

Policy entrepreneurship in UK
central government: The
Behavioural Insights Team and the
use of RCTs

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Innovation in central government

- Starting point is conservatism of public organisations:
 - slack, routines, lack of profit motive, lack of information by principals
- Conservatism is magnified in the centre:
 - bureaucratic competition
 - weakness of PM ‘department’
 - the politics of the ‘court’
 - short term demands from media
 - party management
 - > stymied attempts at innovation
- Examples of innovation units:
 - CPRS: see Blackstone/Plowden:
 - Bernard Donoghue
 - Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*



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The Behavioural Insights Team

- Does the team buck the conservatism trend?
- Is it a successful example of a 'change agent'?
- What conditions apply in this case?
- What lessons are there for the literature on innovation?

Background to BIT

- Formed in June 2010 to apply insights from behavioural sciences to government policy
- Directed by David Halpern; deputy is Owain Service
- Five other members, now at 13 enhanced by interns
- Supported by an academic advisory panel
- Works collaboratively on projects

Achievements

- Persuaded DVLA to require those who are renewing their driving licence to choose whether to agree that their organs may be donated in the event of their death.
- Worked BIS on *Better Choices: Better Deals* (April 2011).
- With (DECC) on energy saving, aiding the redesign of EPCs.
- Evangelised for the use of RCTs, see *Test, Learn, Adapt*
- Worked with HMRC to pioneer different wordings for the reminder of tax returns.
- Worked with the UK Courts Service to increase the number of fine payments through use of personalised text message prompts, reducing the number of bailiff interventions by 150,000.

Applying behavioural insights to reduce fraud, error and debt

Public sector fraud, error and debt cost the UK government billions of pounds each year, costs which are borne by law-abiding taxpayers and firms. Insights from behavioural science can form an integral part of the government strategy to reduce this cost and the tax gap.

This document is intended to help those who administer systems to tackle fraud, error and debt to identify practical interventions, while making it easier for citizens and firms to comply.

Achievements (2)

- With DVLA whether a photo would encourage update of registering
- Identified public savings of £300m since its launch in 2010.
- Currently working on measures to encourage people back into employment
- Work on charitable giving, working with financial institutions to donate portion of salary, using experiments.
- Team has been met with enthusiasm across Whitehall.
- A considerable amount of contact between team members and the rest of the world
- BIT has started work with other governments, such as Government of New South Wales, Australia, where a team member is seconded from 2012-2013.
- The positive press it has received >

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Why David Cameron's 'nudge unit' is a waste of time for the environment

Until systemic problems in environment policy are addressed, a few small prods towards green living will have little impact



Rebekah Phillips and **Sylvia Rowley**

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 31 March 2011 11.11 BST



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'Nudge unit' not guaranteed to work, says Oliver Letwin

Minister's admission follows report that Behavioural Insight Team has failed to convince any Whitehall department to use its ideas

Polly Curtis, Whitehall correspondent
guardian.co.uk, Sunday 20 February 2011 16.16 GMT



Oliver Letwin said there was no hard evidence the 'nudge unit', which costs £520,000 a year, would succeed. Photograph: Matt Cardy/Getty Images

Series: [Interview](#)

David Halpern: 'We try to avoid legislation and ordering'

The head of the government's 'nudge unit' plans to save the state billions by getting us to change our behaviour



Alison Benjamin

The Guardian, Tuesday 5 February 2013 15.29 GMT

 [Jump to comments \(81\)](#)



'The savings will be made in the little details that no one in Whitehall usually gets into,' says David Halpern. Photograph: Felix Clay

The Telegraph

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Inside the Coalition's controversial 'Nudge Unit'

Deep inside Whitehall, psychologists are finding ways to make you insulate your loft, pay your taxes, and even quit smoking. Is the Coalition's controversial 'Nudge Unit' finally paying off?



Photo: Illustration by Bill Butcher

Recent developments

- Sunset clause review > now continues
- Operate as a quasi-body, half owned by gov
- Fared better than international competitors?
 - President Obama has not re-appointed Cass Sunstein, but new unit now
 - In France, Centre for Strategic Analysis of the Prime Minister employed a behaviour science expert, Olivier Oullier, was an advisor. But not with Hollande.
- Bear in mind failures > Employment trial
- What is the secret ingredient of the Behavioural Insights Team's success?

