use these data to answer the following questions:

1. How much is your site used?
2. Does the site reach intended users?
3. Are users engaged with your site?

1. How Much Is Your Site Used?

Watching traffic to your website build over time is satisfying, but increased traffic often generates more questions than answers. A growth in numbers is only one component of monitoring influence. It can even be misleading, as high traffic counts on the wrong pages are not measures of positive influence. However, website traffic is the best place to start when considering whether the site is accomplishing its mission. The key to success in interpreting website analytics is using multiple indicators. Here are some common website analytics that are also valid measures of whether information is reaching users:

- Monthly unique visitors is a measure of how many unique computers accessed your site. For example, one person accessing from home and work would count as two unique visitors, but five people accessing from a shared computer would count as only one unique visitor. Despite this imprecision, monthly unique visitors generates a more stable number than another common measure, number of page views.

- Number of page views is a raw measure of website usage that reflects how many times pages on your site have been requested. A single visitor could refresh the same page 100 times, resulting in 100 page views. Equally, 100 people could access the home page and then leave, also resulting in 100 page views. One visitor accessing 100 different pages would also result in 100 page views.

In a given hour, a spike in page views accompanied by a comparatively small number of hourly unique visitors could indicate that your site had a particularly industrious (or merely click-happy) visitor. Viewing the most popular pages for that hour could give insight into what content interested the visitor(s) in question. Spikes in page views could
also indicate that a class of grade school students, for example, has found your website, or a link was shared via social media. Look deeper at other web statistics to interpret this measure. Look at what domains were accessing your site during the spike for clues to their origins.

- Most popular pages are the web pages that get viewed the most often. This number can quickly become inflated for a page that is a high-traffic area (the website equivalent of a hallway) linking to major sections within the website. If a visitor comes to a page, clicks a link on that page, then hits the back button, that page will have two page views. Nevertheless, the most popular pages metric is the most robust measure for determining which sections of the website (and thus which content) receive the most traffic. If you know which sections of your website receive the most traffic, you can prioritize new content development to those areas. For example, if you are phasing in new content on neighborhood pages, start with the most viewed neighborhoods (as determined from the most popular pages metric). The most popular page metric also reveals which pages are not popular. If an important page is not popular, the page’s link could be poorly named or insufficiently visible on the page, or visitors may be uninterested in that content.

- Downloads are files that are not web pages, but rather PDFs, Excel spreadsheets, or other formats of documents that fulfill a user’s objective on the website. Depending on the content, the most commonly downloaded documents or data files can give insight into which geographic area or types of indicators your audience is using most.

How To Get Website Statistics

An immediate barrier for many people reading this section is not knowing how to access the recommended website statistics. Contact the person or organization that hosts your website(s) for information on how to access these statistics.

If the statistics available are not at the level of detail you need, various free and fee-based web statistics services are available to improve your setup. Google Analytics is just one of a number of widely used and heavily documented services available. A simple web search will produce options, reviews, and how-to guides for these services.
Web statistics provide formal and informal options for documenting influence at varying degrees of rigor. Some web statistics services provide automated, detailed reports. These reports can be saved at regular intervals (such as the first of each month) and periodically reviewed. If your setup does not provide easy reports, consider selecting two or three key measures (such as the ones suggested in this section) and track them on the first of each month or quarter.

2. Does the Site Reach Intended Users?

Once you obtain the initial traffic numbers on your website, you’ll have a lot more questions. The big one is: Are we actually reaching the people we’re supposed to be serving? The answer requires analytics from several perspectives.

- The entry page is the clearest indication of how people are entering your website. An entry page is the first page a person visits on your website. Entry pages may be accessed in response to an intentional outreach effort designed to get visitors to the home page or another specific page within the site, from a search engine that matched the visitor’s query to content on a page within your site (especially when connected to a search term optimization effort), or from a direct link from another website or newsletter. The most useful application of this information is in measuring the success of a given outreach event. For entry page data to be useful, you must plan which URL you will distribute to your potential audience.

- Hourly or daily unique visitors is the same measure as monthly unique visitors, but for a shorter time frame. This short time frame is useful for assessing whether outreach and marketing events are bringing people to your website. For example, look for surges in daily unique visitors the day after a workshop or presentation. The hourly or daily unique visitors metric is also useful for correlating traffic spikes (or dips) to events outside of your control, such as grant proposal deadlines that might increase traffic or holidays that might slow traffic. Understanding the ebb and flow of site traffic can help you plan announcements to coincide with the greatest incidental traffic and avoid times when you know your audience is less likely to come to the website.

