

Do Civil Servants Respond to Behavioral Interventions?



Behavioral tools appear to be effective in improving adherence to deadlines in the context of complying with Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation in the City of Buenos Aires.



Notifications that incorporate behavioral insights make deadlines more salient and increase compliance.



Traditional strategies to improve performance do not necessarily work as intended. In fact, some training sessions that emphasize the importance of the legislation caused a significant rise in late responses even when paired with the behavioral intervention.



The training programs created spillover effects across groups: the time it takes a member of the treatment group to respond to a request increases with her interactions with members of the control group at the workshops.

CONTEXT

Limited government capacity is an obstacle to economic growth, welfare, and legitimization. Thus, to improve trust in government as well as demand for public policies, governments must raise task compliance and efficiency in the public sector. Offering financial incentives to increase productivity in the public sector, however, tends to be politically and bureaucratically cumbersome. Using behavioral insights instead could reduce the incidence of obstacles associated with pay-performance schemes since those interventions have low political, financial, and administrative costs.

PROJECT

Law 104 establishes Freedom of Information (FOI) procedures to increase transparency and accountability in the city of Buenos Aires. Even though public servants are expected to comply on time, many FOI requests are answered after lengthy delays. To tackle this issue, in 2018 the city carried out a field experiment designed to increase adherence to deadlines for FOI requests. The intervention involved re-designing the notice for requests to highlight the importance of the law, emphasized repercussions for non-compliance and signaled a high level of monitoring. The new notices also provided clarity on the procedure to comply with requests.

RESULTS

The results show an increase of 6.1 percentage in the share of requests fulfilled by the second deadline (25 business days after the request). This may stem from a strong *anchoring effect*, where the second deadline became more salient for public servants. Notably, the intervention did not increase the overall number of requests completed on time.

In regard to requests fulfilled through the entire period, the new notifications resulted in a substitution effect. This is shown in Figure 1, where fewer requests were fulfilled during the extension period (days 17-23) and more requests were fulfilled before the second deadline (days 24-25). This supports the idea that the intervention made the second deadline more *salient* and shifted requests towards day 25.

The treatment further resulted in important spillover effects, as new notifications changed behavior regarding previous requests. Requests that used the old notification were fulfilled one day sooner when they were filed a day closer to a request using the new notification. This effect increased by 5.5 percentage points the likelihood of fulfilling the request by the first deadline (15 business days).

Some agencies also carried out workshops on the importance of FOI legislation. Surprisingly, civil servants who participated in the workshops without receiving the new notifications responded to request 7.8 days later. For agencies that employed the new notifications and participated in workshops, the likelihood of responding during the first 13 days does not change significantly; nevertheless, the probability of replying late to a request increases by 14 percentage points.

Civil servants in both the control and the treatment groups participated in the workshops, which meant that they could share information. The evidence suggests that an increase in interactions with control group members makes members of the treatment group more likely to respond late to requests.

Key Concept



SPILLOVER EFFECTS

The effects that one intervention has on other behaviors that are not being targeted.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While the treatment did not significantly improve timeliness, it nonetheless had effects on civil servants, suggesting that behavioral interventions can modify public sector performance and deadline adherence. Moreover, they can do so at a lower cost than traditional alternatives—an important consideration in the public sector, where there are limits on the use of differential compensation (e.g., “performance pay”).

Governments should thus consider revising their strategies to increase public sector productivity. In particular, they should reassess the use of training programs. So far, there is little evidence on the effect of training programs, particularly for tasks that officials have no intrinsic motivation to perform. The evidence we present here indicates that training programs are not effective in reducing delays and, on the contrary, seem to have increased them.

Given that the sums spent on traditional training programs are several orders of magnitude larger than those required to design and implement a behavioral intervention, possible unintended consequences are a matter of no small importance. Since the evidence seems to indicate the potential for spillovers or peer effects during training sessions, it may be relevant for public officials not only to design interventions to capture the extent of these externalities (to measure the “water-cooler effect”), but to be aware of the consequences (positive and negative) of interactions between heterogeneous groups (e.g., those with high or low incentives) of civil servants.

Key Concept



ANCHORING EFFECT

The tendency to rely heavily on the first or most noteworthy piece of information received. When individuals act based on that information, it is acting as anchoring.

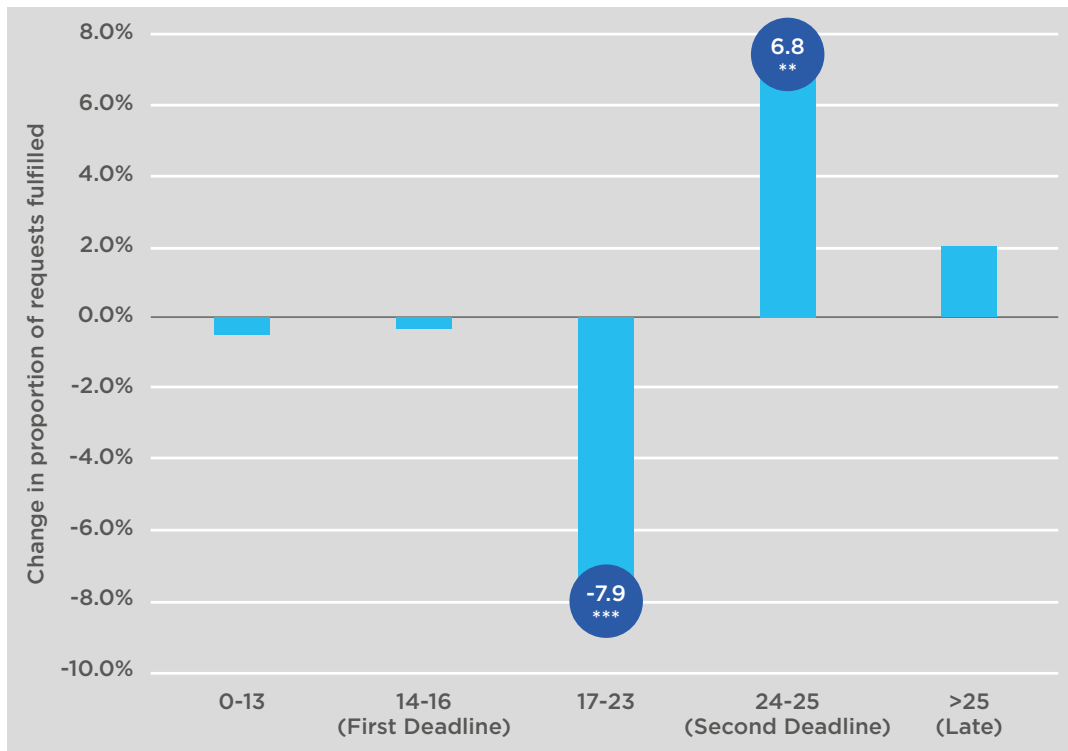
Key Concept



SALIENCE

The quality of being prominent and noticeable compared with surroundings or expectations. For example, messages that are prominent, novel, or stand out have salience.

Figure 1. Agencies' Response to Requests



Note: * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

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FULL STUDY

[Scartascini, Carlos, and Paula Zamora. 2021. "Do Civil Servants Respond to Behavioral Interventions?: A Field Experiment."](#)

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