

How to increase adherence to procedures in the public service using behavioural insights

Designing procedures with an understanding of why people do (or don't) follow them, helps organisations to be more effective.

Procedures in the public service – from policy officers completing timesheets to clinicians washing their hands – help to mitigate risks, improve customer service and ensure the smooth running of organisations. Procedures are sometimes breached, usually for good reasons but often with negative consequences. This presents a two-way behavioural challenge: (1) How do we bring the behaviour of public servants in line with procedures; and (2) How do we bring procedures in line with the realities of human behaviour?

DO

- ✓ Invest time in cutting all unnecessary procedures and making compliance easy
- ✓ Explain what the rules are trying to achieve and show the benefits
- ✓ Plan around errors and give employees personalised performance feedback

DON'T

- ✗ Add new procedures without considering the costs and benefits to employees
- ✗ Jump to your own solutions without employee input
- ✗ Expect adherence from disengaged employees

Make compliance convenient

An individual's choice to comply with a procedure is influenced by the impact on their job productivity.

Minimise the number of procedures: If a new procedure is added, set an expiry date to evaluate whether it should continue, and look for other procedures which can be removed at the same time. At regular intervals, take stock of all the different procedures that need to be followed. Try to do this from the employee perspective, rather than from an HR or finance 'silo'. Start with the assumption that no procedure should continue (a 'zero-based' approach) and then go through them one by one to make sure that the benefits of each still outweighs its costs.

Invest time in reducing compliance effort:

Estimate how long a procedure will take every year (for example, 10 minutes per week filling in an activity tracker x 2000 people = c.10 FTE years). Your investment in making the procedure faster and easier should increase with this number (in this case, investing 1 FTE week to develop a solution that reduces the average procedure time from 10 minutes to 9 minutes would have a high return on investment).

Monitor compliance budgets: A 'compliance budget' is the amount of inconvenience people will tolerate before they resort to workarounds, refusal or lower compliance in other areas. For example, employees forced to change their password every month typically respond by iterating on weak passwords – 'Password1', 'Password2', and so on – to the detriment of overall security.¹ Monitor compliance budgets by regularly asking employees about their perceptions of the costs and benefits of following specific procedures.

How to increase adherence to procedures

Explain why procedures are necessary and legitimate

People are less likely to complete tasks that seem meaningless, even when they are financially incentivised to do so.²

Tailor the rationale to employee motivations:

Different people follow procedures for different reasons.³ For example, health workers may be more motivated by patient safety than personal safety. In a US hospital, doctors and nurses used 45% more soap or hand sanitiser at handwashing stations when a sign read 'Hand hygiene prevents patients from catching diseases' compared to 'Hand hygiene prevents you from catching diseases'.⁴

Ask employees to develop compliance strategies:

A study of Chinese factory workers found that productivity increased by 11% when meetings about production issues were led by employees and everyone was encouraged to speak up, compared to supervisor-led meetings.⁵

Design procedures to reduce the chance of mistakes

We all make errors, and as job complexity increases, so does the error rate.⁶

Create checklists: These work best for teams in stressful situations where important steps can easily be forgotten. For example, a 19-item surgical safety checklist introduced in eight hospitals around the world reduced the death rate associated with surgery from 1.5% to 0.8%.⁷

Talk openly about errors: Project pre-mortems and post-mortems can create a safe environment to talk about where things might or did go wrong.⁸ They can also reduce ambiguity about procedures and shift employee perceptions of compliance from formality (e.g. sign a code of conduct once) to culture (e.g. daily behaviour).⁹

Give personalised, timely feedback: This should include how staff benchmark vs. their peers. For example, informing Australian GPs about their high individual antibiotic prescribing rate relative to other GPs reduced prescription rates by three times more than simply providing education about overprescribing (i.e. 'You prescribe more antibiotics than 85 per cent of prescribers in the ACT region').¹⁰

Maximise employee engagement

To motivate employees to go beyond meeting minimum procedural standards, focus on increasing their overall engagement with work.

There are five key elements that drive employee engagement: meaningful work, supportive management, positive work environment (e.g. showing employees they are valued), growth opportunities and trust in leadership.¹¹ For example, the performance of workers completing a short-term data entry job in Germany increased by 5% after they were publicly given a thank-you card from their manager.¹²

Regularly measure employee engagement with surveys and admin data – such as turnover and productivity – to know where to focus.¹³

To assess your compliance problem, refer to Appendix 2 of bit.ly/improving-compliance-with-safety-procedures

To make workplaces safer using behavioural insights, see bit.ly/EAST-for-health-and-safety

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