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Behn's Performance Leadership Report

An occasional (and maybe even insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities for improving performance and producing real results in public agencies.



On why, eventually, every public manager will have to

“What were they thinking?”
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Fix The Persistent (and Growing) Backlog

If you want to invent something, do not invent it in Brazil. Or, if you do invent it in Brazil, get it patented in some other country.

Why? Because the Brazilian Patent and Trademark Office (BPTO) has a big backlog of patent applications. Last June, it stood at 350,000 applications. (One source reports that it takes 8½ years for a patent application to be approved or rejected.)

The BPTO has 325 examiners who each process roughly 55 applications a year. Thus, the office can discharge about 18,000 applications per year. (Obviously, few of these numbers are accurate to three significant figures.) This means it will take Brazil over 19 years to eliminate the backlog.

Of course, while the BPTO works on its existing patent applications, thousands of geniuses and crackpots will file even more.

Thus, the **Great Sewage Equation** applies: “Patents In” minus “Patents Out” equals “Patents Stuck in the Pipe.” And given that 24,000 patent applications were filed in Brazil in 2006 (the latest year for which I could find any data), and given that 24,000 is greater than 18,000, the number of patents stuck in the pipe grow each and every year by 6,000.

So unless, Brazil's geniuses and crackpots start applying for patents in other countries, the backlog won't go down. It will continue to go up.

Of course, the Brazilian Patent and Trademark Office isn't the only public agency with a backlog. In the U.S., multiple public agencies have multiple backlogs.

At the Department of Veterans Affairs, the number of appeals filed by veterans about their disability payments has consistently exceeded the number the VA can process, creating a backlog of over 450,000 appeals. (Last year, Congress allocated more funds to attack the backlog.)

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has a backlog of roughly half-a-million requests for security

clearances (from employees of both the government and its contractors). Some have waited nearly a year, while others simply opted for other jobs that did not require a clearance.

And at the Office of Personnel Management, both the Civil Service Retirement System and the Federal Employees Retirement System have a backlog of new claims for retirement benefits that fluctuates monthly between 15,000 and 24,000.

Of course, when a business has a backlog it might be a positive sign—though the firm will want to fix it quickly. If the firm does not have enough inventory to satisfy customer demand—if it has a backlog of unfulfilled orders—it is producing a product or service that people do value.

The firm does, however, have an obvious incentive to fix its backlog. If it does not, it will lose sales to its competitors.

The bane of the modern organization is the backlog. It undermines its reputation for performance. It suggests that the organization—and its leadership team—are incompetent. It tells you: At all costs, avoid doing any business with this organization.

Still, let's be honest: Backlogs are boring. No management association gives an annual Top-Backlog-Fixer Award. Eliminating a backlog brings no fame. No glory.

Nevertheless, backlogs annoy people. They annoy inventors. They annoy prospective employees (and their prospective employers). A backlog gives an organization—and its leadership team—a bad name.

Indeed, the bane of modern organizations is the backlog. It always starts small, but then it grows . . . bigger . . . and Bigger . . . and even BIGGER.

Simultaneously, as this backlog grows, the organization's reputation

for competence shrinks: If it can't complete a simple, operational task swiftly, repeatedly, and accurately, how can the organization succeed at a more complex and sophisticated responsibility?

Indeed, how can a manager claim to be even merely competent if his or her team cannot eliminate the obvious plague of an annoying backlog that is undermining performance?

This is not a government problem. It is a large-organization problem. Any organization—public, private, non-profit—can have a backlog. If one of the organization's core responsibilities is to respond to requests—and if the humans making such a request have a reasonable expectation that they will receive an appropriate and expeditious response—these humans will inevitably be unhappy. They are unhappy because they are human.

This applies to when you order a product on line and it doesn't arrive for weeks. It applies when you call a help line and are required to listen to annoying music until you hang up. It applies when, to renew your driver's license, you stand in line (though sometimes you can do this on-line).

Your Department of Motor Vehicles has a bad rap not because its backlog is worse than all the others. The DMV's disadvantage is that its backlog is visible. Everyone experiences the backlog. That's why every comedian's DMV joke guarantees a laugh. Everyone gets it.

The DMV joke is based on the assumption that a long backlog is a sign of incompetence. If public managers can't fix an annoying and obvious backlog, what can they fix? **B**

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