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Can the Public Sector Leviathan Be Reformed? Right Sizing Possibilities for the Twenty-First Century

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Reinventing government (REGO) reforms, once dismissed by some as a passing fad, have made inroads in the public sector. However many barriers to REGO reforms, both inside and outside of government, still exist. The authors discuss some of these barriers and also offer suggestions to overcome the resistance to change. They conclude that REGO reforms must be embraced if the public sector is to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the Information Age and advancing Information Technology (IT).

INTRODUCTION

In the years since the publication of *Reinventing Government* (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993) a revolutionary school of thought regarding bureaucratic development and performance in America has become conventional wisdom for many. This once dismissed “passing fad” is even now known by its own acronym: REGO (Wolf, 1997). As Laudicina (1995) noted the REGO reform movement first caught the academic community by surprise, and once caught, then was viewed with considerable skepticism and even alarm. Reengineering, entrepreneurial management, empowerment, and privatization, according to the skeptics were, at best, simplistic, and, at worst, doomed to failure. Even the noted management writer Peter Drucker once dismissed many REGO pronouncements as «empty slogans» *(The Economist,* 1996, p. 67). Today, the public sector accepts many REGO prescriptions uncritically.

REGO has influence for several reasons. First, the REGO movement has the double-barreled stimuli of the Obsorne and Gaebler book as well as the concurrent publication of the *Report of the National Performance Review* (Gore, 1993). The latter work is the result of the national committee chaired by Vice President Al Gore. Both of these publications received wide national and international press attention. Second, local, state and national governments adopted quickly many REGO principles, especially privatization of services. For example,

previously thought of as government-only services shifted either to the private sector or to the new public-private partnerships. Third, a growing anti-big government movement swept the U.S. and the world. Although scholars can dispute the exact date of the beginning of the current movement, a reasonable beginning date is the late 1970s with the California Proposition 13 anti-tax initiative. The movement picked up steam in the 1980s with the New Federalism approach adopted by Ronald Reagan and the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in Great Britain. More recently, it was seen as the backlash against the U.S. Health Care Reform Task Force chaired by Hilary Rodham Clinton in 1994. The phrase "the best government is the least government" is especially significant with "least" often meaning the least expensive in terms of taxation. Also to the public and many successfully elected officials, a reengineered and right-sized government was needed and that often translated to cutting the total number of government employees *(The Economist,* 1996).

Yet, despite the REGO movement, public sector organizations have not reengineered or right-sized to the extent possible or even desirable compared to their counterparts in the private sector. The Information Technology (IT) changes helped to continue the major transformation that actually began in the 1980s with waves of private sector mergers and consolidation. During the last decade, traditional bureaucratic structures were thrown out in favor of flattened organization structures with fewer workers and even fewer managers. The reforms eliminated established lines of authority and rewarded empowered workers to take risks. Now in the 1990s, the rapid growth of IT has created virtual organizations across department and even corporate lines *(Healthcare Financial Management,* 1997).

Although the REGO movement and the IT revolution created sometimes rapid and radical change in the private sector, the public sector did not achieve a parallel impact. Thus, the desire for radical right-sizing in the public sector continues while only limited success is accomplished. For example although the Clinton Administration cut over 244,000 positions from the federal government since 1992, it has yet to address right-sizing conceptually *(The Economist,* 1996). This article explains that public sector reformers can only accomplish right-sizing with a comprehensive approach keyed to the advancing IT implications. In particular, the current command and control approaches to public budgeting and personnel administration must be abandoned and replaced with decentralized reforms. We discuss the sources of resistance to the REGO change, both from inside and outside of government. Finally we argue that this resistance must be overcome if the public sector is to take advantage of the possibilities offered by REGO and the ever-accelerating pace of IT change in our times.

THE DYSFUNCTIONAL COMMAND AND CONTROL PERSONNEL AND BUDGETING SYSTEMS

Although now dysfunctional in many ways, our current approaches to budgeting and personnel administration in the public sector were often quite appropriate for the needs of one hundred years ago. The current structures were put in place to address real problems in government service and they were largely quite successful. Our current structures are primarily rooted in the ideas and processes developed during the Progressive Movement. This set of beliefs came to define the American notion of modern society with its strong central role for government in society. Under Progressivism, government regulates the private sector and directly guides the nation's social, economic and environmental realities. Progressivism called for government, especially the federal government quite appropriately at this time, to take an activist role in society. This included being a guarantor of national economic stabilization, safety, and the health of the people (Brier, 1992). Perhaps the following quote captures the importance of the Progressive Movement:

«The Progressive Movement transformed government in America. To end the use of government jobs as patronage, the Progressives created the Civil Service System with written exams, lock step pay scales, and protection from arbitrary hiring or dismissal. To keep major construction projects like bridges and tunnels out of reach of politicians, they created independent public authorities. To limit the power of political bosses, they split up management functions, took appointments to important offices away from mayors and governors, created separately elected clerks, judges and even sheriffs. To keep the administrators of public services untainted by the influence of politicians, they created a profession of city manager professionals, insulated from politics, who could run the bureaucracies in an efficient business-like manner» (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993, p. 13).