- Search engine keywords and terms are especially useful because they are words that were actually typed in by visitors to your site. Technically speaking, keywords are individual words that appear in search terms and search terms are the exact strings of words users entered into a search engine to get to your site. However, server software
packages are not always consistent about maintaining this distinction. Knowing site visitors’ keyword choices can be useful, but the search engine term gives more insight into user motivation. For example, one sign that you are reaching an audience of neighborhood stakeholders is when neighborhood names rank prominently in the list of keywords. A really good sign is when search terms include both a geographic name and a type of data, such as “employment rate in Humboldt.” Search term or search engine optimization is one approach for improving the reach of your website by increasing the likelihood that search terms important to your website, such as neighborhood name and indicator, will lead users to your website. A variety of free and fee-based search optimization services can be found on the web.

Search terms people use to find your site can also explain surges in traffic and help you determine whether those visitors were in your target audience. A spike in search terms unrelated to your organization’s work (such as terms related to sports or entertainment events) indicates the spike is coming from people outside your target audience.

- Registration and logins are the only way to uniquely identify your visitors. Typically, users must register with the website by providing identifying information such as their name, organization, and e-mail address. They choose a username and password during registration. Each time users visit the site, they must enter that username and password. (If they always visit the site from the same computer, they typically have the option to store their login information in cookies on their machine, allowing them to bypass the login process as long as the cookie exists.) If visitors register with accurate information, then your registration list could be a useful metric for whether you’re reaching your intended audience. However, you’ll need more than a list of registered users. You’ll also want statistics on how often those users visit the site, what pages they visit, and so on. You can analyze these data to determine whether your registered users fall into the categories of your intended audience. You can also see the patterns of usage for different types of registered users. Do they return right before major grant proposal deadlines? Are they comparing data in their neighborhood to larger geographies to paint a more meaningful picture? Are they choosing indicators that support their mission?

Although these data are valuable, keep in mind that registration and logins can restrict use of an organization’s website and diminish the quality of the user experience. Potential users may bypass a site to retain anonymity or to avoid having to remember yet another password. Registration may also prove a management burden for website.
administrators. Carefully evaluate these trade-offs in determining whether to collect registration and login data.

An alternative to implementing registration is to use a pop-up survey to collect information about users. Short pop-up surveys can help collect basic details such as what sector (e.g., nonprofit, government) visitors come from, what data they are seeking, and what neighborhood they represent.

3. Are Users Engaged with Your Site?

Answering the question of whether visitors are engaged with the site can be accomplished by examining whether they accomplish specific tasks, such as viewing a data page, contacting technical assistance, signing up for the e-newsletter, mapping neighborhood assets, or downloading a spreadsheet.

In the commercial and marketing fields, these accomplishments by users are referred to as “conversions.” A companion to this metric, “abandonment,” documents whether users leave the site without accomplishing a specific objective. Each specific objective on your website has a series of microactions in which visitors must engage on their way to the objective. Some websites, for example, may offer a technical assistance contact form. “Number of technical assistance requests” may itself be a measure of conversion, but that number is incomplete without considering how many visitors abandon the site at the technical assistance contact form page. Depending on the goals of your website and the technology employed in the site, you will have to create your own metrics of conversion and abandonment. Conversion and abandonment rates are most useful when analyzed over time in the context of deliberate changes made to the website to increase conversions (and thus decrease abandonments). In the case of the technical assistance contact form page, you may find that decreasing the amount of information visitors must enter to complete the form decreases the abandonment rate. If changes to your site are effective, you’d expect to see an increase in conversion after the intervention.

User testing can increase conversions by providing specific insight into where users abandon the website without completing tasks and what improvements are needed to increase the conversion rate. User testing is the process of observing users and documenting their activities as they attempt to complete tasks or find content on a website. It can be implemented informally with a small number of users during a one-time meeting or range up to a project as formal as hiring a firm that specializes in user testing.
Other specific measures typically included in a package of website analytics can also be deployed to measure whether users are finding and engaging with your website content.

- The exit page is the last page a site visitor views during a given visit. Being a top exit page isn’t necessarily a bad thing—users need to leave the website from somewhere. For each exit page, you must try to distinguish whether the exit was the result of a success (conversion) or a failure to keep the visitor’s continued interest (abandonment).

