Nudging Government to Use Evidence
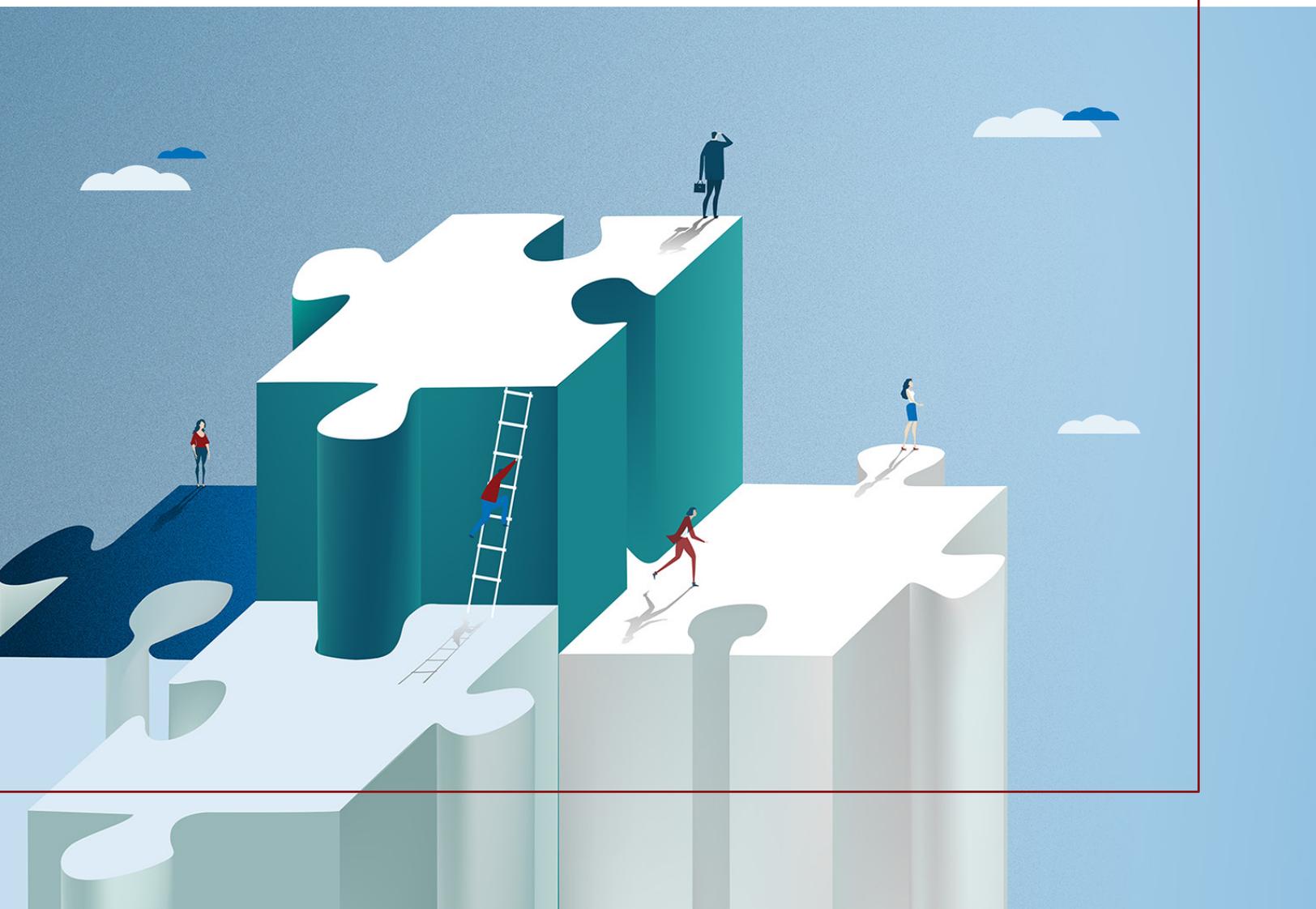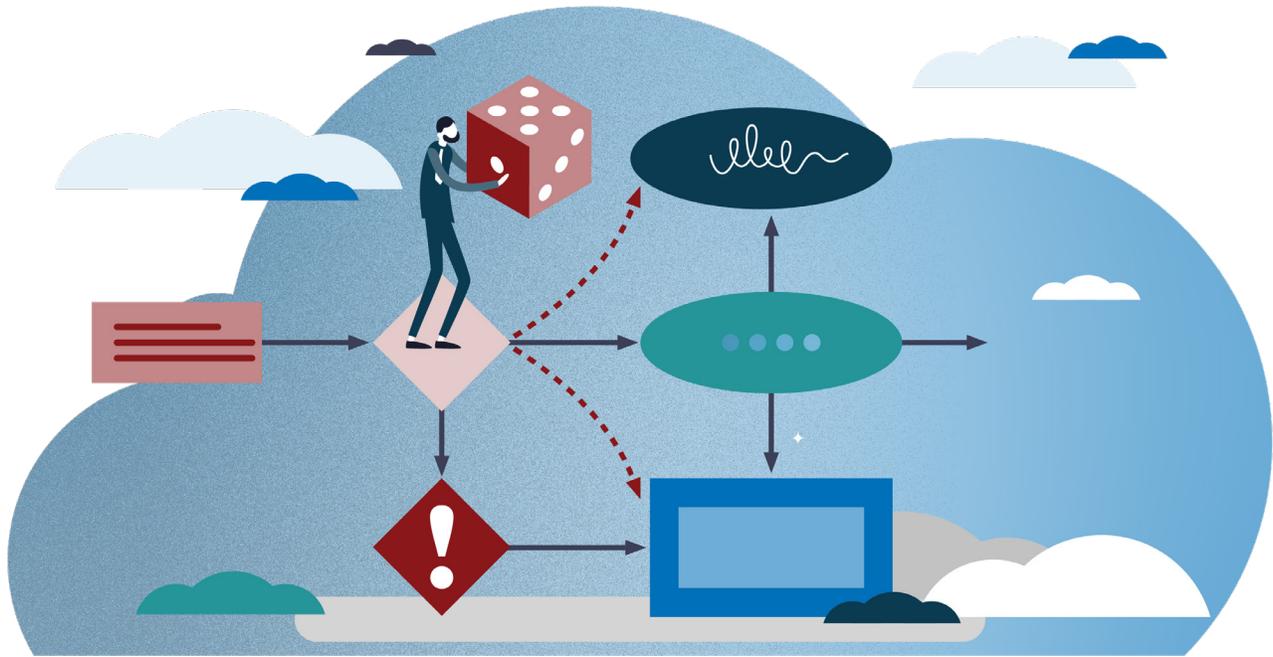
Four strategies for encouraging evidence-based policy — and why they will help change behaviour