Compared to earlier governments in the world, progressive government was efficient and effective in providing national security, economic stability, and social services to the nation's people. It provided a sense of equity and fairness in services needed to fuel the industrial era. It worked particularly well by providing massive numbers of roads, bridges, tunnels, communications, sewer and water works, electrical projects and schools. The bureaucratic centralized command and control model also worked particularly well in times of crises as goals were clear and widely shared. Tasks were straightforward and measurable. Because of democracy, shared values existed. There was a wide spread willingness to work together toward common goals. Like other industrialized societies in the world, America responded well to the command and control mentality (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993).

Under the direction of the Progressives, modern budgeting came into being. Influential reformers like Woodrow Wilson argued in favor of strengthening the executive authority in government through budget process reform (Lynch, 1995). As the reform movement continued, business interests demanded greater government economy and efficiency, partly in response to the new progressive tax system promoted by Wilson. Budget reform focused on enhanced control, better management and enhanced planning. With a focus on control, budget formats stressed guaranteeing agency accountability. They did this by ensuring that the agency used the money provided them only for the stated policy established by law. Audit provisions were added and later strengthened to enhance central control, confront corruption, and prevent public employees from being unchecked in their decision making (Lynch, Hwang, and Lynch, 1996; Starling, 1998).

A review of the modern public personnel management system also reveals the influence of many Progressive Era reforms. Although the evolution of American personnel administration can be divided into several distinct phases, Nicholas Henry (1995) characterized the period of 1883-1906 as a true reform period, chiefly because it addressed the corrupt excesses of the spoils system that preceded it in the early nineteenth century. The spoils system was most associated with the administration of President Andrew Jackson and eventually led a group of individuals to found the New York Civil Service Reform Association in 1877. Later, more and more state civil service reform groups followed the New York example as they were increasingly influenced by the National Civil Service Reform League (which is now know as the National Civil Service League). These groups, borrowing from Britain, promoted and advocated the concept of merit in the public service, especially in the Federal government. Upon the assassination of President James Garfield by a disillusioned government job seeker, Congress quickly considered and passed national civil service reform legislation. The Pendleton Act was passed in 1883 and civil service reform became national policy. The Act created a bipartisan Civil Service Commission, which was replaced in 1978 by the Office of Personnel Management and the Merit Systems Protection Board. The major change of the civil service movement established the task of filling government positions only through a process of open, competitive examinations (Henry, 1995; Starling, 1998).

According to Henry (1995), the crusade for reform of the personnel administration system had three dominant characteristics. First, the reform movement was negative in the sense it did away with the spoils system and its attendant problems. Second, the movement had a high moral tone, associating the terms “goodness” and “badness” with the way people were hired and maintained their employment with the government. Lastly, the reform movement was concerned with efficiency in government. The reformers believed that the merit system would help assure a more efficient and less corrupt government system. Perhaps even more important, the Civil Service Commission and its descendant agencies were buffers against inappropriate political

pressure. These institutional buffers form the core of what would later become the "professionalization" of the bureaucracy. If the professional bureaucrat could be insulated from political influence, and serve as a counterweight to the elected politician, the result the reformers reasoned was to create a more efficient government.

In the years since the Progressive Era, public sector personnel management has continued its original reform focus. The only substantive attempt to modify the basic principles established by the Progressives was the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 passed during the administration of President Jimmy Carter. Among other things, this Act split the Civil Service Commission (and with it the oversight of federal civil service personnel) into two parts: an executive branch dependent agency (the Office of Personnel Management) and a quasi-independent agency (the Merit Systems Protection Board). Following the European tradition first established in the 1870s, the Act also established a Senior Executive Service whose members were ranked by their own accomplishments and training (Henry, 1995). Even with these important changes to federal public sector personnel administration operation, the centralized command and control, efficiency-based structures were not altered in any fundamental way. Now, over twenty years later, public sector personnel administration policies and procedures, developed to meet pressing problems of the late nineteenth century, are still in place as we start the twenty-first century.

