


'What Works'? Towards evidence-based government

David Halpern

CEO of BIT and National Advisor on What Works



THE
BEHAVIOURAL
INSIGHTS
TEAM

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How we got here...



THE
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INSIGHTS
TEAM

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Spot the odd one out...



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In the footsteps of Archie Cochrane...

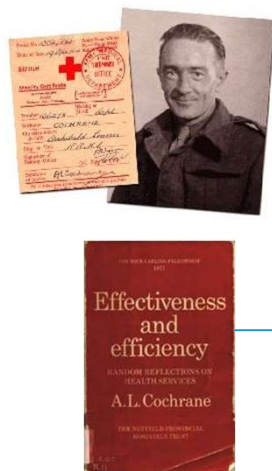
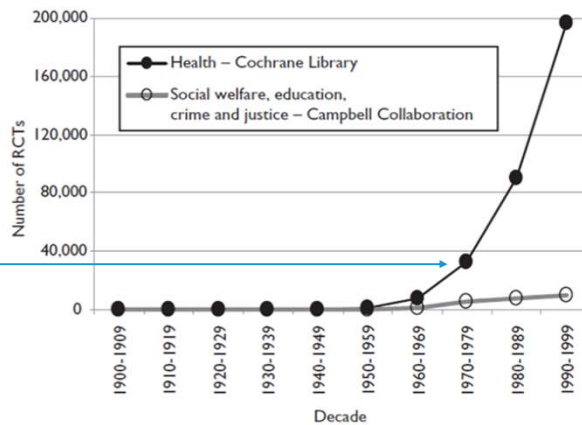



Figure 1: 20th century RCTs in health and in social welfare, education, crime and justice



Courtesy of Jonathan Shepherd

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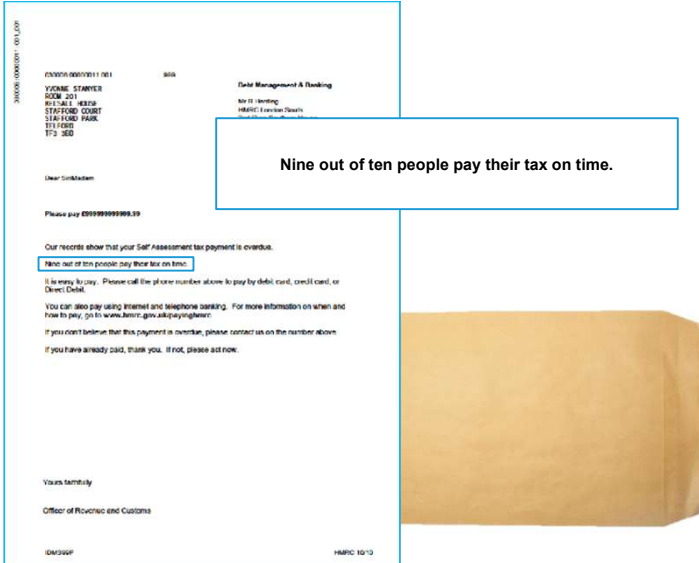


...With a little help from our friends!

The Behavioural Insights Team

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Experimenting with experiments



Field Management & Ranking
 Mr D Bentley
 HMRC Finance Centre
 100 Victoria Street
 London SW1E 6QP

Dear Sir/Madam

Please pay **£999999999.99**

Our records show that your Self Assessment tax payment is overdue.

Nine out of ten people pay their tax on time.

It is easy to pay. Please call the phone number above to pay by debit card, credit card, or Direct Debit.

You can also pay using internet and telephone banking. For more information on when and how to pay, go to www.hmrc.gov.uk/payingsheriff.

If you don't believe that this payment is overdue, please contact us on the number above.

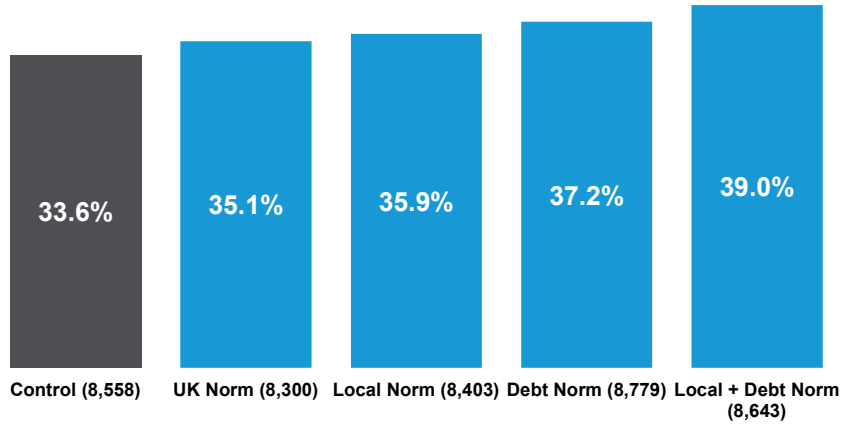
If you have already paid, thank you. If not, please act now.

