The feds have accomplished a lot with the year-old Open Government Directive, but they must get going this year on these 10 critical action items

By John Foley

One year after the federal Open Government Directive was released, the list of accomplishments is long: Detailed plans are in place, new Web sites have been launched, and more than 300,000 data sets have been released to the public. But how much of what's been done to establish a more transparent government—one that encourages collaboration between the public and private sectors as well as participation from citizens—is having a real impact? And what work remains to be done?

The Office of Management and Budget's open government scorecard, the feds' self-assessment, paints an overwhelmingly positive picture of the progress. Its visual dashboard, which grades 29 agencies across 10 categories, is almost entirely green, the color associated with "meeting expectations." In fact, there isn't a single instance in which one of the 29 agencies fails to meet OMB expectations in any of the categories measured.

Things are pretty good, but not *that* good. While federal agencies can point to many areas of progress, the to-do list remains long. The roster of unfinished work—including full-fledged public participation, creating a master index of government data, and reducing the backlog of Freedom of Information Act requests—is more critical to long-term success than anything done so far.

The road ahead could get rougher. Agencies may face budget restrictions, new federal cybersecurity and privacy policies, ingrained organizational resistance, a changing political climate, and a backlash to the widespread pub-

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lication of confidential government correspondence via the WikiLeaks site.

10 Milestones

President Obama set the direction for open government with his "Transparency and Open Government" memo on Jan. 21, 2009, one day after he took office. By December 2009, the 11-page Open Government Directive was in place, outlining a series of requirements. The top 10 accomplishments so far:

>> The establishment of an Open Government Working Group of CIOs, CTOs, and other C-level execs from across the federal government.

>> The publication of detailed agency open government plans and road maps.

>> The release of more than 300,000 high-value data sets in machine-readable formats on Data.gov.

>> The launch of Web sites that serve as portals to government data and provide tools to view and manipulate that data, as well as the government's use of wikis, blogs, Webcasts, and other social media to communicate with the public.

>> A White House-issued framework to improve the quality of federal spending information, followed by a strategy to increase federal spending transparency.

>> The establishment of Federal Register 2.0,

an online version of the National Archives' daily record of legislation, presidential documents, and other official business.

>> The General Services Administration's Challenge.gov site, where the public can take a crack at solving the government's problems, often for prize money.

>> The first annual International Open Government Data Conference, a three-day event in which 400 attendees from 30 countries discussed best practices on issues including security, privacy, and making data available through mobile apps.

>> The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office effort, in collaboration with Google, to provide a free, searchable archive of 7 million patent grants, applications, and related information, as well as trademark registrations and applications.

>> Federal outreach to local, state, and foreign governments to extend the concepts of open government worldwide.

Word Isn't Getting Out

How much have you seen, heard, or read about open data initiatives offered by different levels of government in the last 12 months?

A lot ■   Some ■   A little ■   None ■

	A lot	Some	A little	None
Federal	4%	12%	19%	65%
State	5%	12%	15%	68%
Local	5%	10%	15%	70%

Data: Socrata 2010 Open Data Benchmark Study of 1,000 U.S. adults

These accomplishments represent only a partial list of open government advances. Federal CTO Aneesh Chopra, in an interview with *InformationWeek,* said the government is pleased with the effort so far. Chopra credits the GSA with putting in place the technical grounding—including IdeaScale, a Web platform for establishing innovation-oriented communities—for agencies to quickly set up open government Web pages and solicit public input on their plans.

That said, agencies aren't meeting expectations across the board. On OMB's scorecard, 41 of the 290 boxes are yellow. The poorest performers are the Department of State and the National Science Foundation, both of which received five yellow marks across the 10 categories.

Establishing An Expert Network

The most difficult part of open government may be getting the public to participate. That

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notion seems counterintuitive, as so many people now use social media, but the "if you build it, they will come" approach simply doesn't work. So agencies must be creative.

One example of how the feds are trying to spark public engagement is ExpertNet, a wiki under development that aims to draw private sector experts into government problem solving. As it's envisioned, government officials will define topics, pose and distribute questions, and manage feedback on the wiki.

The concept has great potential, but Expert-Net is getting off to a slow start. A wiki established to brainstorm its design has generated only a handful of comments. In an attempt to spur interest, Chopra wrote a blog post explaining how the system is intended to work. That the federal CTO had to solicit public input on a project that itself is designed to solicit public input speaks to the challenge—most Americans aren't aware of the new open government platforms or, if they are, aren't being drawn into the give and take of participatory government. Chopra said getting the word out is a huge challenge, admitting: "I'm terrible at marketing."