BARRIERS TO REGO SUCCESS

Although, as noted at the beginning of this article, the will exists to implement REGO reforms, public budgeting and personnel administration barriers are in place that frustrate the desired reforms. The bureaucratic command and control budgeting and personnel administration developed at a time when:

— society evolved much slower;
— manufacturing was creating the new jobs;
— large corporations and governments used hierarchy to control their organizations;
— mass markets were the key to economic success, and
— population often associated together with strong family units.

As we near the next century, we are experiencing almost the polar opposite conditions. We live in a time of:

— breathtaking change;
— service and knowledge industries are creating the new jobs;
— organizations using networks and webs;
— global markets with market niches being critical, and
— people living in more isolated communities with fragmented family units (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993).

These trends can also be seen graphically in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Progressive/Liberal versus information age characteristics (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993, p. 15)

Characteristics	Progressive/Liberal Era	Information Era
Speed of technological advances	Evolved slowly	Breathtaking speed
Source of new employment	Mainly manufacturing	Service and knowledge industries
Organizational structure	Top down, hierarchical	Networks,webs, partnerships, coordinated teams
Key to economic success	Mass marketing	Global marketing targeted at specific niches
Social structure	Strong associations, communities, neighborhoods, and family units	Isolated individuals, fragmented communities, dysfunctional family units

For the last two decades, futurists continue to tell us that technology changed how our society operates and that our organizations are changing to accommodate the new technology. The rapid evolution of the computer and related software makes using information in daily work activities radically different. The very nature of how we can and do accomplish our work has shifted dramatically. New jobs are increasingly information dependent and organizations can work better as decentralized units that are connected together not by hierarchies but by webs (e.g., Naisbitt, 1984; Reich, 1992; Hammer and Champy, 1993). However, we need to identify and address barriers inside and outside of government before the public sector can fully take advantage of IT and what the Information Age offers. Some of the more important barriers are job protectionism, the technical expertise barrier, the need for a higher ethical plateau, and giving up political and economic power. These barriers, along with suggested REGO reforms, can be seen graphically in **Table 2**. Both the barriers and reforms are discussed in more detail.

Table 2. REGO barriers and reforms for public personnel and public budgeting activities

Barriers	Reforms
Job protectionism	Job flexibility
Low technical expertise	Knowledge worker/IT-based
Higher ethics	Ethical grounding
Giving up power	Entrepreneurial management

JOB PROTECTIONISM

Nearly 17 percent of all union members in America are public sector employees with more than six percent of all union members working in the federal government, and more than ten percent have jobs in state and local governments. About 37 percent of all government workers belong to unions. Of this number, about 60 percent are federal employees and 43 percent are state and local government employees (Henry, 1995). U.S. federal, state and local governments must deal with many different unions as well as a plethora of individual bargaining units (Gray and Johnson, 1997).

Although public sector employee organization efforts go back to the early nineteenth century, a major landmark occurred with the passage of the Lloyd-LaFollette Act in 1912 which first allowed the federal government employees to organize. Even with this and other new rights to organize and collectively bargain on issues such as salaries, hours and working conditions, governments on all levels have continued to resist the rights of their employees to use the ultimate weapon at their disposal: the right to strike (Henry, 1995).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the lives of many America workers, both in and out of government, were not very pleasant. Until the union movement began to take hold in the early twentieth century, common problems included work weeks of eighty or more hours; child labor abuses; monitoring worker's tasks with minute detail; and providing little latitude including asking permission even to go to the bathroom. For example, Henry Ford carried such practices one step further: he even had a company police force whose job was to monitor the private lives of employees (Buell, 1997).

The union movement, formed to address these and other important problems of a previous era, now finds itself (sometimes unwittingly) serving as a barrier to many of the necessary REGO reforms in the public sector. For example, as noted earlier, IT is ending the days of assembly lines and many kinds of rote, tedious jobs. Modern IT changed the face of the public sector workplace. Today budgeting and personnel administration activities in the public sector need more thoughtful and flexible workers who both use the new technologies and fashion continuously improving public services. Traditional boundaries between production and management are breaking down. Because unions assume a permanent division of interest between managers and owners on the one hand and the work force on the other, they too often hinder flexible adaptation to the IT twenty first century workplace (Buell, 1997).