Yours faithfully
 Officer of Revenue and Customs

HMRC 10/13

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Tax payment rates within 23 days



7

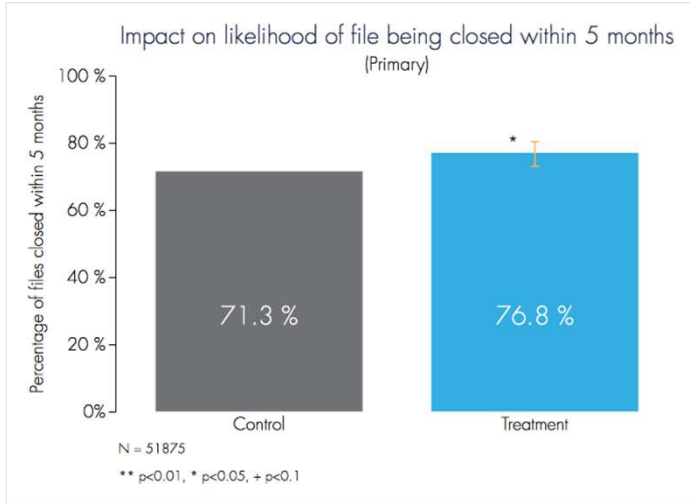
Helping Moldovan jobseekers plan ahead

The screenshot shows a digital 'Employment Plan' interface. It is divided into three main vertical sections: 'Set goals', 'Review progress', and 'Get feedback'. Below these sections are two weekly planning grids, one for 'Monday' and one for 'Friday'. Each grid has columns for 'What', 'When', 'Where', 'How', and 'Why'. At the bottom of the interface, there are buttons for 'Not a consultation' and 'Create Action's signature'.

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Impact on file closure within 5 months



We found a **5.5 percentage point increase** in the likelihood of a jobseeker's file being closed within 5 months of entering the trial.

9



Nudging employers to advertise jobs as flexible



Store manager
Pizza Palace – London
 Apply

Salary: £28,000-£32,000 per year
 Job type: Full-time
 Experience

- Management 1 year (preferred)

Flexible working options available

- Compressed hours
- Job share

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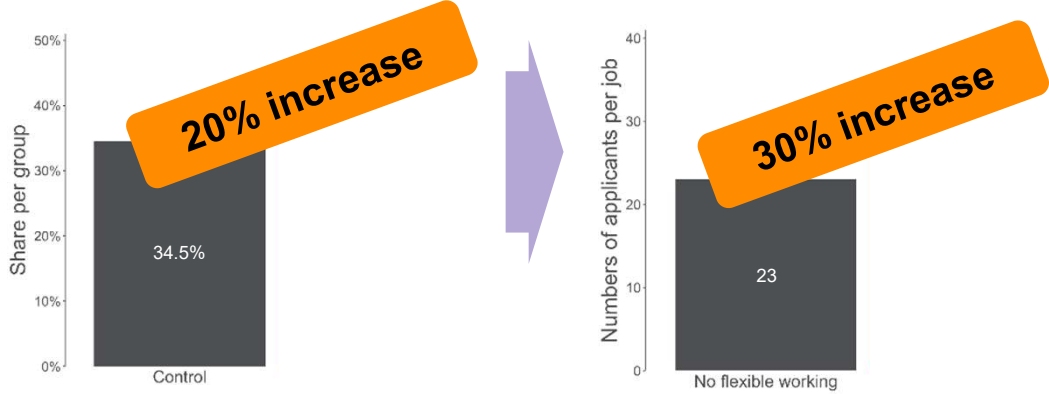
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Impact on job adverts offering flexible working



Increased jobs offering flexible working...

