Critical Features of Performance Management Systems for WIA Reporting
As an organization receiving funding through the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) or a state agency overseeing WIA distributions, performance management processes are a key to success. However, not all software systems (which may include data collection or workforce reporting functionality) equip agencies to do their work well.

In this eBook, we examine the key features you should look for as you choose a performance management system for your WIA-based initiatives and programs. Those features fall into 6 categories:

- Flexibility
- Data Quality
- Efficiency
- Data Sharing/Interoperability
- Course Correction
- Best Practices

This eBook is intended as a resource when considering your options for implementing a performance management process. Understanding your options, and their long-term ramifications, are crucial for getting the most out of whatever process and/or software you select.
First off, when I use the term ‘flexibility,’ I am describing a system’s capacity for change and also the difficulty of implementing that change. When a performance management software system is inflexible, there are two major drawbacks:

- Startup is hampered by tools that don’t meet the initiative/program’s needs
- System changes are expensive and slow

Any performance management software system that you choose should allow you to customize it at the outset to exactly match your process and the WIA reporting requirements. Additionally, because of the flexible nature of those requirements, your software should ideally allow you to rapidly deploy changes to data gathering and reporting.

**Startup Right With Flexible Software**

Having your data collection or workforce reporting tools custom-built to your exact needs, and the needs of your specific state’s WIA reporting requirements, is perhaps the most obvious benefit of a flexible system. This is traditionally accomplished by having a system built from scratch to your exact specifications. While the final product is undoubtedly configured to your needs and specifications, waiting for a lengthy (as long as 12 months) development cycle to complete can put your program behind before it’s even started.

Instead, look for a performance management software system that has the ability to start with proven models and then allows you to make customizations and ‘tweaks’ until it’s exactly what you need. By having much of the infrastructure already in place, you will be able to roll out your software and roll out new programs faster and often at lower expense.
Reconfigure Without Re-programming

WIA Reporting requirements are not static and your performance management software systems should not be either. Change can come from many reasons, including:

- **Changes in guidance for funding programs:** These types of changes, like TEGL 17-05, can occur yearly and each one can have an impact on how you collect and report data for your WIA-funded programs and initiatives.
- **Newly available funding streams:** When the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) was released, it created a whole series of new programs. Each of these programs had their own reporting requirements which were probably not already included in your system.
- **Individual state reporting requirements:** If your organization operates in many states, your system needs to be able to accommodate the varying WIA requirements that each state maintains. What’s more, because each state can issue guidance changes, your system has an increased chance of becoming outdated if it’s not flexible.

The good news is that any software can be reconfigured. The question is: How much time and money will it take to make these changes?

If the system you use is custom-developed and requires outside developers to make the required changes, you can count on substantial cost and as much as a 6-month timeline. For many organizations, these restructurings can be among the most expensive projects they undertake.

Instead, look for software that’s designed to be reconfigured by well-trained, but not necessarily ‘technical’ staff. When changes can be made internally, the changes are being made by people who truly know what the final expectations are. Aside from the decrease in development time, you can eliminate the need for multiple revisions due to miscommunications with your developers.

As flexibility is one of the core tenets of Efforts to Outcomes (ETO™), we are able to see the benefits that software flexibility brings to organizations:

“ETO software helps us reduce the ramp-up time for new programs dramatically. What used to take us a year or more takes our agency weeks.”
That kind of flexibility can’t be easily “bolted-on” to a custom-built software system. It has to be incorporated into the software’s core design. When you’re evaluating your software options, be sure that flexibility is part of your initial specifications.

**Key Takeaways Regarding Flexibility**

- Flexibility comes in two forms: startup and software adaptability.
- Startup is fastest and most efficient when you can start from a core functionality and “tweak” it to what you want.
- Because the WIA reporting requirements can change, your performance management software needs to be able to change too.
- Ideally, you should be able to make changes to your performance management software internally because they will be faster, and more likely to be right the first time.
Data Quality

All reporting for WIA compliance involves some degree of validation of the data that makes up each report. You can't get around those validation requirements. And you can't compromise on data quality.

So the issue for workforce development agencies is how to assure that data quality requirements are fulfilled without undue hassle and cost. In a perfect world, all data would be accurate from its capture and entry to its ultimate correlation to key program indicators.

In the real world, data is often entered multiple times and into multiple systems. This creates data-entry errors and errors of omission. It’s the back-tracking, research and re-validation necessary to isolate and correct these errors that cost time and money for many agencies when completing their WIA reporting. It doesn't have to be that way.