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Why have we written disparaging statements about government when our firm is so deeply committed to public sector excellence? These include statements like "as the fire rages on, our governments seem powerless" and "hunches no longer pass for evidence these days, unless we're talking about government policy." We have compared the policy-making process to a chaotic game of tag and suggested that government policymakers can act as seemingly irrational as Cosmo Kramer did on Seinfeld.

These statements aimed to grab your attention using behavioural science techniques so you continue reading, and so the author can then convince you that these ideas have merit. It isn't enough to have the best, most sound solutions to problems. Humans don't base their opinions and decisions solely on facts and rational arguments, and this is especially true when more complexity is introduced – such as in government policy-making.

Like many public servants, our firm works hard to embed evidence into decision-making. Using evidence in large-scale policy decisions is in society's best interest and is also incredibly difficult. We have written on the misunderstandings about evidence, the structures within government that prevent the use of evidence, and the challenges that academia

(as a key evidence-generator) presents to accessing knowledge. Ultimately, these institutions and their structural issues are driven by humans and their collective decision-making.

Our team has begun exploring how we focus less on only presenting sound evidence and solutions (as many academics, consultants, and experts do) and more on **how to best introduce these facts into this collection of human decision-making we call government policy**. Perhaps our best bet to advancing the use of evidence in policy-making is to look for strategies that address human behaviour and the biases we humans hold.

To that end, we present four strategies, informed by behavioural science, that government and researchers can deploy to improve the use of evidence in policy decisions.

These strategies are based on proven behavioural science concepts: simplification, commitment devices, optimism bias, confirmation bias, the messenger effect, and incentives. For more detail on these ideas, we recommend reviewing the MINDSPACE report, a document that lead to the establishment of the Behavioural Insights Team at the centre of the UK Government.

Four Strategies For Encouraging Evidence-Based Policy — And Why They Will Help Change Behaviour

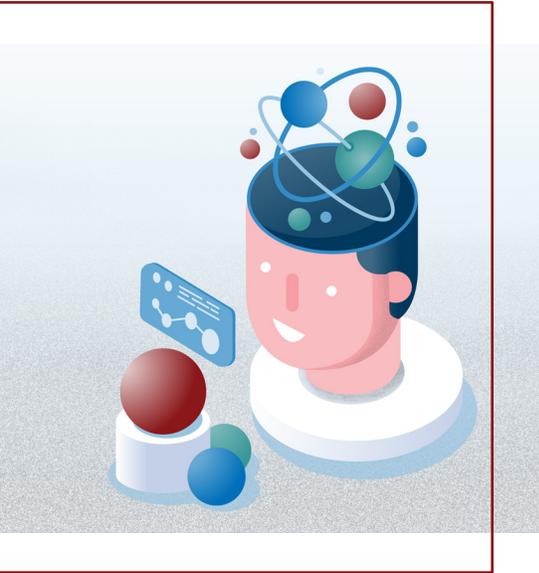## Idea One: Science Advisors

The Overview:

Each government ministry or department would benefit greatly from having a senior 'science advisor' on the leadership team. Having access to a senior leader with a strong knowledge of evidence will help ensure that better information is incorporated in government. But it can also make more people pay attention to this information, because of something called the **messenger effect**. Simply put, humans tend to process facts differently based on where they read or hear them. Having an executive that is also seen as a scientist automatically gives their opinion more weight with 'non-scientists'.

The Details:

'Science advisors' are easy to find in healthcare organizations (e.g. we've all now become very familiar with our Chief Medical Officers of Health as a result of the pandemic) or other very technical government departments and ministries. The average public sector agency does not regularly employ people in these positions. Having a chief scientist – whether a physician/medical scientist, natural scientist, chief engineer, social scientist, or economist – at the most senior decision-making tables would better ensure that true evidence is more regularly considered in decisions.

The skillset and mindset to do this job effectively are relatively unique, in that they need to have a strong grasp of a particular policy domain, an excellent understanding of research methods, considerable emotional intelligence, ability to communicate complex concepts, and general patience and appreciation for how government works. This is not the role for pure academics, nor is this the same as the senior policy executive who has a multitude of organizational responsibilities to move the decision-making machine of government departments forward.

Having an individual in this role and involved at the most strategic and senior levels of the organization would greatly simplify and expedite the use of evidence in policy-making. They could also help play a role in communicating the justification for policy decisions to stakeholders and the public.
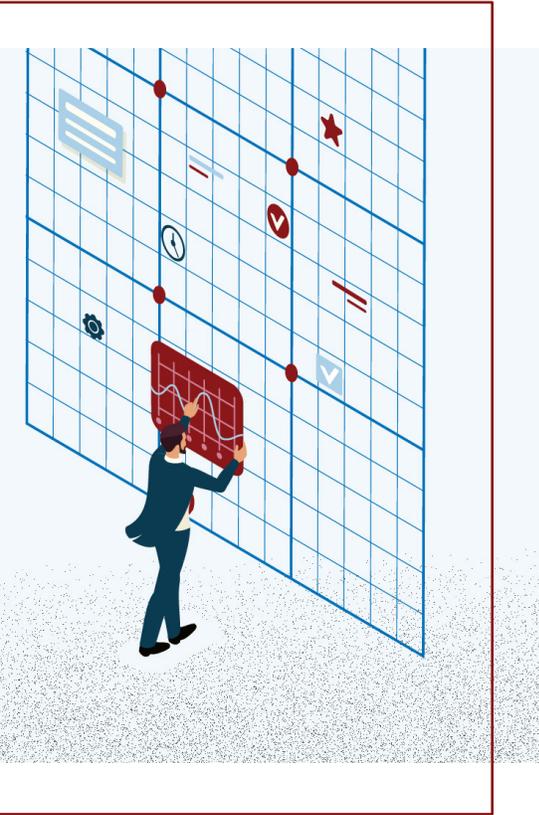
Idea Two: Literature Reviews and Rapid Evidence Assessments

The Overview

Given the immense amount of evidence that exists on individual topics, no government decision-maker, policy analyst, or even science advisor could be expected to be aware of all of it. Furthermore, most of this evidence is found in academic journals which can be quite dense and difficult to access.

Regular completion of literature reviews and rapid evidence assessments (REAs) has the behavioural benefit of **simplification**. In the government policy-making world, numerous perspectives and competing demands create cognitive burdens and choice overload. Key information thus needs to be presented in simple, condensed forms to be considered. If policy processes required governments to more frequently complete literature reviews and REAs, policy-makers would find it easier to draw from already tested ideas.

The Details

Literature reviews of peer reviewed research and other sources provide a good overview of the leading thinking on a specific topic, and they can be done in a matter of days or weeks. A rapid evidence assessment (REA) is a bit more exhaustive — it is a more involved review of the evidence that exists.

REAs aren't to the level of systematic reviews which are normal for academia but are much more exhaustive and rigorous (and therefore much more resource and time intensive to complete). The benefit of systematic reviews is that they tend to be seen as more valuable by peer reviewed journals, but this added level of rigor has diminishing returns. In a world where key policy decisions are made on the fly, systematic reviews are not a realistic input (unless they have already been completed).