... and these jobs attracted more applicants

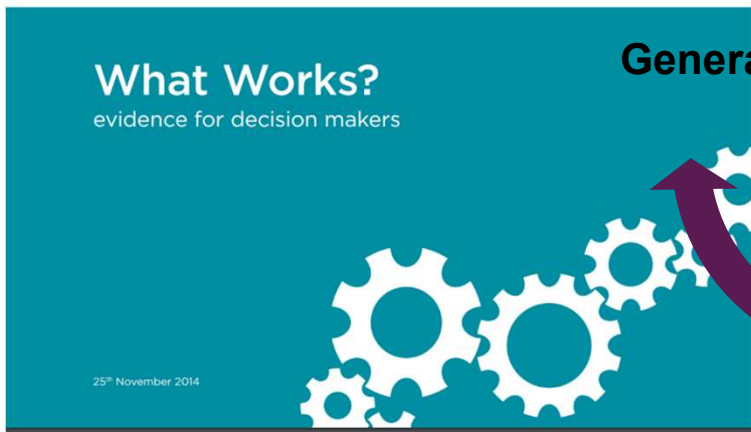


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** p < .01
* p < .05
+ p < .1
N = 220, 282

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The What Works approach



Generate

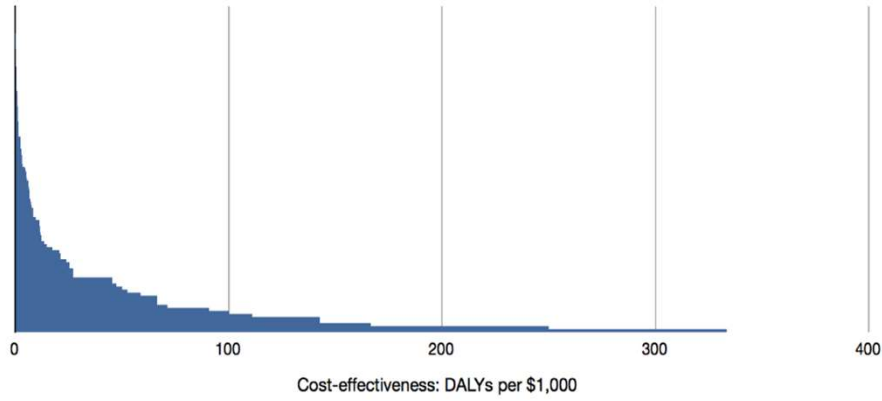
Translate

Adopt



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Relative efficacy – 100x average differences



Toby Ord, 2013

The Moral Imperative toward Cost-Effectiveness in Global Health

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The growing 'What Works' network in the UK

