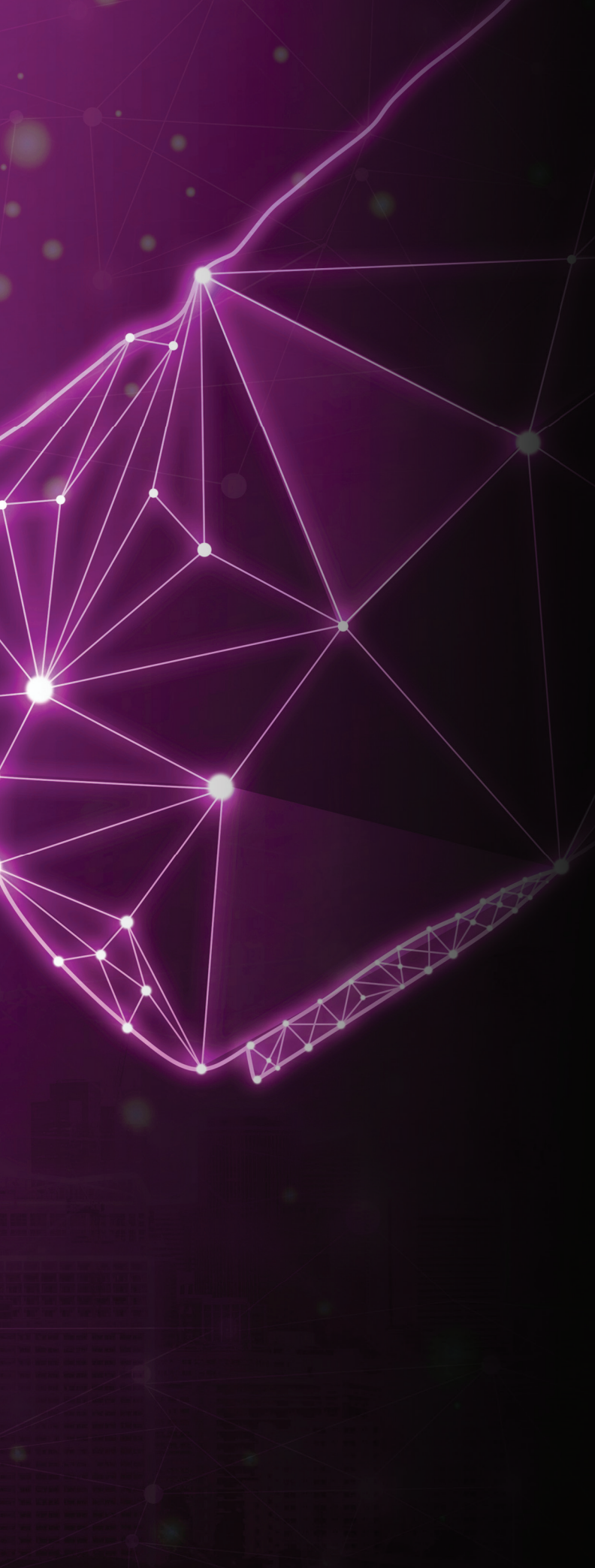


CHANGING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH DATA

Solving Our Capacity Crisis
by Making Data Work for Us,
Not the Other Way Around

By Ken Miller



Big data and analytics have been transforming industries from health care to finance. Even moribund and unchangeable baseball is being revolutionized by data. With rapid learning, big data promises to produce fresh insights that can transform strategy. Given this promise, why then has government—and specifically human services—been so slow to join the revolution by continuing to resist the allure and charms of big data? Simply, our historic relationship with data in government has been less than positive. Some would even say it has been borderline abusive.

Rather than a helpful tool that can increase our workers' capacity to do more good, data has been a marginally helpful money pit that has robbed our workers of precious time and resources. How much time and money has your agency spent on building data systems? How much time and money has been dedicated to "reporting"? And rather than producing fresh insights that drive new innovations, how often has the data instead been used to complete accountability reports that are then weaponized against the very people who spent all their precious time producing them? More pointedly, what percentage of your staff time is dedicated to finding "that data" in "that system" and "that system" that goes into "that report" for "those people" so they will stay off your backs? Does this sound familiar?