One simple way of viewing this metric is whether the exit page has content that fulfills an objective. For example, some home pages contain no useful content. Nor would a registration/login page. Having many visitors exit from a low-content page could indicate that the page is a barrier to users finding information they seek. As with many of the metrics discussed in this section, exit page is most meaningful when you have a baseline number of exits from a given page, make a design change in an attempt to reduce bailouts from that page, and then look for improvement.

It is also helpful to figure out how many visitors who leave the website should be doing so—that is, they are not in your intended audience and landed at your website in a misdirected web search.

- Visit depth, which is the number of pages viewed per visit, is another measure with many interpretations. If a visitor views many pages, it may be that they loved the content in your website and were highly motivated to click around. It could also mean that visitors could not find what they were looking for but were persistent in their search. Visitors who leave after visiting only a few pages may be outside your target audience, or there may be a usability flaw that causes them to abandon their search, or they may have efficiently found the information they were seeking and left happy. One way to assist your interpretation of this metric is to count how many pages at a minimum must be viewed in order to get to relevant content. For example, visitors entering the website from the home page may need to visit three pages before they get to neighborhood data. See how closely the number of pages a visitor must access before getting to the content of interest matches visit depth statistics for your website.

In addition to the website analytics already presented, other tools are emerging with potential to assist intermediaries with monitoring their influence. These tools include utilities that track where users click on maps and tools that track social media activity, which can potentially
contribute to an even finer-grained analysis of whether users are engaged with targeted content.

**CONTENT ANALYSIS**

Content analysis is a technique that can be used for better understanding how data intermediary products are reaching users and how engaged they are with the content. At a basic, informal level, content analysis can be an exercise in which web and social media are checked for coverage of a recently released report. A more structured use of content analysis addresses targeted questions:

- Define what you are looking for more specifically. Are you looking for all coverage of a report? Or are you looking for a specific reference to one or two key findings in the report? Did the source portray your findings accurately? Was the material neutral, supportive, or critical toward your position?

- Define a time period for your search. Was this a one-time report? If so, it may be appropriate to conduct this analysis only over the days and weeks immediately after release. Are you promoting a particular finding or position through multiple modes of communication? If so, it is probably more appropriate for periodic analysis over the entire time period during which you are actively promoting the finding or position.

- Define locations where you will search. What sources do you want to pick up your research, data, and reports? Places to look for content include web-based local, regional, and national media; newsletters; message boards; blogs; and social media. In addition, other websites such as those of interest groups and local government may cover your research. Reports by other organizations are an additional place to check.

A robust content analysis that considers all these factors will provide the greatest level of detail about whether people are accessing and engaged with your content. Consistency in your approach will lend additional credibility to your content analysis (i.e., consistently looking at the same sources using the same search terms).

A simple approach to content analysis is to find references to reports and content in online media via Google alerts. Google alerts can be set up to notify you via e-mail any time your
reports or content are listed in news stories or posted to websites. The best use of Google alerts is to collect and store references and analyze them over time.

Another approach to finding references to your reports and content on the web is using a basic reverse URL lookup, which allows you to see what other major sites link to you. The sites that come up are not typically a complete listing of all sites that link to your site, but you may discover some unexpected links to your site. In any search engine, type “link: www.yourURL.org” into the search field and it will bring up your results. Try variations of links that include specific reports or other linked content that users should be finding.

Web analytics can also assist in content analysis. Referral traffic—the percentage of total traffic from individual referrers and the number of distinct referrers—measures the breadth of websites and how much specific websites are engaging with your content, at least enough to incorporate it into their websites.

Go beyond these reports and visit the websites that are referencing and using your content. What specific indicators are they using? How are they using the indicators? Are specific types of organizations, such as media, community groups, or other researchers, using the content more than others? Content analysis is a starting point for investigation into how data intermediary products are being used by others.

Exhibit 1 shows a sample content analysis framework.
Exhibit 1.

Content analysis applied for measuring influence outcomes [adapted from Reisman et al. (2004)].

Outcome: Local media pays attention to the problem of high cost to low-income communities of tax preparation fees and high-interest, rapid refund loans as a result of your organization’s campaign to publicize the issue.