NICE
National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

EARLY INTERVENTION FOUNDATION

Education Endowment Foundation

College of Policing

what works centre for local economic growth

what works wellbeing

WHAT WORKS SCOTLAND

Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

What Works Network

Centre for Ageing Better

Centre for Homelessness Impact

Money & Pensions Service

What Works for Children's Social Care

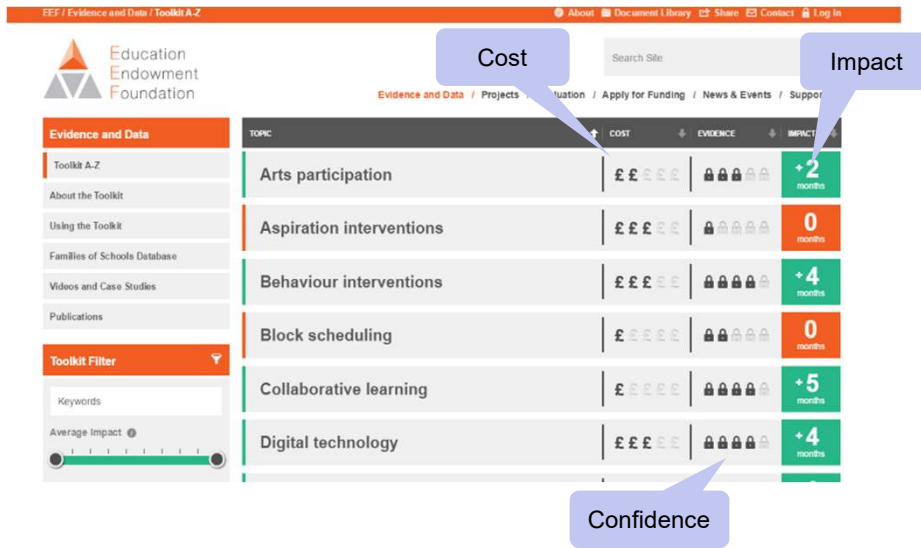
youth futures FOUNDATION

YOUTH ENDOWMENT FUND

TASO Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

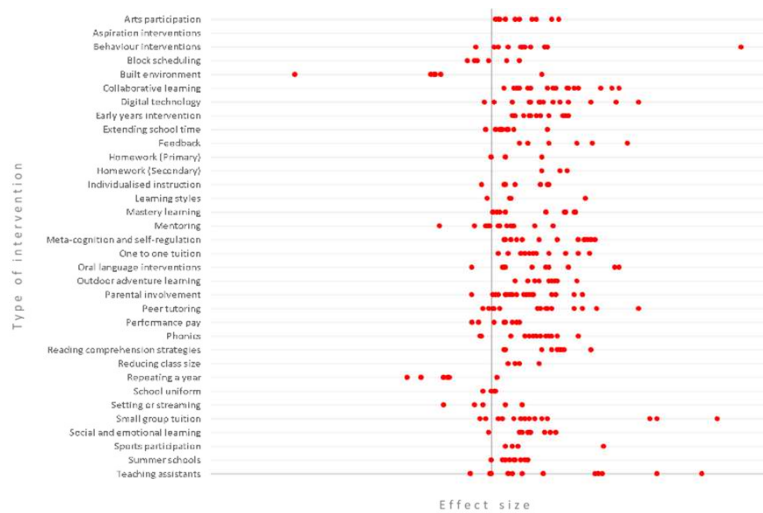
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Producing summaries for practitioners




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Built on a growing evidence base...



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Changing how we do policy



THE GREEN BOOK
CENTRAL GOVERNMENT
GUIDANCE ON APPRAISAL
AND EVALUATION

HM TREASURY

HM Treasury

THE GREEN BOOK
Appraisal and Evaluation in Central G

Treasury Guidance
LONDON: TSO

Box 6. Use of Evaluation and Testing

The Behavioural Research Centre for Adult Skills and Knowledge wanted to understand if behavioural science could help improve educational outcomes for 16 to 19 year olds. Existing research suggested that there is a link between strong social support and student attainment. The project team adopted a 'test, learn, adapt' methodology, which focuses on testing what works and continually improving policy interventions in response to evaluation results.

Almost 1,500 students at 9 further education colleges were enrolled into a 'study supporter' trial. Students were randomly assigned into 2 different groups. An intervention group is asked to nominate one or two 'study supporters' (such as a parent, friend, or employer) to receive weekly text messages about their studies. Messages to supporters were a mix of notifications about key events, including upcoming exam dates, and suggested questions that supporters could ask the student to prompt a learning conversation. A second group nominates study supporters, but did not receive text messages.

Costing less than £10 per student, the trial finds that students whose supporters received weekly text messages were 27% more likely to pass their GCSEs than students who had volunteered to be part of the programme but had not been selected to receive supportive messages.

The results indicated the potential of the intervention and the team tested another iteration the following academic year, with a different cohort of 900 students. This time both the students themselves and their study supporters receive text messages. Results showed a 32% increase in the exam pass rate.

The team then decided to test whether the intervention could be effectively replicated at larger scale by running a trial across 31 further education colleges, involving approximately 4,000 students.

Source: *Behavioural Insights Team Update Report 2016-17*, see: www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk

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But still...

8 %

...of >£400bn of new programs were evaluated... (2020, CO-HMT analysis)

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effectiveness

Home > Organisations

Inputs

Impacts

Increased effectiveness and efficiency of government spending

8 March 2022 — Collection

Top Evaluations: Government

The Evaluation Task Force showcases featured evaluations from across government departments to demonstrate best practices for public policy evaluation.

