

BEHAVIORAL PROBLEM ASSESSMENT TOOL

FOR NYC GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND ISLG GRANTEES

Many programs, services, and policies are not as successful as they could be because they're built on models of human behavior that rarely align with how people actually behave. Behavioral science helps improve policies and programs by incorporating a more accurate understanding of human behavior. Even small tweaks—such as changes to the framing of a letter, thoughtful choices for the subject line of an email, or a timely text message—can have a big impact on behavior.

What is a behavioral problem?

In order to determine how you can improve your program, service or policy using behavioral science, you must first identify whether you are facing a behavioral problem. Are people making decisions that don't seem to align with their intentions? Or are they making decisions they never put into action? Behavioral problems come in many forms, but we often see them fall into one of four categories:

- ▶ **Uptake:** low or disproportionate sign-up or utilization of a program or service
- ▶ **Retention:** high or uneven levels of drop-off over the lifespan of a program or service
- ▶ **Compliance:** low adherence to core requirements for program engagement or management
- ▶ **Matching:** frequent mismatches of participants to programs or services when better fit options are available

Learn more about these problems and answer the questions below to see if any of these apply to your work.



Uptake Problem

Programs and services can experience two types of problems with uptake, often thought of as outreach or recruitment problems. First, you might have lower uptake than intended, meaning there are resources to provide your program to more clients, but they are not accessing those resources. And second, you might experience issues of disproportionate uptake, meaning your program or service should serve a more diverse range of clients or recruit a more diverse team of staff. Answer these questions below to determine if you have an uptake problem.

Answer the following yes-or-no questions:

Low uptake

- ▶ Is your program struggling to reach as many clients or staff as it should?
- ▶ Are your clients or staff underutilizing a program or service?
- ▶ Do potential clients or staff “not know” about a program or service?

If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions, you may have a problem with low uptake.

Disproportionate uptake

- ▶ Is your program not reaching the intended audience?
- ▶ Is your program reaching fewer historically underrepresented groups? Or are you struggling to serve clients who are most vulnerable?
- ▶ Is your program or service not serving as diverse of a population of clients or staff as it should?

If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions, you may have a problem with disproportionate uptake.



Compliance Problem

Programs, services, and policies often experience issues of compliance, or lack of adherence to the expectations of program engagement or management. Clients may need to meet a number of requirements to become or stay eligible for a program or service, but fail to do so. Similarly, there may be policies in place that require clients or staff to follow specific rules or instructions, but they often don't. This can lead to clients not accessing important City resources for which they are eligible or create an administrative burden for your office or agency to address the consequences of non-compliance.

Answer the following yes-or-no questions:

- ▶ Do your clients or staff sign up but not show up to required meetings?
- ▶ Do your clients or staff show up unprepared (e.g. without required documents)?
- ▶ Are your clients or staff not following certain policies, rules, or laws?

If you answered "Yes" to any of these questions, you may have a compliance problem.



Retention Problem

Programs and services are often designed to engage users over a certain period of time or with a certain intensity of engagement. If clients or staff drop out of a program before it's finished, they won't get the full benefits—or sometimes any of the benefits—of participating. Similarly, policies often require clients and staff to update their eligibility information on a regular basis, such as verifying changes in income to continue receiving cash assistance. If clients miss a step or fail to update their information, they end up losing access to City or nonprofit resources for which they are still eligible. These issues are commonly referred to as "attrition," "drop-out," or "churn."

Answer the following yes-or-no questions:

- ▶ Do your clients or staff leave a program before it is finished (e.g. training or re-employment programs, early childhood benefits, education courses, etc.)?
- ▶ Do your clients or staff frequently miss deadlines to recertify for programs or services for which they are eligible?

If you answered "Yes" to any of these questions, you may have a retention problem.



Matching Problem

Programs, services, and policies often present clients and staff with many options when they access City or nonprofit resources. New York City residents are presented with seemingly endless options when choosing a job training program, a new financial product, or even when deciding where to get their annual flu shot. Clients and staff often need to compare across numerous options with limited information and time. This often results in suboptimal matches and can reduce overall access to resources.

Answer the following yes-or-no questions:

- ▶ Does your program or policy present your clients with many choices?
- ▶ Do your clients or staff choose a suboptimal choice, or the choice that doesn't seem like the best fit for them?
- ▶ Do staff disproportionately assign clients into a default option?
- ▶ Do your clients disproportionately select one choice over others?

If you answered "Yes" to any of these questions, you may have a matching problem.

Interested in applying behavioral science in your work?

Want to discuss your behavioral problem with the NYC Behavioral Design Team?

▶ Sign up for Office Hours at calendly.com/nycbdt/officehour.

▶ Read more about how the BDT works [here](#).