Academic approaches to change management

- Moss Kanter, 1983 *The Change Masters* also mainstreams, new streams
- Chris Argyris, 1993. *Knowledge for action: a guide to overcoming barriers to organizational change.*
- Steve Kelman. 2005. *Unleashing change: a study of organizational renewal in government.*
- Bart Nooteboom. 2000. *Learning and innovation in organizations and economies.*

Skunkworks unit

- Used to describe the unit that designed Lockheed's P-80 Shooting Star, the Advanced Development Projects Division in Burbank, California during the Second World War called the Skonk Works or Skunk Works unit

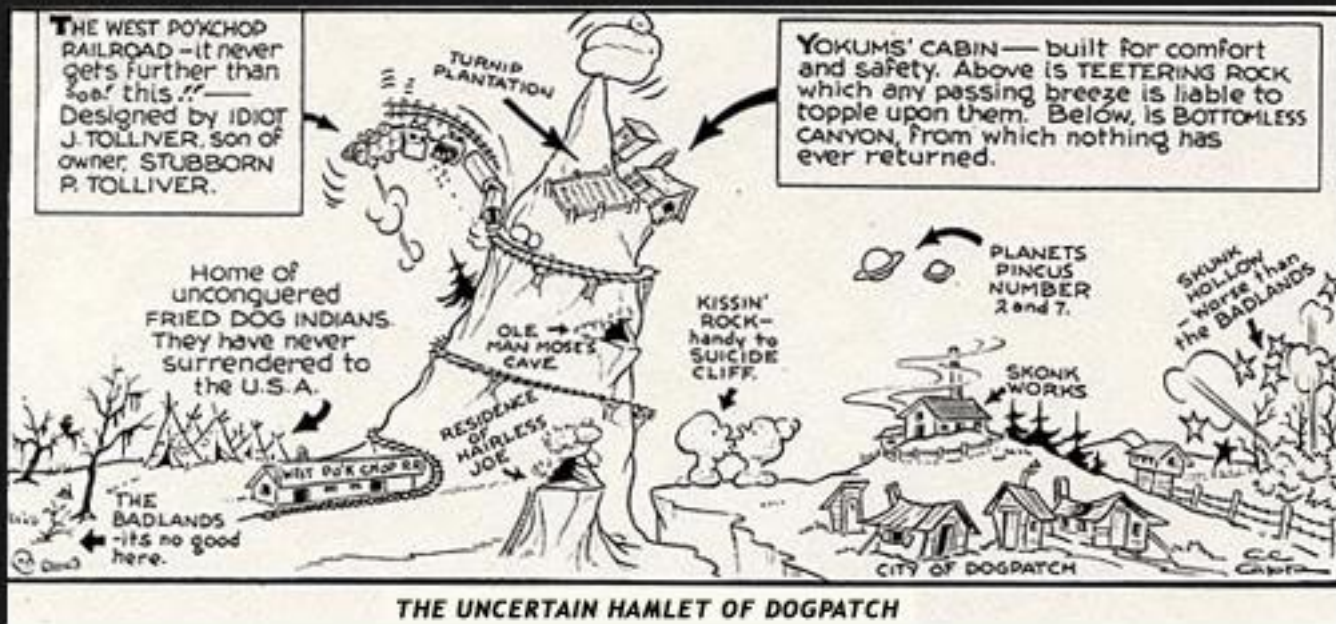


Entrance plaza at the Skunk Works in Palmdale, California



Skunk Works logo

Al Capp comic strip Lil Abner



Factors behind the success of change agents

- less hierarchy
- within a different framework of performance evaluation, where the unit is not subject to short term management objectives
- nurtured by senior manager champions who can protect them from turf wars
- funded differently and have a different structure of cost control
- separate physical space (a Skunkworks condition)
- a longer time cycle for the measurement of success
- have low staff turnover

Applying the conditions to BIT

- less hierarchy YES
- Less performance evaluation YES
- senior manager champions YES, no GOD?
- funded differently NO, private?
- physical space NO
- a longer time cycle YES, sunset?
- low staff turnover YES

Discussion/Conclusion

- Framework works well
- Not all conditions need to be in place, but most do
- Success critically dependent on people and experience (Halpern/Service combo - very effective) + lack of turnover
- Politics very important - low cost intervention, good media management, coalition needs good news