

## **Response to RFI: “Establishing a GEAR Center”**

To Whom It May Concern:

The Behavioral Insights Team is pleased to respond to the RFI “Establishing a Government Effectiveness Advanced Research (GEAR) Center.”

The Behavioral Insights Team was founded in 2010 inside the UK Cabinet Office. We are now an independent consultancy whose mission is to help governments and other organizations worldwide apply insights from behavioral science and rigorously test outcomes. As a social purpose company, we define success by our ability to create social impact through improved services, programs and policies. At the heart of our approach is rigorous, iterative piloting that enables us to know which interventions are effective. We combine the rigor of academia with the pragmatism and professionalism of consulting.

By combining an expert understanding of behavioral sciences, experience of public policy, and the necessary pragmatism to make things happen inside government, the team has had substantial successes across policy areas and geographies. We continue to work with the UK national government, and now with the national governments of Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore. In the past three years in the US we have completed 75+ projects with 35+ municipal governments, many through our participation in the What Works Cities program, a public-private partnership focused on increasing the use of data and evidence by cities. Of particular relevance to this RFI, we also completed (1) an extended project in the UK on workforce reskilling, and (2) a report on how insights from behavioral science can improve the work of government. Both are described below.

For any questions or follow-up related to this response, please contact Jacob Appel (jacob.appel@bi.team).

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### **3. What model of public-private partnership should inform the GEAR Center?**

We have responded to this RFI because we considered that our own history and operating model – which evolved from our initial incubation by the UK national government – might be relevant to GEAR. The Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) began in 2010 as a small team of British public servants housed in the Cabinet Office with a remit to develop and execute standalone projects with a variety of ministries. Over time, as more agencies both within and beyond the UK national government became interested in working with BIT, we needed more flexibility. Consequently in 2014 we mutualized to become a private company with a unique ownership structure: BIT’s roughly 170 employees own a third; Nesta, a British charity that funds innovation, owns a third; and the UK government still owns a third.

BIT’s operating model in the UK could be a relevant example for GEAR. Our headquarters in London is located in Westminster, in a private office that is walking distance from key national ministries. Our London staff of approximately 100 work in project teams from our headquarters, making visits to client

(ministry) offices as needed. Occasionally we locate project staff semi-permanently within client offices, but we also value the “cross pollination” that occurs when teams work on diverse projects out of a single space.

Across a range of topics and projects, we have found three areas of expertise to be essential to our work: (1) specific topics in public policy, (2) academic-quality research (especially randomized controlled trials), and (3) consulting/client service. Our project staff usually have backgrounds in one or more of these areas. We assemble project teams of 2-5 that blend these capabilities according to the needs of each assignment. Occasionally we collaborate with outside experts where they have a distinct value-add, e.g., liaising with leading academics to bring their latest research topics to the front lines of implementation.

From when we mutualized as a private company through 2018 we operated as a preferred supplier to the UK national government; with the release of a new procurement framework for suppliers of behavioral science services, we now compete with five other suppliers for most contracts. Using the framework, specific ministries secure our services through procurements, RFPs, and competitive tenders. We believe our “incubation period,” first inside and then alongside the national government, is an important reason why today BIT is a viable contender for many of these contracts.

## **7. What models, approaches, and opportunities should inform an anticipated early focus on reskilling and upskilling Federal employees?**

BIT completed a series of projects in the UK related to reskilling and redeploying workers that may be of interest to the GEAR Center. We worked with Job Centres (public facilities that serve the unemployed with financial benefits, career counseling, and other supports) to update the processes and procedures they use to help unemployed people get back to work. The initial updates were quite modest:

1. Ensuring every incoming job seeker talks about getting back to work on their first day by cutting down and reorganising intake processes;
2. Introducing “stretching” commitment devices that focus on what the job seeker will do in the coming two weeks, rather than tallying what they have done over the past two weeks;
3. Building psychological resilience for job seekers still out of work after 8 weeks.

The effort was highly successful: job seekers that went through the updated process were 15-20% more likely to be off public benefits after 13 weeks than job seekers that went through the standard process. A brief description of the project is available [here](#).<sup>1</sup>

We highlight two lessons from this project. First, the updates we helped make to the Job Centres process were informed by insights from the field of behavioral science – the study of how people make choices. Rather than changing major policy parameters or program requirements, we focus on understanding how people behave in response to government services and redesign them accordingly.

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed description can be found in our [2013-2015 Update Report](#), p.7-9

Our 500+ projects worldwide, and the growth of behavioral science in public policy generally,<sup>2</sup> attest to the broad applicability of this approach. The GEAR Center might consider building behavioral science expertise into its core skill-set; doing so would enable it to support innovation across a wide range of policy areas and government agencies.

Second, this project was the first of four we completed with Job Centres. In each, we proposed just a few process changes, implemented them on a pilot basis, and conducted a rigorous randomized evaluation to see if outcomes improved. This allowed us to build on the process changes that worked, and at each stage discard the ones that failed. The resulting improvements, refined over four rounds of testing, were ultimately adopted as national policy and implemented across all UK Job Centres. Today 25,000+ career counselors use the improved process to help hundreds of thousands of job seekers find work more quickly. We believe this evidence-driven approach to government innovation, where extended partnerships with agencies provide a platform for an iterative process of design, evaluation, and scaling, could be a model for the GEAR Center.

Separate to our work with Job Centres, BIT recently published a report on [Behavioral Government](#) that we believe is relevant to the GEAR Center's interest in innovation and improvement. Here we turn the lens of behavioral science onto the work of government itself – policy formulation and implementation – instead of onto a specific policy area. Governments are increasingly using behavioural insights to design, enhance and reassess their policies and services. Applying these insights means governments adopt a more realistic view of human behavior than they have done in the past – and may achieve better outcomes as a result. However, elected and unelected government officials are themselves influenced by the same heuristics and biases that they try to address in others. This report explores how this happens – and how these biases can be addressed or mitigated. Its findings could help the GEAR Center identify and pursue specific opportunities to upskill/reskill Federal employees (perhaps with a focus on better decision making), and to improve the work of government broadly.

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<sup>2</sup> The OECD's report [Use of Behavioural Insights in Consumer Policy](#) gives an overview of the growing interest in, and application of, behavioral science for policymaking