Yes, this is partly a failure to get the word out, but architecting an expert network may simply be too arcane a subject to stimulate community

activity. A better approach: Build the expert wiki, then let users suggest improvements.

Public Engagement

Jeanne Holm is among the dozens of federal employees who have taken on new responsibilities to increase public engagement. A 26-year NASA veteran, Holm has become an "evangelist" for Data.gov. On the site's community section, she initiates forum threads on topics such as security, openness, and measuring the value of government data. "It's my job to find where the conversations are happening, then to become part of them," she says.

Even with this proactive approach, however, it's been slow going. Two months after the November launch of Data.gov's community section, only 60 comments had been posted on 10 topics.

What's coming next may hold greater potential. GSA plans to roll out "topical communities," around areas of interest such as healthcare, energy, education, and climate. These communities will provide easy access to relevant data sets, and stakeholders from government agencies will lead and participate in the discussions. "We want to give people easy, integrated access with some context around the data," Holm says.

Federal CTO Chopra: Marketing's not his forte

Beyond that, she describes a scenario where the public soon will be able to create wiki-like discussions around individual data sets. A new application, based on open source Drupal content management software and the Bing search engine, will let users comment on data sets and connect with the government official responsible for them.

That approach would enable an unprecedented degree of dialogue and collaboration around government data. And it would let the public weigh in on just what is and isn't data of "high value." In a presentation at the Gov 2.0 Summit last fall, Ellen Miller, executive director of the Sunlight Foundation and an open government advocate, dinged the feds for a lackluster effort at making "real" high-value data available. In a follow-up interview, Miller scoffed at the Interior Department's categorization of data on wild horses and burros

on public lands as being highly valuable. "That's unacceptable," she says.

The Sunlight Foundation has also called attention to the problem of incomplete, inconsistent, and inaccurate information that's been released under the auspices of open government. It compared 2009 federal spending data on USAspending.gov to data in other federal reporting systems and found a staggering $1.36 trillion discrepancy.

World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee, one of the chief figures in the U.K.'s open government efforts, has created his own five-star system for rating the value of government data. Berners-Lee's rating system looks like this: The act of posting data to the Web under open license garners only a single star in his estimation. Releasing data in structured formats earns two stars. Three stars if it's in a nonproprietary format. If the data includes URLs and links, making it easy to locate and reuse, the effort gets four stars. Five stars for data that includes additional links for added context.

WikiLeaks Fallout

The WikiLeaks disclosure of confidential government documents could throw a wrench into open government efforts. At the same time that agencies are being asked to

open their databases, they're being forced to reassess security with an eye on preventing unintended disclosures.

Fed CTO Chopra insists that ramped up data security won't undermine open government. "Our commitment to open government is foundational, not ephemeral," he says. Just days after that statement, however, some agencies blocked access to Web sites that published the WikiLeaks cables, and OMB warned federal employees not to access the purloined cables even from home computers.

10 Next Steps

Chopra admits there's "much, much more work to do" in advancing open government. He wants agencies to continue releasing high-value data, do a "much better job" facilitating public participation, and do more to create interfaces that make it fast and easy to tap into government data.

We agree that much remains to be done. What follows is *InformationWeek Government*'s list of 10 action items that must be addressed this year if open government is to reach the critical mass necessary for long-term success.

1 | Create a master index The 300,000 data sets released on Data.gov are just a drop in the bucket when it comes to all the data

Find Out More

>> View the Office of Management and Budget's open government scorecard

>> Take a look at the White House's open government Web page

>> Get the Open Government Data Benchmark Study by Socrata, the Sunlight Foundation, and others

stored in federal databases. What's needed is an inventory of all the data that's collected, generated, and managed by agencies. "We don't know what kind of data is collected," says the Sunlight Foundation's Miller. "Give me an audit of what you collect."

2 | Release more data The volume of data released so far is a decent start, but it's not nearly enough. Data.gov shows that some organizations have yet to release any data sets, while others have released just a few. The vast majority of what has been released is geodata from the departments of Commerce and Interior.

3 | Improve data quality When developers were asked in a recent survey by Socrata, a specialist in social data discovery, what would help them use government data, 47% cited better-data quality (see chart, p. 13). Guidance may be

needed to help agencies master the science of data cleansing and quality control.