These literature reviews and REAs could thus play a critical role to evidence-based policy. They require the dedication of resources to have them completed — resources that can navigate the world of peer reviewed articles and assess the pertinence of research to a policy issue. Their completion further simplifies the presentation of evidence and, when combining their frequent completion with the appointment of science advisors, the accessibility of evidence to decision making can be further enhanced.

Idea Three: Prototyping and Experimentation

The Overview:

REAs are excellent tools when there is substantive evidence on a topic. There are times, though, when issues have not been studied. Additionally, any evidence previously generated may be specific to a particular environment or context (e.g. a behavioural experiment conducted with only university students may not produce the same results as in the workplace). Governments, therefore, need to invest more in their own rapid-cycle experimentation and prototyping of potential solutions. To learn more, this whitepaper by our firm details how governments can use innovation labs to practice such experimentation.

Launching small-scale versions of programs or interventions with the explicit purpose of learning what works (and what doesn't) has numerous impacts on influencing decisions. Such prototyping helps mitigate against **optimism bias** by quickly presenting actual outcomes to decision-makers. It also helps address **confirmation bias** because prototypes are set up with the assumption that not everything about them will go well. This discourages policy-makers from seeking out evidence that an intervention is working when perhaps it isn't.

The Details:

Quickly designing small scale, 'fail fast' prototypes and experiments is an excellent way for governments to learn. When designed to test specific concepts, the opportunities to address gaps in evidence are immense. In a perfect world, these experiments would be done at a larger scale – like the randomized controlled trials so familiar in medical studies; these types of studies gather data that tends to be more reliable.

These larger scale studies also require significant resources and long timelines to complete, both of which can be barriers to completing them.

It's important to note that the term 'prototype' is not interchangeable with 'pilot.' Pilot is often used in government to describe soft-launching something on a small scale. These usually does not have a robust approach to gathering the data needed to assess a pilot's effectiveness.

Experimentation and prototyping allow for either rough or finished designs to be implemented with the main purpose of gathering evidence to further improve programming and decision-making.

In summary, **governments need to be empowered and equipped to launch things for the sole purpose of testing ideas.** This contrasts with investing millions of dollars in a program launch based on either limited or circumstantial evidence that the program will meet the intended outcomes. Launching a project simply to test ideas tends to be so difficult because of the perceived risk of 'testing' something with real people and the perception around spending resources on something that may not remain. It is important to recognize, that the risks of launching programs to test are low compared to the risk of launching a fully conceived, multi-million dollar program that may not achieve its results.

Idea Four: Collaborative Development of Research Programs

The Overview:

There is no shortage of funding available to researchers, but most of it targets the university world and is skewed towards individuals generating peer-reviewed journal articles. More research would be conducted with practical application in mind if this was a requirement of the funders. Research programs should be curated collaboratively amongst research institutions, funders, governments, and community organizations with the objective of funding research that is deemed necessary by policy-makers.

This could change the **incentives** for researchers, many of whom would like to apply their findings but are discouraged from doing so by current funding requirements.

Additionally, having governments fund this type of research would create a **commitment device** that encouraged them to use the results. If they are funding the research, they will be much more interested in applying its outcomes.

The Details:

Collaborative research agendas are domain specific, industry-based funding mechanisms that are developed either outside of or in collaboration with traditional research funders (e.g. those governed by groups like the Tri-Council Agencies - Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada(SSHRC)). Their intent is to be developed in collaboration with policy makers, community organizations, industry associations, and other stakeholders that can identify societal issues that would benefit from research, science, and innovation. The benefit of this collaboration is that funding is allocated to fill knowledge gaps identified by would be consumers of this information.

A great example of where this has recently been done is an initiative led by Research Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Forestry Innovation Transition Trust. These groups partnered with the Nova Scotia provincial government and industry to support the forestry sector's transition to a sustainable future by identifying areas that would benefit from novel research and innovation.

It should be noted that limited application of research has long been a concern of some scientists and researchers. This has resulted in the growth of domains such as knowledge translation, knowledge mobilization, and implementation science. But the working assumption one must make to get behind the process of conducting research and creating avenues for its dissemination is that the potential consumers of this knowledge care about the results. What better way to ensure this than to ask what is needed before the research begins?

These are four ideas that, if implemented, would increase the use of evidence in policy-making. All of them have been used previously with positive results, likely because they nudge human behaviour and decision-making. If you are interested in any of these ideas, we have included more detail about each below.

Please reach out to learn more about these ideas or about applying more behavioural science evidence in your work.

In our next publication, we'll talk about one more 'nudge' towards using evidence in policy-making – changing the default to focus less on money and more on wellbeing. Sign up here to be notified of its publication.

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