1. Identify the main messages of the campaign: Many low-income households pay high fees for simple tax preparation services to get the full benefit of their Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

2. Time period: Focus on articles related to the topic leading up to and during tax season, such as the period from January 1st to April 15th.

3. Selected material: All articles in the local newspapers that address tax return preparation and/or the tax industry.

4. Tracking:
   - Track type, date, location of reference (e.g., name of newspaper),
   - Reach of reference (e.g., number of subscribers, targeted audience),
   - Prominence (e.g., size of coverage, placement of coverage),
   - Perspective (pro/con/neutral),
   - References to your organization, and
   - Factuality of information.

5. Analysis:
   - How many articles mention tax preparation and/or EITC?
   - How many articles mention the main messages of the campaign?
   - Is the information about EITC, rapid refund loans, tax preparation fees, and the tax industry factually correct?
USER ANALYTICS

Data collected about users and how they access services provide specific insights into the influence of data intermediaries. Robust user data can be collected through services data intermediaries offer, mainly technical assistance and e-mail newsletters.

Technical Assistance Requests

User data can be collected through online submission forms developed to collect information for technical assistance requests. Systems for managing these data can be customized for organizations, particularly as part of an investment in a system such as Salesforce or Zoho. Off-the-shelf systems such as Freshdesk offer an easily implemented alternative to a more comprehensive user database. These systems often offer survey features for following up with users. As a simple alternative, you can make a low-tech file using a spreadsheet to record phone calls and e-mails from your technical assistance users.

If more than one staff person handles technical assistance requests, the tracking solution selected should account for multiple staff inputting details into a single database. The more people you have on staff and the more distributed your staff is, the higher the burden for creating a system that can be accessed (usually via the web) by all staff.

An intake form that tracks technical assistance requests is key to making user data manageable. An intake form can be higher tech (on the web) or lower tech (e.g., an Excel spreadsheet on a common network drive). If all technical assistance requests have standard intake data and notes detailing how staff answered the request, then it is possible to analyze patterns in technical assistance requests every three to six months (or whatever time interval you choose). Such an analysis can help guide design decisions based on objective information rather than memory. Exhibit 2 shows possible questions for an intake form, and Exhibit 3 shows a sample technical assistance request intake and processing protocol.

Technical assistance requests also create an opportunity to connect with users and investigate outcomes. Surveys can be used to document outcomes such as whether users are satisfied with the technical assistance they received and how they used the data they requested. Follow up with a brief survey three or six months after the request was received to investigate how they used the data and if they succeeded in the program they inquired about or decision they needed to make using the data. A brief survey that follows every TA request can be as simple as two questions: “How did you use the data?” and “What other data would help you?” The survey
could also ask for examples of how respondents used the data they received (e.g., whether they produced products such as reports, blog posts, infographics, or maps). Answers to these questions can provide further evidence of influence while also providing content to showcase in communications. Exhibit 4 shows an example of a technical assistance service evaluation survey.

Analyzing patterns in documented technical assistance requests can also help identify content in the website that is hard to find or data that are desired by users. If you get requests for information you already publish, you might conduct user tests to find out why people have trouble finding it. If you get multiple requests for specific data you do not publish, you might consider adding them to your collection or creating a “how to” guide to help visitors find the data on their own.

**E-mail Lists**

Contact lists or databases, primarily those connected with e-mail newsletters and communications efforts, can also be used to measure influence. If you have a user database of registered e-mail newsletter recipients, monitor increases (as well as opt-outs). Flurries of sign-ups after an outreach event can indicate that the outreach effort worked. Opt-outs may indicate that users are not finding value in your content and warrant additional inquiry. E-newsletters can be a handy tool for communicating with your audience about timely issues or new additions to the website, but off-topic or too-frequent e-mails can alienate your audience.

Many third-party newsletter distribution services track whether your messages are received and opened. They can give you information such as the number of times users clicked on links in the e-newsletter (click-through rates). The open rate is always lower than the actual number of people who read an e-mail newsletter, but it is a consistent indicator to measure the success of e-mail campaigns over time.
Exhibit 2.

Suggested content for intake forms (adapted from protocols developed by The Data Center, a New Orleans, LA, NNIP partner).

**Intake Fields**
1. Name, title, organization, e-mail address, phone
2. Whom does your organization serve?
3. What data do you need?
4. What do you plan to do with these data? (e.g., What are you trying to demonstrate? or What is your research question?)
5. What information sources have you already looked at?