A sufficiently robust performance management software package can significantly reduce opportunities for errors and streamline the data validation process.

The Great (and Expensive) Error Hunt

The most common source of errors found in data validation stems from unintentional inaccuracies (“typos”). The opportunities for these errors to occur increases when the same data has to be entered in multiple places. For example, with many workforce reporting systems, frontline staff frequently has to re-enter data they already entered into a separate data entry/case management system. This model simply increases the opportunities for human errors to occur.

Additionally, initial data may not be completely entered into a workforce reporting tool. This creates data validation problems when information gaps do not reveal themselves until a report is generated.

When reporting reveals data that fall short of validation requirements, the sources of any discrepancies have to
be identified and then corrected: a lengthy and laborious process. Did those errors happen during the initial data entry, or just during the reporting process? It’s expensive to track down the sources of those errors and resources that should be applied to client needs are diverted to complete the “error hunt.”

The Right Performance Management Software Can Simplify the WIA Reporting Process

A “blended” performance management software package – one that accommodates both case management and WIA reporting functions – streamlines the process. By eliminating the need for separate data entry to satisfy reporting requirements and allowing this data to be gathered as part of the day-to-day job function, your frontline team can handle WIA reporting requirements almost as a ‘side-effect’ of servicing their participants effectively.

A performance management software that is well-designed for WIA reporting requirements will collect information for case management, and then takes relevant data and puts it into the format required for state reporting, automatically and accurately. Additionally, since data is entered only once, it becomes easier and faster to locate (and correct) any discrepancies when they do show up.

Social Solutions’ Efforts to Outcomes (ETO™) software is the only performance management system that can handle both case management and reporting needs. The blended approach has made ensuring data quality a “user friendly” experience for social services and government organizations alike.

“The ETO system allows for the tracking of data that can assist individual users in understanding participants’ progress within a re-entry program or other programs,” according to Diane Pabich from the Baltimore City Mayor’s Office of Economic Development. “It also allows users to review their own work in order to monitor their own performances and outcomes.”
Eliminating the need for double entry of data saves time and money by reducing the number of data validation issues likely to pop up when handling WIA reporting. It’s one case where less really is more: Less data entry means more efficient data validation and correction.

**Key Takeaways Regarding Data Quality**

- Data Quality is directly seen by spending less time correcting data validation issues and more time servicing participants.
- Validation issues most commonly come from multiple data entry, usually leading to improperly-entered data and errors of omission.
- Eliminating the need for multiple data entry with a “blended” case management and WIA reporting system cuts down on these errors.
Efficiency comes down to one crucial question: How much of your time is spent using your performance management software instead of servicing your clients? While virtually any software will provide more efficiency than manually entering data and generating WIA reports from raw spreadsheets, “better than manual” shouldn’t be the acceptable standard for efficiency.

The more your software can do – and how easily it allows you to access the insights you need, when you need them – will directly impact service delivery and results. Ultimately, more efficient tools and features in your performance management software will translate into more effective case management, more success, and more funding.

As you evaluate performance management software, watch for these efficiency-related features:

**Integrated Reporting**

It’s important that reporting features are built directly into the system, aggregating inputted data automatically according to your varied reporting requirements. Instead of culling through your accumulated data for monthly, quarterly or annual reports, you should be able to specify the required parameters (such as date ranges, program areas, the service populations, etc.) and build reports with a simple click of your mouse.

The better your system can integrate the raw data into the reports you need, the less time your staff has to spend generating those reports. That means your job counselors are able to spend more of their time delivering services to your participants.

**Self-Service Portals**

An ideal performance management software system for WIA initiatives and programs should offer the capability
for program participants to enter their own data and search available positions on their own. This takes the burden of entering intake information off the job counselors and allows self-driven participants to move forward at their own, faster, pace. Self-service portals also provide more efficiency and flexibility for employers looking to access resumes on file.

**Automated Messaging Tools**

Your performance management software choice should offer you the capability to reach out automatically to participants, with alerts or reminders about program participation. This not only frees job counselors from a time-consuming and often tedious task, but also regulates the process, assuring timeliness and consistency of the messaging.

Pay special attention to software tools that allow you to send reminders as recorded phone messages, email or text messages. Text messages especially have become an extremely compelling medium for connecting with participants.

**Time-Based Staff Management**

Efficiency shouldn’t solely focus on participant interactions, though. The right performance management software system should include internal reporting tools that allow you to monitor the performance of your job counselors.

Specifically, look for a system that has the capability of weighing how effectively your job counselors are using their time, measuring both time-spent and results. This capability lets you identify your most efficient staff members and discover practices that can be replicated throughout your team.