PARLIAMENT STREET SW1

WHITE SW1

CITY OF WESTMINSTER

Magenta Book

Central Government guidance on evaluation

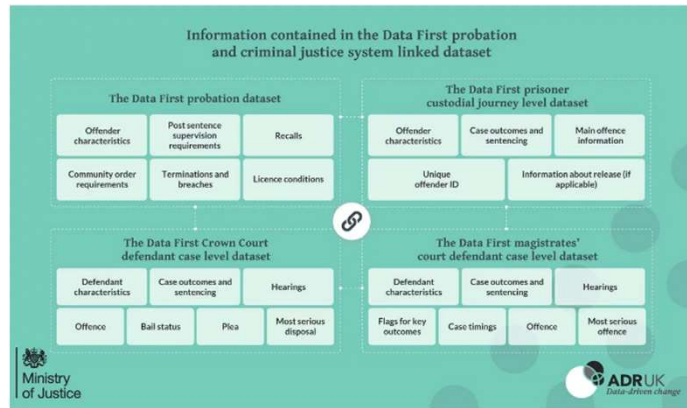
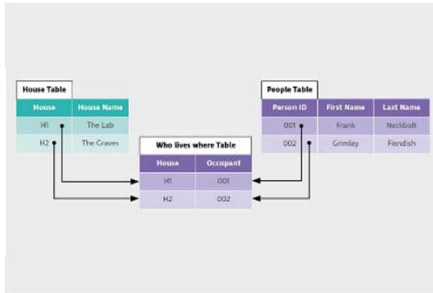
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What next? 10 challenges
From guerrilla action to mainstream...

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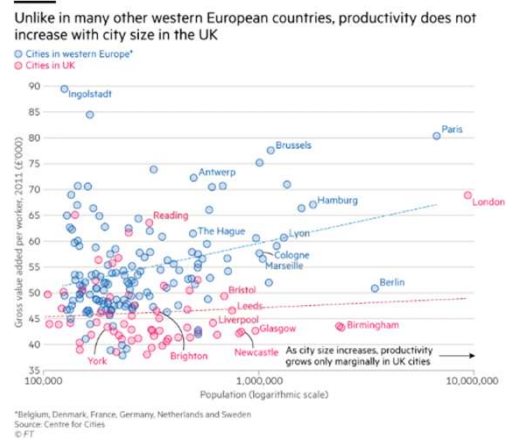
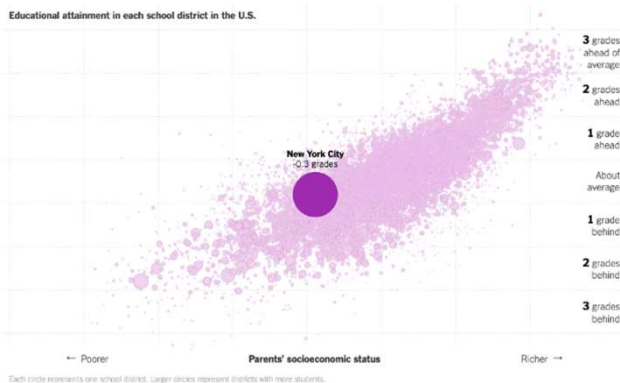
4. Build the data architecture



...rapid ability to assess multiple **group aggregate outcomes** – and data architecture & APIs to deliver

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5. Mine the variance



...mine the variance in public services – regression, ML, and deep dives – to identify promising interventions

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9. Bring the public with us

- Asking ‘why do you think that?’
- From worrying about experiments, to demanding them!
- Nurturing the skill of bullshit detection (Uganda trial)

Effects of the Informed Health Choices primary school intervention on the ability of children in Uganda to assess the reliability of claims about treatment effects: a cluster-randomised controlled trial

Allen Nsangi, MSc · Daniel Semakula, MD · Dr Andrew D Oxman, MD · Astrid Austvoll-Dahlgren, PhD · Matt Oxman, BJ · Sarah Rosenbaum, PhD · et al. [Show all authors](#)

Published: May 21, 2017 · DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)31226-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)31226-6) · [Check for updates](#)

...nurture a nation of ‘bullshit detectors’ – who ask ‘why do you think that’s the best thing to do?’

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10. Go global

The Evidence Commission report

A wake-up call and path forward for decision-makers, evidence intermediaries, and impact-oriented evidence producers

...turn **What Works** into a global public good – through shared commissioning, G20, UN, and FCDO

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Let's make more winners...through marginal and radical innovation



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BIT approach has spread well beyond UK - but What Works?