Moreover the union movement, for the first time in a generation, has mobilized successfully members to vote and to volunteer in campaigns for major political offices at all levels. According to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, the hoped for result of this involvement is to preserve past union gains and slow or reverse many of the REGO inspired reforms (Gray and Johnson, 1997). Exit polls indicated that voters from union households made up 23 percent of the total vote for U.S. House of Representative seats, up from 14 percent in 1994 and 19 percent in

1992 (Candaele and Dreier, 1996). In a recent election in California, the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor targeted three state legislative seats in suburban Burbank, Glendale, and Pasadena that Republicans held for half a century. The unions used computerized lists to identify households with union members and organized a political education and voters registration effort among their members. All three union candidates won, regaining a Democrat majority in the State Assembly and preserving a narrow Democrat majority in the Senate (Candaele and Dreier, 1996).

Finally, in the health and human service sector, union activity attacked the very premises of work redesign. For example, the California Nurses Association (CNA) and the SEIU Local 250 make no secret of the fact that they intend to attack the very premises on which the market-based reforms in healthcare are founded (Gray and Johnson, 1997). In particular, they are warning their members of the dangers of workplace restructuring and downsizing, promoting studies that indicate that increased illnesses and injuries befall nurses who work in organizations that were reengineered (Shogren, 1996).

TECHNICAL EXPERTISE BARRIER

Advancing IT and the Information Age requires a new type of public sector employee: the knowledge worker with an entrepreneurial spirit. In the public sector of the past and even now, the tight command and control system restricted managers and workers to such an extent that individuals were encouraged not to work “outside of the box” or act in an entrepreneurial manner. REGO reforms require workers and managers to have this expertise because thinking creatively and in an entrepreneurial manner are essential. However, one of the most difficult barriers to implementing REGO reforms is the lack of such expertise in the public sector.

REGO involves the processing of large amounts of data, which will require higher levels of computer skills, as well as greater analytical and behavioral talent and skills (Lynch and Lynch, forthcoming). Knowledge workers, who can accomplish these tasks, are not attracted to the public sector. We can overcome this barrier on two levels. First, the public sector must be willing to compete for the best talent, as does the private sector. This is made more difficult by the fact that the public sector does not react quickly to changing external market forces. Second, we must reduce and even overcome the public sector organizational resistance to employing entrepreneurial, “out of the box” knowledge workers and managers. If this is not accomplished then the internal organizational environment will be dysfunctional and even hostile to the needed change.

HIGHER ETHICAL PLATEAU NEEDED

A basic tenant of democracy is that governments elected by the people are responsible and accountable to the people. Therefore critical to the success of REGO reforms in democracies are achieving a responsible and accountable government. Although citizen empowerment and customer satisfaction determine the parameters of the entrepreneurial spirit in government, the larger ethical issue of accountability for spending the people's money (in the case of budgeting) and redesigning and rightsizing (in the case of personnel administration) remains. If an agency and program manager are to be entrusted with these tasks without the traditional command and control micro management, they still must be held accountable if we are to maintain our democracies. With REGO comes the need to decide more independently issues of what is right and wrong and the potential of loss of accountability and responsibility to the whole society.

Examples of REGO-based accountability mechanisms that confront this challenge are many. Governments on all levels are already implementing performance measures based on outcomes. Such measures establish managerial accountability and often are established with memoranda of understandings; performance contract agreements with incentives, such as personal bonuses, percent split of profit earnings to program agency and seed funds; and business plans with profit and loss statements. Management can easily extend performance contracts to public/private ventures, as well as contracted service providers, licensees, and franchisees in almost all areas of service (Lynch, Hwang, and Lynch, 1996).

The challenges for implementing these accountability mechanisms are many, especially in a rapidly transforming environment. For example, Joseph Rost in *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (1991) argued the world is experiencing a radical transformation which futurists claim is changing the basic values of the present industrial era. Following this theme, others have predicted that the «rational, male, technocrat, quantitative, goal-dominated, cost-benefit driven, hierarchical, short-term, pragmatic, materialistic model must give way to a new kind of leadership based on different assumptions and values» (Garafalo,1995). A pervasive sense exists that our fundamental perspectives on life are changing radically and any new values or perspectives built on the industrial paradigm are not adequate for the next century.

Unfortunately at a time when the public sector manager should look to academia and its study of Public Administration for assistance in working within this new entrepreneurial environment, the field itself is in turmoil. As Lynch, Omdal, and Cruise (1997) have noted, we have allowed public service to become secularized and lost our links to a greater wisdom. In the past, public administration was focused on objectivity, detachment and the logical positivist legacy promoted in mid-century by Herbert Simon. Now, even this approach is being supplanted by postmodernist thought, which rejects all objectivity and replaces it with nothing (e.g. Cruise, forthcoming). Without a viable link to ethics,

public sector managers working within networks and web environments will be faced with moral dilemmas that can, among other things, threaten democratic governance and reduce political responsiveness (e.g., Cope, 1997; O'Toole, 1997). If REGO reforms are to prosper in the twenty-first century in a networked environment, public sector managers will need to develop a much better basis to make ethical decisions. As Lynch, Omdal, and Cruise (1997) have suggested, a source for such a value base should include the spiritual wisdom of the ages and might easily be built on Aristotle's value ethics (Lynch and Lynch, 1998).