**Keep the Focus on the Participants**

What all four of these features have in common is allowing your team to focus on what they do best. In the case of WIA-funded programs and initiatives, that means being able to concentrate on assisting participants with the challenge of getting back to work.
Poorly-configured data entry forms and reporting redundancies will compromise the productivity of even the best job counselors. That’s why your performance management software should have the efficiency features identified here, promoting better case management and better, measurable results.

**Key Takeaways Regarding Efficiency**

» Efficiency is the ability to focus more on case work and clients and less on creating reporting and other tasks.

» Integrated reporting allows your job counselors to create reports on the data they’ve already entered, instead of having to recompile and re-enter it.

» Self-service portals are critical for allowing participants to move forward at their own pace without taxing job counselors unduly.

» Automated messaging tools make the tedious process of reminders and follow-ups easy and quick.

» Time-based staff management gives the managers of a program the ability to find successful work habits and share them with other job counselors.
At the state level, monitoring the effectiveness and coverage of multiple programs is paramount to success. Even on the local level, understanding where your services fit into the landscape of offerings can be instrumental in planning and decision making. The degree to which your performance management software facilitates data sharing will directly impact your ability to deliver workforce development services efficiently.

Whether you're tracking service delivery and results, looking for best practice opportunities, or providing reports to state and federal inspectors (as well potential investors), the performance management software you use should include features that promote easy, efficient data sharing.

Here are the basics of data sharing and interoperability that should be built into your performance management software:

**Data Imports**

Because a great deal of important information comes from outside your organization, the performance management software you use must provide the ability to import data from other programs. Comparing data from multiple sources can help you assure that there are no gaps or overlaps in the services being provided in your region, especially when you compare your results to those with similar services and populations.

Are your services necessary? Do they need to be bolstered, or replaced? By being able to easily import comparable data, an agency can find opportunities for improving its performance, gaps in service offerings or even find instances of potential abuse.

**Data Import Case Study:** While it’s not specifically workforce development related, one group that we worked with showed us a great example of the need for data imports. By importing external files, they uncovered a case of “double dipping” where participants were receiving identical services from more than one organization.
Whether the cause was fraud, or simply a situation where initial providers’ programs were inadequate to meet the participants needs, this is a real problem for social services organizations. Data sharing allowed this group to identify and correct the issue. The fix allowed funds to be reallocated to service areas that greatly needed them and more clients could receive crucial services that the group provided.

**Access for Third Parties**

Your team is not the only group that needs to access your data for success. Your performance management software can improve your services by allowing external third parties to access your performance data easily. Look for tools that accomplish this through:

- Portals
- Data exports
- Multi-user systems

Most federal grants, including WIA-related funding, include an evaluation component. When those evaluators have easy access to pull performance information, it eliminates hassles for the agency being evaluated. That means your staff can spend considerably less time providing information to evaluators.

Streamlined data sharing assures the availability of more precise, accurate and relevant information for regulators and investors (in pay-for-success programs) alike, making a stronger case for your organization's accountability when it is looking for funding in a competitive environment.

**Multiple Reporting Options**

While not strictly WIA-related, your performance management software system should natively support the ability to create multiple data sharing outputs as needed. This is especially true for programs supported by multiple grants or federal funding programs that need to report in a number of different ways, and on different metrics. Your organization supports more than just WIA-required programs, and your software systems should too.
Data Sharing and Interoperability Creates an Environment of Support and Cooperation

Data sharing isn’t just for generating status reports to third parties. The benefits of true data sharing (input and output) run both ways. Third parties get the accountability they rely on to make regulatory or investment decisions and local agencies benefit by having immediate access to external information.

The more you can share, the more you can know. And the more you know, the more your agency can improve day-to-day performance and even overall program goals and targets.

Key Takeaways Regarding Efficiency

» Importing data from external parties allows for an agency to see where its services fit into the entire community of workforce development offerings.

» Allowing 3rd party access grants regulators and auditors the ability to easily see the status of your program can lead to more funding in competitive environments.
For many WIA-funded programs and initiatives, the reporting period is a time of surprise, insight and reevaluation. It’s during this time when the success or failure of their workforce development efforts are seen and corresponding changes are planned. This course correction is crucial to ongoing success. With the right performance management software system, though, you don’t have to wait until the reporting period to recognize when projections put you below your marks.

The right software for your program will give you the information and insights you need between reporting periods so that you can make adjustments mid-stream and change your projections for the better. To accomplish this, look for a performance management system that includes real time data entry and analysis.