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A common foundation is addressing weak evaluation and methods

1984

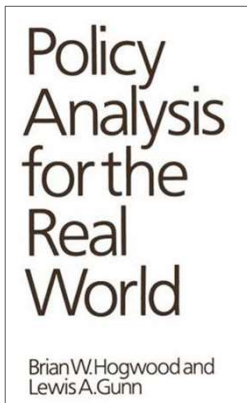
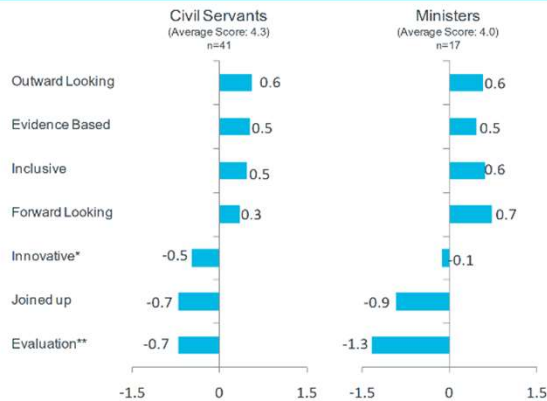


Figure 1 – Strengths and weaknesses of policy making characteristics



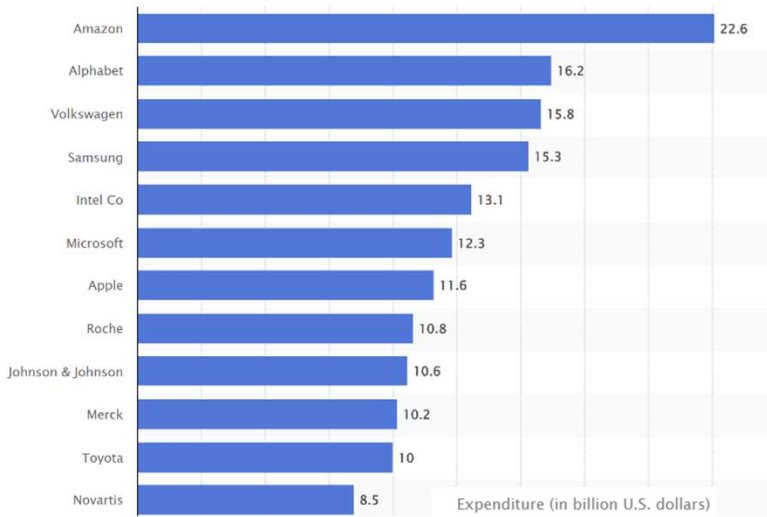
2011

Based on a survey of former ministers and Civil Servants. The results show the deviation from the average score given for various categories response to the following question: "In your experience, how often would you say that government policies were ..." (using a seven point scale where 1 = 'never' and 7 = 'always').
 * Innovative, Flexible and Creative; ** Evaluation, Review and Learning

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20making%20in%20the%20real%20world.pdf>

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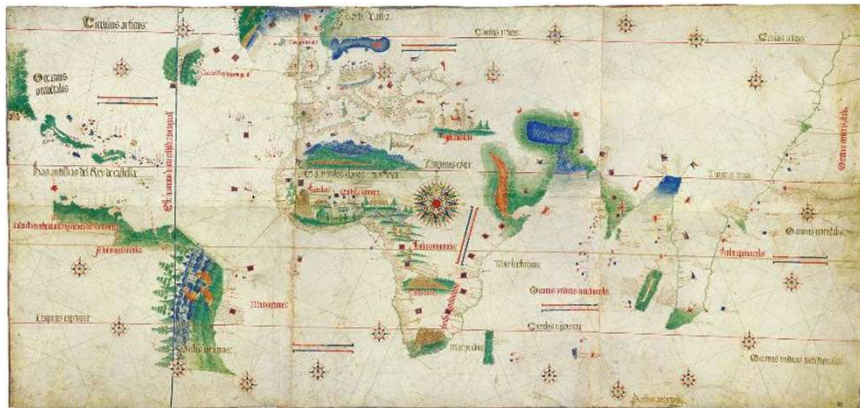
R&D fit for a government department?