GIVING UP POWER

The efficiency paradigm, underlying many of the Progressive Era Reforms in budgeting and personnel administration, requires legislative oversight and control over the workings of government. In the twentieth century reform movement, tightly controlled government was both efficient, effective, safe and corruption-free. Unfortunately the mechanisms in place to keep government and government managers tightly controlled is another barrier to implementing REGO reforms in the twenty-first century.

In budgeting, for example, line item budgeting is very useful for exercising control especially if one wants to tightly restrict employee action in an agency. The line item format stresses accountability in terms of what money can be spent but not for the larger purposes for which the program was established. By assuring the money is spent on only the acceptable expenditures, a type of accountability is achieved but it shows little faith in the manager's ability to direct and ultimately achieve program objectives. By adding the auditing process, focus is brought to expenditure spending in terms of line item budgets. Thus, a type of accountability is created that confronts corruption, helps discourage public employees deviating from strict instructions, and enhances tighter control over the employee's behavior (Lynch and Lynch, forthcoming). But this control comes at the price of limiting the creative forces of the employee.

In personnel administration, many similar examples of tight control also exist. For example position classification systems, first developed for the federal government in the Progressive Era, now are widely used by all levels of government. These systems group positions into rational classes on the basis of comparable duties, responsibilities, and skills for each function. Most cities and counties use a single classification system for all employees, although many (like the federal government) use different classification plans for different kinds of employees, such as clerks, trades people, professionals, and executives. The smaller the jurisdiction, the more likely there will be multiple classification systems (Henry, 1995). Position classification systems work very well for a hierarchical command and control environment. In a networked, multifunctional environment brought about by increasing IT, the need is to cross-train and allow workers to move across rigid

position classification systems. Restrictive position classification systems can also work to frustrate REGO reforms.

In these two administrative functions of the public sector (budgeting and personnel administration), Progressive Era management policies and procedures reformed bad government practices in the nineteenth century by tightly restricting government and public sector lower level managers. To take advantage of the Information Age and advancing IT, twenty-first century reformers must reduce or eliminate those restrictions. In the case of budgeting, public sector managers should be permitted to allocate and expend their money in the best possible ways to achieve the policy mission mandates. In exchange for this liberty, however, each program must have clear mission statements, measurable outcome goals using specific performance measures in order to hold the public sector managers accountable to the policy makers, and a monitoring system in place that allows elected officials to ensure their policy mandates are accomplished (Lynch, Hwang and Lynch, 1996).

In the case of personnel administration, rigid position classification systems that restrict the ability of public managers to cross-train and reallocate workers across department and even the boundaries of government (as in public-private partnerships) are an impediment. In a synthesis of REGO budgeting and personnel administration, reformers should allow managers to develop program budgets that permit a salary component for fewer multifunctional Information Age staff. Such a reformed system should not adhere to a position classification system that arbitrarily slots people into trades, clerical, or managerial positions without regard to needs of the program.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued that the advancing IT brought about the Information Age and REGO. In turn, they have presented the public sector with unprecedented opportunities for reform, especially in the areas of budgeting and personnel administration. We also argued our twentieth century command and control approaches to these functions limit our ability to take advantage of all IT offers, particularly in terms of reengineering and rightsizing public sector organizations. This is true, both inside and outside of government, because a number of barriers exist that increase organizational resistance to REGO reform. We have identified some of those barriers which must be addressed (and overcome) if the reforms are to be successful.

We need more innovation in the public sector. Although there are many negative aspects to REGO, those reforms should lead to improved public services and should be accepted. The price for not accepting this change is great, but one consequence will mean an increasing inability for government on all levels to address even the most basic needs of its citizens at a tax level people are willing to pay. Moreover, if recent history is a gauge, citizens will demand even lower tax levels at the cost of rapidly diminishing public sector services in spite of the negative consequences to society.

Like the Progressive Era early in this century, the Information Era is now and will continue to have profound effects on all aspects of society. The Progressive Era reforms addressed the practices brought about by the spoils system. The Information Age, advancing IT, and REGO reforms confront and are antithetical to Progressive Era centralized command and control bureaucratic structures. They cannot be sustained if twenty-first century reform is to be successful.

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