Real-time Data mean Real-time insights

The best way to integrate real-time data into performance management is by integrating case management into your workforce reporting tools. This allows data collection to happen as fast as your job counselors perform their duties, and reports can be generated on that data just as quickly. This speed of access allows you to catch problems in their early stages and solve them before they become larger and impact your long-term success metrics.

**Course Correction Example:** A workforce development program provides access for their participants to technical and vocational classes. Not every participant attends classes regularly, and over the course of a reporting period, this causes that participant to miss out on services crucial to their re-entry into the workforce (and can result in failed program metrics and potentially reduced funding). Without real-time data, it may be difficult for a case worker to know this behavior is happening until a final attendance report is released and it’s revealed that their participant missed 50% of their classes.

Instead, if the workforce development program had a performance management system that implemented real-time data and reporting, this problem could be caught much earlier. When a participant is marked as
absent from the class, an alert can go through the performance management system within 15 minutes and alert the appropriate case manager. This immediate feedback gives the case manager the chance to act and get their client into class and back on track.

A leader within a Milwaukee work force investment board relayed how the course correction methodology has changed his group:

“Without real-time access to data from programs and providers in one place, we would have a difficult time managing our performances to stay competitive.”

Real-time data allows you to improve effectiveness on the fly, which is fundamental for maintaining the outcomes necessary to keep your WIA funding, but also better enables you to do what’s most important: help your participants achieve successful integration into the workforce.

**Key Takeaways Regarding Course Correction**

» Traditional performance management tools require that you wait for a reporting period to see your impact and make changes.

» Real-time data and reporting can help you make course corrections mid-stream.
Whether you’re looking to replicate an existing model with fidelity or measure the success of a new initiative, it can be tempting to look to a completely customized, built-from-scratch, performance management system. This method, however, requires that you create or collect all the specifications and success measures yourself—a process that not only takes a lot of time, but can lead to problems if key specifications are missed (or if they change during the development process).

Instead, look for a performance management software system that implements best practices as a feature so that you can get started quickly and measure the impact of your efforts.

Get Started Quickly With Performance Starter Models

The core of all WIA-compliant program or initiatives is approximately the same—they all have the same reporting requirements. What’s more, many such programs seek to replicate an existing model with fidelity. Your performance management software should have preconfigured assessment and reporting packages (like WIA or TAACCCT) so that you can avoid the effort of defining and specifying a model that already exists.

This is especially important if your workforce development agency knows the results you want to achieve, but not how to measure them or what is necessary for federal compliance. What’s more, if you find a tool with the right level of flexibility, then you can build off of a starter model and customize it to fit the exact needs of your own program/initiative.

Correlate your Efforts to Outcomes

While existing programs have predefined success measures and a verified link between outcomes and activities, non-standard programs must have other ways to analyze their results. Before you can even seek 3rd-party authorization of your model as viable, you need to be able to show a correlation between services and
impact. And, if your program isn’t having a positive impact, this same correlation can help you find areas for improvement.

You should be able to look to your performance management software to help you. When choosing a system, look for one that has built-in correlational analysis tools (using Pearson’s coefficient) so that you can measure the outcomes of your efforts and act on them accordingly.

**Best Practices Make Your Program Better**

Having best practices included as a feature of your performance management software makes it much quicker to replicate an existing WIA-compliant model with fidelity. Quicker setup means that you can bring your services to the community quicker, and at a lower overall development cost.

Additionally, having a correlational analysis tool allows you to show the impact that your program, standard or non-standard, is having on the community you serve. These insights allow you to fine-tune your model until it is having the greatest positive impact that it can.

**Key Takeaways Regarding Best Practices**

» By having performance starter models, you can be up and running faster than by building your software and tools from scratch.

» Correlational analysis tool allow you to measure the specific impact your program is having on the community.
Key Takeaways Summary

Flexibility

» Flexibility comes in two forms: startup and software adaptability.
» Startup is fastest and most efficient when you can start from a core functionality and “tweak” it to what you want.
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Best Practices

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» Correlational analysis tool allow you to measure the specific impact your program is having on the community
There are a lot of ways to facilitate performance management processes, and they all have advantages and disadvantages. Understanding how those advantages and disadvantages will impact your WIA-reporting organization will go a long way to ensuring you have long-term success.

*Social Solutions provides a single solution that provides a single performance management software system that incorporates all of the key features that streamline WIA reporting and allow social services organizations to monitor the efficiency and impact of their workforce development efforts. Contact us for more information on how Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) can improve your organization.*