Note: Intake question 5 is essential for establishing the expectation that users should independently look for the desired information before submitting a request, which will save valuable staff time and help staff avoid providing something the user has already consulted.

**Potential Categories to Use for Intake Fields**

**Requestor**
- Nonprofit of community organization
- Student
- Consultant
- University faculty
- National colleagues
- For-profit companies
- Individuals

**Planned use of data**
- Program planning
- Grant proposal
- Advocacy
- Policy research
- Media article
- Academic publication
- City government
- State government
- Federal government
- Funder
- Reporter
- Other

- For-profit business planning
- Research for a book
- Land use planning
- Unknown
- Other
Entries into the Knowledge Management System (KMS)
- Each technical assistance (TA) request submitted via “Ask Vicki” is automatically posted in the TA KMS.
- Phone calls and e-mailed data requests are entered into the Ask Vicki intake form by the person who received the request.
- If an e-mail to info@ is deemed to be a TA request, then the e-mailer should be directed to make their entry into Ask Vicki. Using Ask Vicki will ensure that the request is accompanied by sufficient information to allow us to answer the question.
- Any entries that are not data requests should be deleted or moved so they do not become part of the KMS statistics report.

E-mail notification
When an initial entry is made into the TA KMS, an e-mail copy of the request is automatically sent to the entire team.

Ownership
Vicki designates an owner through the system (usually after conferring with the person to whom she wants to assign ownership). The owner of a TA request is responsible for responding to the request and, if necessary, seeking assistance from the rest of the team. The owner is the primary contact for the request. The owner, Vicki, and Allison (the executive director) will all receive e-mailed copies of any “comments” posted on that request.

Initial response
Within two business days of receiving the request the owner should send a general reply to the request e-mail or phone call using language similar to this:

Dear ___________, Thank you for getting in touch with us with your data request. I understand you are looking for [repeat what they requested]. I have shared your request with my colleagues and we’ll get back to you with information (or questions, if we need further clarification about your request) as soon as possible.

Follow-up response
A response can be as brief as a phone call or e-mail or as large as a spreadsheet, PowerPoint presentation, or map. Custom-made maps always take more than an hour and, therefore, before production is started an estimate of the time it will take to make the map and a quote should be given to the requestor.

The majority of the requests, however, will require only an e-mail in response. The overriding objective of TA responses is to teach requestors how to find the answer themselves, not to give them the data.

- Start salutation with “Dear ____,”
- If Vicki is not directly answering, indicate “Vicki asked that I get back to you about your data request.”
• Start with a pleasant greeting, and perhaps a compliment about the work the requestor’s organization is doing.

• Repeat what he or she requested.

• Create a response using enduring teaching materials, previous TA responses, or leads from team members. Research the answer when no prior knowledge exists in the TA system or among the team.

• Enter the requestor’s e-mail address onto our “Numbers Talk” newsletter list (via our home page). If you do not get a response indicating this person is already on the list, alert the person that he or she has been added to our newsletter list by adding the text below to your e-mail response:

  “Because we regularly publish fresh new data (and so that you don’t have to periodically scour our site), I’ll make sure you are on our e-mail list so you’ll be one of the first to know whenever new data are available on our site. We send out mailings typically no more than once a month (and we try to make them fun, so I think you’ll enjoy them).”

• Students, out-of-town consultants, and for-profit companies are not added to the e-mail list to reduce the number of people on the e-mail list who may not be interested and, thus, to reduce instances of our e-mails getting stopped by spam filters.

• To set expectations, conclude with language similar to the following:

  “Don’t hesitate to let us know whenever you are looking for data that you can’t find at www.gnocdc.org. We’re always happy to point you in the right direction.”

• Close with “Sincerely, your name and title.”

• E-mail should be sent from your Data Center e-mail account.

Recording interactions
All e-mails and phone calls with the requestor should be entered into the KMS.

Closing requests
After the request is complete, create a closed report.

Paper files
Paper files should be created for any requests for which there are printed products or printed correspondence from the requestor. The folder should be labeled according to the date and name of the request in the format MM-DD-YR-NameOfOrg. Electronic source files should be stored in a directory of the same name.

Exhibit 4.
**Technical assistance service evaluation survey** (compiled from surveys used by NNIP partners in Chicago, IL; Nashville, TN; Sacramento, CA; and Washington, DC).