Public servants are resistant to the siren song of data and analytics because, for too long, the data haven't been serving us, we have been working for data, and it has been a toxic boss.

Human services faces a phenomenal capacity crisis—there is way more work than resources available. Data hold the key to solving this crisis but our relationship with data has to change. We need to flip the script and take charge—no longer working in service of data used by others against us. Rather, we need to put data to work for us so we, in turn, can better serve those in their time of need.

Imagine if all of the energy consumed by accountability was redirected toward learning?

Relationship Number One

Data's primary role should be that of a teacher or someone who shows the way. All of the time and money we have invested in data systems should be producing mountains of insights. Insights that fundamentally change how we work and what we achieve. So where are these mountains? Why aren't we learning? Why are data not teaching us? There are three key reasons.



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1. We encounter data that are used primarily for accountability ... against us. When you think of all the data your agency collects, is it used for learning... or accountability? That is, are you and your colleagues the consumers of the data in an effort to uncover insights that improve operations, or are you and your colleagues the producers of data merely intended to keep funding sources satisfied? Accountability is not bad, and keeping funding sources informed of our progress and proficiency will always be a necessary mandate. But, the accountability movement has had two massive effects detrimental to our ability to improve. First, again, our most precious resources are being used to generate reports. This time, effort and money are crowding out any initiative to use data for learning. My colleagues and I see this often when we work with an agency and begin asking learning questions that require data to give a correct answer. The usual response is “you want us to generate another report?” Even though this report would help solve a major puzzle, the fatigue of data collection trumps the desire for insight and, in turn, any positive action that could be taken.

Second, accountability measures, no matter how well intentioned, breed fear. By their very nature, accountability metrics create a top-down, fear-based system where one body (a funding source or legislative committee or upper management) is in a position to take resources from another. The fear may be severe in some cases and quite mild in others, but it has the same effect: we expend most of our analytic energy justifying, reporting and, in some cases, outright gaming the system to ensure we look good. Vertical accountability systems have contributed mightily to our toxic relationship with data.

I recall a workshop I conducted with a large county where we were supposed to be developing performance measures for each agency. The agency leader of the juvenile justice agency was exceptionally bright, but as soon as we came to an exercise to develop measures, immediately pretended not to understand. After some prodding about why there were no metrics for the

agency, the response was, “Why would I build the hammer they are going to use to hit me over the head?” Data have so much to teach us, but that will never happen in such a climate. Insights gleaned from data are extremely delicate creatures. They need safe and open places to grow. Insights do not appear where fear persists.

For some information on accountability systems that do inspire our workforce, please see my article, “Band of Brothers” (see www.changeagents.info/band-of-brothers).

2. We aren't asking the right questions. There are so many insights that will transform your operations. Unfortunately, they are hiding from us in a place we rarely look: our work systems.

We don't think about work this way. In government in general, and particularly in human services, we don't see work systems. We usually see programs, policies, practice, and people. But weaving through all of these are work systems—that is, the processes that we use to produce “widgets” for “customers” so that we—and they—can achieve desired outcomes. (This is the entire point of my book, *We Don't Make Widgets* [see www.changeagents.info/widgets]). It is through these systems that all of our hard-working staff makes things happen for their clients. Unfortunately, it is also these very systems that cause so much frustration and burden for staff and customers alike. When the systems work, magic can happen. When the systems are instead complex Rube Goldberg contraptions deluged by an endless flood of work without nearly enough capacity to work it, well you get what we have...it is a mess.

The best way out of this dilemma is first to make it visible—to see how these systems meander through our workplaces. Where do they start? Where do they end? What is produced? Who uses it? What do they want? Draw a picture. Make the systems visible.

Second, understand the systems using—you guessed it—data. Every system has vital signs, a few key metrics that tell you the health of the system and alert you when there is

danger. These are not accountability measures. They are not for other people. They exist to help us learn and act. At a minimum we should know:

- How many people need help?
- How long does it take to help them?
- How many people can we serve on the first try?
- Where is work piling up?
- Where are we losing capacity?

3. We aren't curious. In human services our focus is on helping families and communities. None of us signed up to be plant managers overseeing the production of “widgets” in complex processes. But, to be most effective and understand what is happening in an agency, we need to embrace the plant manager role. We must look at and break down the systems and ask the questions that need to be asked. Unfortunately, a lack of curiosity often stands in our way of doing so and is the greatest impediment to using data and developing insights.

