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Jacksonville, Fla., Creates Scorecard for Government Services.

Opaque governments, pay attention. Jacksonville, Fla., is showing how to do transparency right.

On March 5, Mayor Alvin Brown announced the city's new open data webpage, called JaxScore 1.0, which provides basic metrics about various city services for all to see. This transparency effort, officials say, is a push toward Brown's goals of improving performance and efficiency, and increasing public participation in government.

JaxScore 1.0 displays boxes in a grid format; each box shows a metric for a city agency, such as Animal Care & Protective Services, Information Technologies Division and the Jacksonville Children's Commission. If residents want to know how many jobs were created in one year by the Office of Economic Development, for instance, it's easy to see that the number is 1,712 (as of March 31). Clicking on that box brings up a PDF where users can view basic trend data in a graph, and a chart outlining more advanced data.

To make this data available, the city first had to begin collecting it — which has changed how employees are working.

Having the data published online is great for the public, but it also helps the city see how it's matching up to its goals, said Karen Bowling, Jacksonville's chief administration officer.

"We're all used to being graded," she said. "From first grade, kindergarten, we measure everything, so our employees really appreciate the opportunity to have this objective data so that it feeds right into the employee evaluation process. Rather than having to rely on anecdotal information, they can, on a monthly basis, know how they're doing against their goals. It's a thing of competence – they know where they're at."

How did the concept originate? From budget cuts, Bowling said. The city took a long hard look in the mirror, and decided that to make the most of their resources, it would need to benchmark its performance — something it previously had not been doing thoroughly, she said.

And it is a big change for city employees, said Cleveland Ferguson, deputy chief administration officer for the city. Pockets of government have done things in the same way for a long time, he said, so getting people to track their progress has been a bit of a culture shift — but it's worth it to get focused around the Mayor's goal of making government more efficient.

The data is available to the public through the JaxScore website, as well as to city employees internally through a dashboard. The data is collected by each departmental division, each of which has been assigned a data analytics person. The analytics employees along with a process improvement internal team work together to collect data each month, and that data is published quarterly. Eventually, Ferguson said, this data will build and allow them to recognize trends.

Now that employees started that habit of collecting the data and paying attention to performance, they're getting comfortable with the process — and enjoying the benefits the system brings, Ferguson said. Each month, employees can look back and see what they've done and how that compares to their goals.

The system was developed internally, with no outside procurement, and there was no cost other than a time investment, Ferguson said. It took about four months of intense dedication from a small team to get the system to where it is today, he said — and the response has been positive. "We've gotten glowing feedback from many constituencies that are into transparency and more open government," he said. "It has been overwhelmingly positive and we are very appreciative of that."

The culture shift and change in work processes is important, but the technology was a big piece too, Ferguson said — and the city will keep updating and improving the system. The city is now looking at several new interfaces that would allow employees to input data themselves, which would further streamline the data collection process, he said. The city plans to eventually add that functionality, as well as more public facing data, he said. The city's complaint system allows officials to monitor complaints, comments and questions in near-real time, and in a future iteration of Jaxscore, he said, that data will become available online, too.

Strong executive leadership from CIO Usha Mohan also was an important key to getting this project launched and having it be a success, Ferguson said. Mohan's background in health care, a sector that places emphasis on analytics, played a critical role in her understanding the importance of the city's transparency efforts, he said.

"We made a conscious decision to use IT strategically and not as merely providing a service," he said. "And she's the perfect CIO to appreciate the strategic nature of IT being change."

By Colin Wood

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