[Technical assistance service] evaluation form for [Organization]
Date of request:
Date information was sent:
Group/agency name:
Contact person:
Phone and e-mail address:

1. How did you learn about [technical assistance service] at [Organization]?

2. What information did you receive from [Organization]?

3. How satisfied were you with the quality of the information you were given?
   Very satisfied/Satisfied/Neutral/Dissatisfied/Very dissatisfied

4. How satisfied were you with the timeliness of the response?
   Very satisfied/Satisfied/Neutral/Dissatisfied/Very dissatisfied

5. [Organization] staff helped me understand the information I was provided.
   Agree/Disagree/No opinion

6. The information I received helped me or my group understand something new about my neighborhood.
   Agree/Disagree/No opinion

7. The information I received helped me or my group identify or resolve a neighborhood problem.
   Agree/Disagree/No opinion

8. If your answer to question 7 is “agree,” please briefly describe the problem(s) you identified or resolved.

9. Please specify if you used (or plan to use) the information you received in one or more of the following:
   Execute a project/write a report
   Write a grant request or funding proposal
   Use for internal planning/strategy
   Measure program outcomes
   Provide consulting/data to another organization
   Provide public education/advocacy
   Target a program/activity
   Other (please specify)

10. What did you like about the information you received from [Organization]?

11. What could be improved about [technical assistance service] at [Organization]?
SURVEYS

Surveys come in a variety of types and lengths and are used for a variety of purposes, such as the examples in the previous section related to technical assistance requests. They can be used to collect information for any of the influence outcomes described in this guidebook, as well as for most of the activities of data intermediaries. Exhibit 5 shows a sample training evaluation survey. This section does not reproduce the ample literature available on survey design and usage.

Various modes can be used to administer surveys. Examples and considerations include the following:

- **In-person or telephone.** Informal surveys are an overlooked method for collecting data. Often they are overlooked because they tend to be collected in different modes, such as via e-mail, over the phone, or in conversation at meetings or events. In practice, deploying this technique can be as simple as asking three to five people whether they've read a particular report, whether they've used the report (if so, how?; if not, why not?) or whether the findings surprised them (if so, how?).

  Although responses may be obtained informally and may not follow a scripted survey instrument, a few key questions asked when opportune can yield valuable feedback. Capturing this feedback in a central place will allow all interested stakeholders to access it. Another technique for disseminating this information includes adding informal user feedback as a discussion topic to regular staff meeting agendas.

- **Internet.** Surveys conducted over the Internet are frequently hosted on third-party web services like Google Forms or SurveyMonkey. These services are low cost (generally $200 or less), although other more expensive options are available that provide built-in analytic tools. Internet surveys offer the advantage of being easy to circulate (and recirculate) to a large pool of potential respondents at minimal cost and time expenditure.

- **Feedback form at events.** Collecting information from audiences about how they liked an event or training and what they think could be done better is a standard accepted practice likely to yield a high response rate. Basic, clear instructions and reminders to the audience to complete and turn in forms before leaving the event will usually yield a
good response rate. An online form can also be sent to participants via e-mail following the event.

Exhibit 5.

Training evaluation survey (compiled from surveys used by NNIP partners in Columbus, OH; Indianapolis, IN; and Washington, DC).

1. Please rate the following aspects of the class by filling in the most appropriate circle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How well did the course meet stated objectives?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well paced was the course?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How useful was the course manual?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the instructor create a positive learning environment?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How useful was the course manual?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the instructor create a positive learning environment?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you rate the instructor’s knowledge of the course material?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you recommend this course to others who needed similar training?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your overall impression of the course?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you rate the quality of the training facility?</td>
<td>Poor ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ Excellent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. What specific changes or improvements to this course would you recommend?

3. What is the most important thing you learned from the training?

4. What additional training needs do you have?

5. Please share any other comments you have regarding the course.

OPTIONAL: Would you like to be added to our listserv?

Name: ____________________________________________ Organization: ____________________________

E-mail: ____________________________________________
COLLECTING DATA THROUGH MEETINGS

The monitoring techniques presented thus far represent methods to collect and analyze data from and about individual users. Another approach to monitoring influence and documenting outcomes is to conduct focus groups or user group meetings or to observe the proceedings of meetings at which data intermediary products are discussed. Focus groups and user group meetings also provide a format for following up directly on questions raised in the course of reviewing website analytics or user databases.