For transformation to occur, government needs to be constantly learning. What precedes learning? Fascination.

Curiosity. Asking questions. And, from those questions come insights. The more questions we ask and the deeper we dig, the more insights will appear.

Sadly, it seems like we have stopped asking. Why are we not looking at our current situation, scratching our head and asking “Why does it have to be this way?” “Why don't our systems work for our clients and our staff?” “How will we ever dig out of this pile?” Most of us start our work life extremely fascinated and filled with questions, but eventually the bureaucracy extinguishes our light. The complexity and powerlessness we encounter drains our spirit and creates a sense of apathy that nothing can really change. We cannot let this happen, especially when the stakes are so high and people rely on us in their moments of need.

In human services we have been handed the most amazing puzzle—the most difficult Rubik's Cube. How can we serve the most customers with the biggest impact with not nearly enough resources? People love to work on puzzles (did you finish Wordle today?). We have to find a way to ignite the

fascination and curiosity of our people to solve this non-trivial puzzle.

Relationship Number Two

In addition to being our teacher, data should also be our co-worker. The central dilemma facing human services is our lack of capacity. There is simply more work coming in than any agency has resources to deliver. Data should not just point out this obvious fact, it should also roll up its sleeves, get its hands dirty, and actually help us do the work. How can that happen? Consider the vast majority of tasks that your dedicated workers perform: locating people, validating and verifying income and assets, monitoring changes in status whether it be employment, incarceration, family composition, and so on. The bulk of our staff time is dedicated to finding, validating, verifying, and monitoring data. The bulk of that time can now be done by data itself. Let me give you an example.

Our vital human services programs are all undergoing a capacity crisis.

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The invisible systems I have described have evolved in complexity to the point that we cannot serve the customer completely, immediately. Rather, each transaction takes on average three to five contacts. In one large county, 290,000 applications and renewals in one month led to 1.2 million contacts (i.e., calls, visits). This lost capacity was crippling in good times, but adding that to the end of the Public Health Emergency (PHE) workload and the massive labor shortage, there is simply no way an agency can sustain this level of work and even begin to meet demand.

While data are critical, the real value is the insights they offer, and, in turn, the informed decisions we make and actions we take. Data can be used to determine and monitor eligibility in real time, mitigating the need for workers to manually search for verifications, rely on old and incomplete data, or worse yet, wait days for customers to return information. Using up-to-date, actionable data available via commercial and public sources can also help increase program integrity and, at the same time, reduce churn and avoid an unnecessary break in coverage for eligible customers.

Human services is facing a capacity crisis that will only continue to get worse in the coming months as labor

The only way out of the capacity crisis is to serve our customers completely and immediately. And data can now help us do this, when used correctly and applied at the most opportune time. For instance, during each stage of the eligibility life cycle, we can allow data to do the heavy lifting, enabling us to serve clients with one touch and even no touch. Here is how:

Using real-time intelligence and verification throughout the entire eligibility life cycle:

- **INITIAL APPLICATION:** Validate real-time customer provided information at application against known and real-time data sources to speed verification and improve integrity.
- **ONGOING ELIGIBILITY:** Monitor active customers 365 days a year to identify life-changes that are relevant and actionable.
- **RENEWAL:** Enhance the renewal process by certifying customers without needing to mail out mid-certification reports when all authoritative data sources indicate ongoing eligibility for services. Also populate renewal forms with the latest known information about households before mailing packet to customers.

shortages continue and, in particular, when PHE ends and Medicaid agencies must redetermine eligibility for all applicants. To effectively navigate this next chapter, agencies must adopt a multipronged approach that focuses on process, technology, and people. Data—when used correctly, curated appropriately, and applied at the right time—is one of the most valuable tools agencies have that can help them manage all three of these critical areas. The key, however, is making

sure data is positioned in a way that will work for you and your agency rather than the other way around. Let it teach and show you what is important and what gaps may exist. Be ready to explore what it tells you and ask more questions, and then work with it to drive your decisions and take action. Only when we change our relationship with data and make it work for us in support of our purpose-driven mission can we unlock our agencies' capacity to do more good. 📌