<https://www.statista.com/statistics/265645/ranking-of-the-20-companies-with-the-highest-spending-on-research-and-development/>

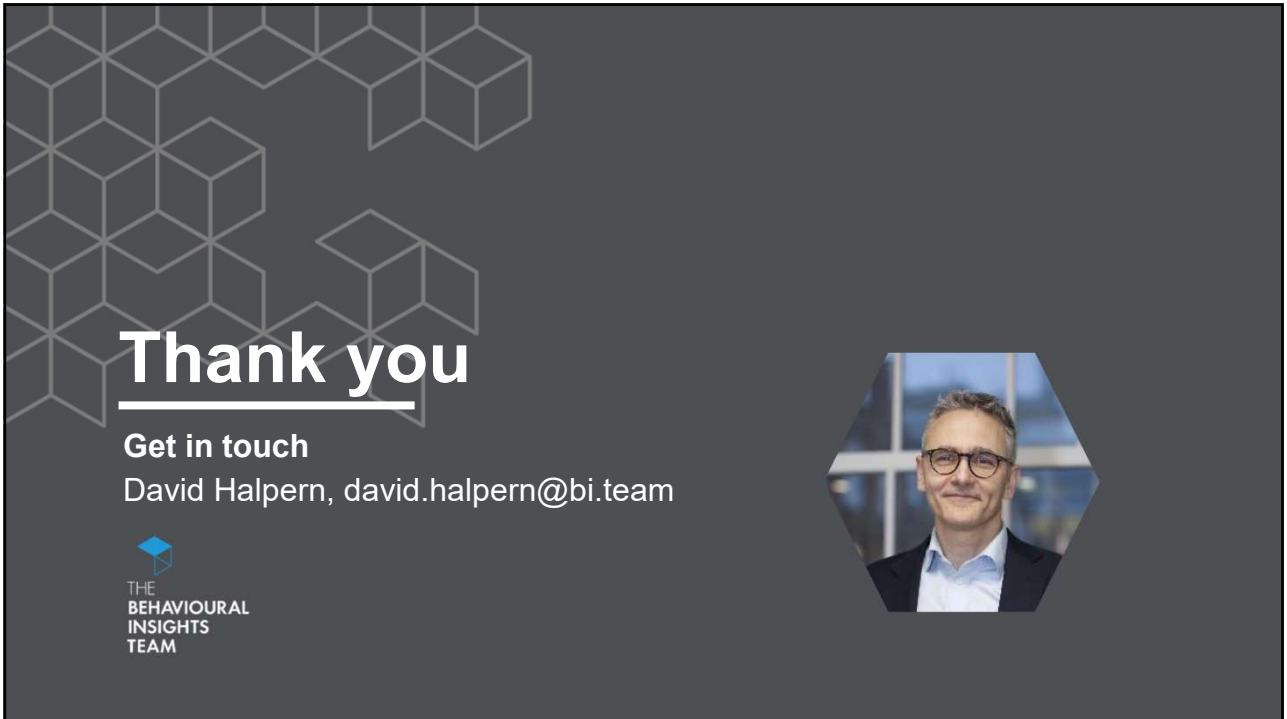
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Humility is the cornerstone




Cantino planisphere (1502)

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Thank you

Get in touch
David Halpern, david.halpern@bi.team



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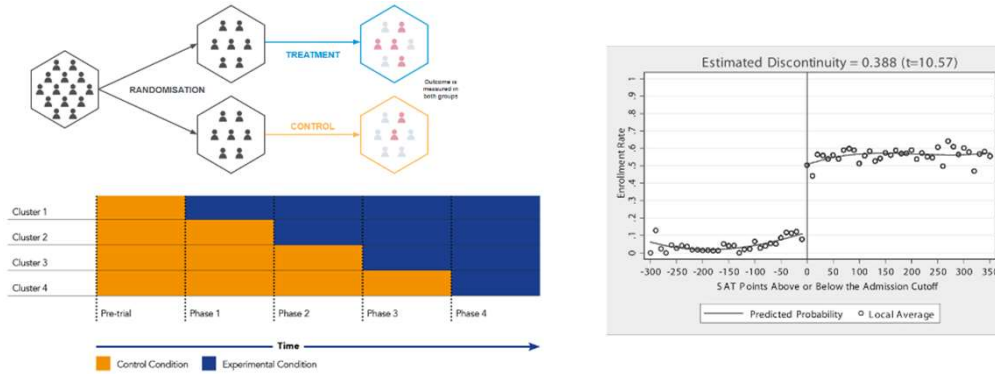
Appendix