Interested readers are encouraged to consult the ample literature that exists documenting how to conduct focus groups.

- Focus groups can be used to explore any of the influence outcomes discussed in this guidebook.

- User group meetings vary from focus groups in important ways, particularly in that user groups are often convened on a regular schedule and have varied agendas. Performance management can be included on the agenda of an existing user group meeting. If a data intermediary conducts regular user group meetings, including a section to explore outcomes at each meeting yields performance management data for the data intermediary at low investment of resources.

- User group meetings also vary from focus groups in degrees of formality, particularly with regard to preparation and facilitation. To get useful information from a user group meeting, formal protocols may not be needed as long as consistent questions are asked of users and responses are systematically documented.

One approach for engaging in performance management work in a user group meeting is to select a topic or a neighborhood for which the data intermediary creates data briefs or reports and discuss user feedback about the products. What information do they find valuable in the products? What information is unclear? What is missing?

Another approach is to engage a user group directly in strategy, such as by soliciting user feedback on who they see as the intended audience for a report or in reviewing performance data such as website statistics, survey results, or a case study.
Meeting observation is another approach for documenting and observing influence. Exhibit 6 provides a template for documenting meeting proceedings in which a data intermediary’s products and perspective may be presented and/or discussed. As with user group meetings, observing and documenting meetings consistently will generate useful outcome data to apply in measuring influence outcomes.

Exhibit 6.

**Observation checklist for meetings [adapted from Reisman et al (2004)].**

Date:
Length of meeting:
Location:
Attendees:

1. What were the main issues discussed during this meeting?

2. Was [policy issue/topic of interest to your organization] on the agenda? YES/NO

3. Was [policy issue/topic] discussed? YES/NO

4. What was the main content of the discussion about [policy issue/topic]?

5. Was agreement reached in this discussion? YES/NO
   What was the length of the discussion? ________________

6. Would you say that the [policy issue/topic] was taken seriously by the attendees? YES/NO
   Please explain:

7. Was there any action planned related to [policy issue/topic]? Yes/No
   Please explain:

Additional notes or comments:
Case studies offer substantial promise for data intermediaries to use in the development of in-depth knowledge about the influence of their activities on outcomes. They offer an opportunity to have open-ended conversations with key decisionmakers about the specific factors that influenced the decision they made to take a particular action and to highlight the role of data in their planning and decisionmaking.

Case studies can be generated through interviews that data intermediary staff conduct. They can vary in degree of formality, as well as in depth and length. The following are examples of questions to use when interviewing people to assess how data influenced their work:

- Why did the organization get involved with this issue?
- Who were the main stakeholders involved? What was their interest or involvement in the issue?
- Who initiated the action on this issue? When did this happen?
- What data were used to address the issue? What products were produced? How were they used?
- What changes resulted because of this action? When did they occur?
- What factors or conditions were most important in making these results possible (e.g., access to particular data, involvement of a key group, or support of a key organization)?
- Has there been any follow-up since the initial action and results?

Case studies can also be created by communications staff or independent writers. Communications professionals bring an outside perspective to case studies that help to generate angles and details in the case that might be difficult to identify. In addition, involving professional writers brings the potential to generate a version of the case study that serves performance management interests, as well as produces human interest stories that promote the work of data intermediaries.

Many NNIP partners are already using case studies as a performance monitoring technique. The Urban Strategies Council’s 2012-2013 Impact Report provides example case studies that are

---

brief and comprehensive in addressing multiple projects and policy areas. Case studies created
about NNIP partners by NNIP staff are also compiled and posted on the partnership’s website.⁹

CONCLUSION

This guidebook offers data intermediary organizations a framework for documenting their
positive influence on community outcomes (section 2), a process for integrating this important
performance management work into regular organizational functions (section 3), and a range
of easily available techniques for accomplishing performance management tasks (section 4).

As data intermediaries increasingly use this framework for performance management, more
robust examples of practice will emerge, and new techniques for doing the work will follow. This
guidebook is, therefore, a starting point for growing a practice that strengthens understanding
about and the impact of the work of data intermediaries.


NNIP is a collaboration between the Urban Institute and partner organizations in more than 30 American cities. NNIP partners democratize data: they make data accessible and easy to understand and help local stakeholders apply data to identify and solve problems in their communities.

For more information about NNIP, go to www.neighborhoodindicators.org or e-mail nnip@urban.org.