4 | Automate data distribution Open government will work at scale only if content can be easily consumed. That includes converting paper documents into electronic ones, making data available in popular file types like XML and PDF, and publishing APIs. Carl Malamud of PublicResource.org proposes that the government spend $250 million annually over the next 10 years on a national scanning initiative to convert paper docs into downloadable digital formats.

5 | Engage the public in new ways Many of the Web sites created as first steps in the open government effort are little more than static pages. Agencies must find ways to spark the public's interest and show that they're responsive. This will likely require training government workers to spend more time interacting with the public using the latest generation of online tools.

6 | Reduce FOIA backlogs The Open Government Directive calls for agencies to reduce Freedom of Information Act backlogs by 10% annually. Twenty-five percent would be a better target. The directive calls on agencies to "proactively use" technology to disseminate useful information rather than wait for FOIA

requests. Why not link those goals? Use technology to expedite responses to FOIA requests and deliver related information that may already be available.
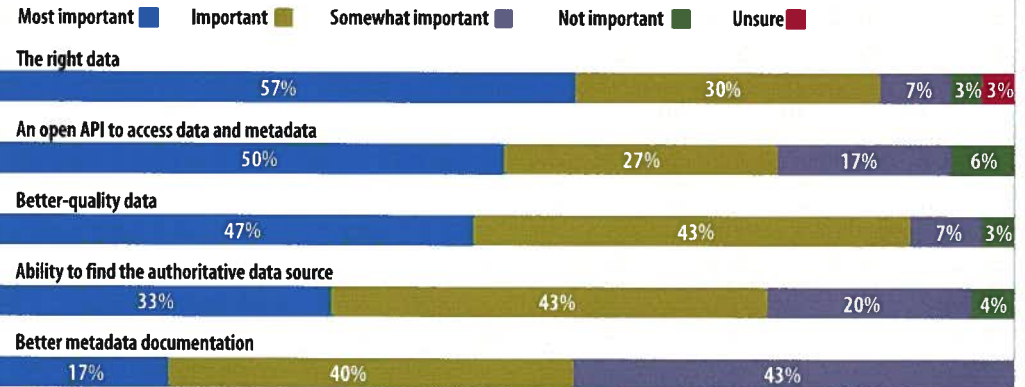
7 | Apply better metrics The Open Government Directive is surprisingly light on hard number objectives. Aside from a mandate for three high-value data sets per agency and deadlines for meeting various requirements, many of the expectations are vague. Last year, we called for a more concrete approach, including the ability to track costs and return on investment. The key objectives of open government—transparency, participation, collaboration—should all be measured for effectiveness and accountability.

8 | Greater accountability is needed There must be consequences when agencies don't deliver. Among the options: Hold TechStat IT project review sessions focused on open government performance, tie IT budgets to results, and bring in new open government leaders at agencies that are deemed to be laggards.

9 | Engage the private sector Open government creates fertile ground for public-private partnerships around new applications and services, economic opportunities, government efficiencies, and other public service innovations and improvements. Citizens, Web developers, entrepreneurs, tech vendors, and

The Right Data Matters To Developers

When government data is available, what's important in helping you use it efficiently?

Most important ■ **Important** ■ **Somewhat important** ■ **Not important** ■ **Unsure** ■

The right data

Most important	Important	Not important	Unsure	Unsure
57%	30%	7%	3%	3%

An open API to access data and metadata

50%	27%	17%	6%

Better-quality data

47%	43%	7%	3%

Ability to find the authoritative data source

33%	43%	20%	4%

Better metadata documentation

17%	40%	43%

Data: Socrata 2010 Open Data Benchmark study of 50 civic application developers

other companies have all gotten involved at some level, but we've only scratched the surface. Agencies should host forums, seek out public venues (such as trade shows and conferences), and do more in general to identify new collaborative initiatives.

10 | Get the word out Too many Americans don't grasp open government. When Socrata asked 1,000 adults in the U.S. whether they had heard of or read about the federal open data initiative over the past 12 months, 65% said that they hadn't (see chart, p. 9). Agencies must do more to help the public understand the possibilities and processes of open government, and

Obama himself must lead that effort.

Open government is off to a good start, but it needs more than good intentions. It will require clarity of objectives, buy-in from managers and staff, performance monitoring, and businesslike execution. And even then, open government will work only if the public decides to participate.

If those responsible for implementing open government take too long to get it right, the whole effort could bog down. Open government cannot cruise ahead on autopilot.

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