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2. Build the skills

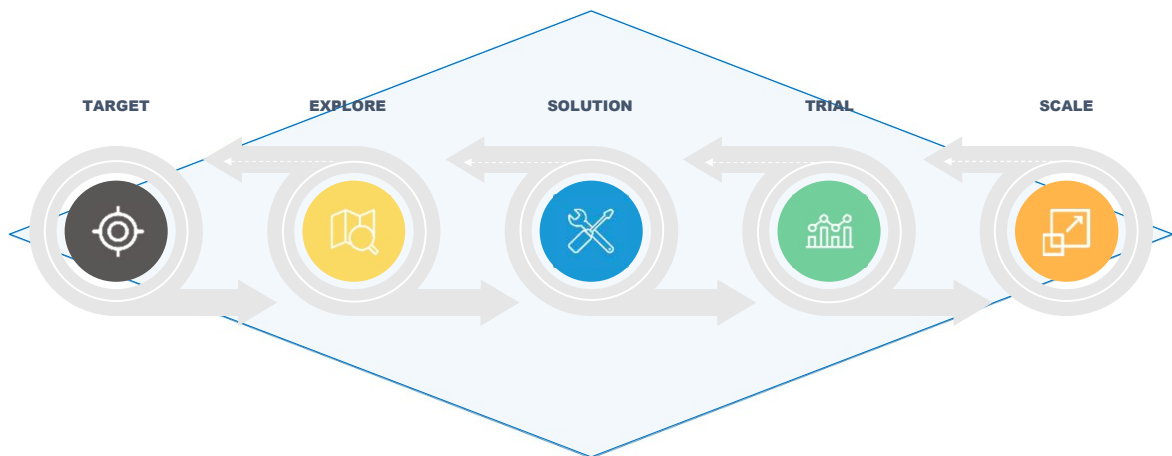
- Eg core evaluation approaches, to build into policy design...
- RCTs...but also basic (before-after, diff-in-diff...) quasi-experimental



...it will be hard to get into a senior civil service position without **knowing how to evaluate**

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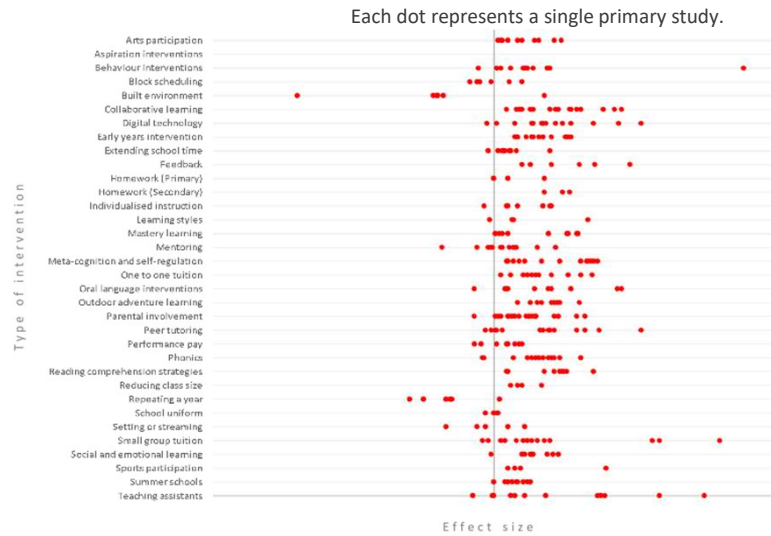
3. Expand the pipeline



...innovation funds with robust evaluation; evaluation by default; and **protocol publication** (a key early KPI!)

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6. Replicate



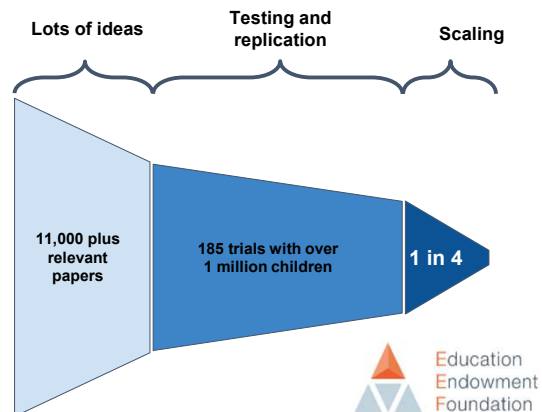
... 'measure twice, cut once' – **replicate, iterate, improve** – check implementation, but don't fossilize

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7. Increase the hit rate

Better than BAU...

- 1 in 50 - Commercial A/B
- 1 in 5 – education
- 1 in 3 - BIT



...prototype and **look out for transferable solutions**, techniques or insights

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8. Translate and adopt



...plug the gaps in the What Works landscape – and nurture **evidence-curious professionals**