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Unleashing Pent-up Data: A Revolution in Military Management

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With \$600 billion in planned U.S. Defense Department budget cuts over the next decade, and another \$500 billion on top of that if the congressional sequestration holds, it is worth considering how DoD plans to enact such massive savings.

Cutting planned acquisitions and closing or combining commands will play a role, but war fighters still will need new equipment. Downsizing domestic bases is politically difficult and requires money today to move people and assets in pursuit of uncertain savings tomorrow.

How, then, will the Defense Department find a magic recipe that maintains critical competencies while embracing massive unexploited (and apparently as-yet undiscovered) cost-saving innovations? And can this miraculous plan be accomplished by the same leadership, budget structure and bureaucracy that created the current system?

The biggest game-changer for DoD this decade could well be to better harness the budget and program data it already collects by setting it free, and allowing people to use and analyze it consistently and collectively, rather than sporadically and in isolation. There is no surer way to improve the effectiveness, innovation and performance of any group than to unleash the power of pent-up data.

And yet it seems the government, and especially the Pentagon, is possibly the last place to be affected by the wave of data sharing and analysis tools that define the Internet era.

Sound like an overstatement? Consider the impact of easily accessible geospatial data, which enabled GPS navigation, Google Earth, localized services like restaurant reservations and hotel bookings, and many more daily conveniences we now take for granted. Or the financial services sector, where open access to data democratized stock trading, instantly enabled much more comprehensive market research by anyone with an Internet connection, and spawned new professions such as day-trading.

Even mundane tasks have been irrevocably altered as Google searches replace advice from friends and Twitter allows anyone, anywhere, to know all manner of details about someone else's thoughts, habits and lifestyle.

The point is not whether these specific outputs are good for society, but rather that innovation of all forms can come from free-flowing data used by many people in many ways. Who knows how much efficiency and improvement DoD could foster if it embraced the same idea?

Yet in the Pentagon, as in many bureaucracies, control over data has come to be synonymous with institutional power, and uncontrolled data is seen as a threat to programs, people and budgets.

Consequently, many of the dysfunctional elements of the Pentagon, including mismatched requirements, duplication, rework, poor collaboration and miscommunication, are a result of data that is over-controlled and under-utilized.

Ensuring strategic coherence and effective force structure decisions while budgets are being cut demand a strategy that harnesses the wisdom of the crowd by giving the uniform, civilian, contractor and other communities unfettered access to collaborative analytical tools and consistent budgetary and program data.

This can be achieved simply by using better software tools that define a common baseline and allow many more users to access and perform collaborative analysis upon Pentagon budgets. With such an approach, it is possible to turn the tables so that the 99 percent of DoD's management structure that is controlled by the 1 percent that looks at the numbers can themselves understand the budgets, identify new opportunities to cut waste and foster collaboration, and let loose the million other innovations that blossom when people are able to use technology to better foster systemic improvements.

When analysts, program officers and even war fighters can collect, assess and share data in ways centralized management never imagined, amazing things will happen. New data will revitalize their interests, improve their productivity and inspire innovations that save money and foster improvements on a massive scale.

True, change is often disruptive, and it is impossible to fully predict what would result from large-scale data being made available to all members of the Pentagon's management structure, from the secretary on down. Such change is revolutionary, and like all revolutions, it will at times be exhilarating and at times terrifying. But it also is necessary to grow into a more modern phase of informed and deliberate management all across the Pentagon's operations.

To embrace this potential, DoD must incentivize and, where necessary, demand the improved flow of information about budgets, priorities and ongoing activities. Deriving value from this data requires a focus on embracing change and innovation, and that means cultural changes inspired from the top. It also requires a revolution in how and why we gather, share and analyze disparate data.

But most of all, it requires embracing the reality that the power of management and planning with data drives improvements through the collaborative power of the many, not the few.

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