

By Robert Brodsky

Published November 7, 2008

© Copyright 2008 National Journal Group Inc.

Some aspects of Bush management agenda could endure

While feverishly campaigning for president this year, Sens. Barack Obama and John McCain appeared to be running as much against President Bush as against each other. Bush's handling of the economy? Change is on the way. America's credibility abroad? They'll fix it. Global warming, health care and federal spending? The current president's policies appear finished. When it comes to government management and reform, however, neither candidate illustrated a vision that was dramatically different from the one Bush outlined eight years ago.

"What matters most is performance and results," Bush said of his President's Management Agenda in 2002. "In the long term, there are few items more urgent than ensuring that the federal government is well-run and results-oriented."

Now compare those words to Obama's during a Sept. 22 speech in Green Bay, Wis. "We will fire government managers who aren't getting results; we will cut funding for programs that are wasting your money," he said. And McCain in Arlington, Va., on June 3 said: "I want to freeze discretionary spending until we have completed top-to-bottom reviews of all federal programs to weed out failing ones."

Bush's approval ratings are parked south of 30 percent, but his management agenda has been somewhat successful. The five key tenets of the PMA - strategically managing human capital, encouraging public-private job competition, improving financial reporting, expanding electronic government and integrating performance - have become standard operating procedures in government during the past eight years.

President-elect Obama undoubtedly will want to stamp his own imprint on management reform, possibly doing away with stoplight-style score cards, for example, but the core focus of the PMA could be around for years to come. "We expect the agenda to be more similar than it would be different," says Jon Desenberg, senior policy director

for the Performance Institute, an Arlington, Va.-based think tank. "Of course, the names would change, but I think the centerpiece to everything . . . is that top-to-bottom review of federal programs."

Management observers anticipate financial reporting, electronic government and human capital initiatives have the best chance of surviving intact, because of their relative success as much as their lack of political controversy. Most agree government has made significant strides in financial reporting. All major agencies now issue their financial statements within 45 days of the end of the fiscal year and all but five received a passing score on their last audits. Obama isn't likely to risk reversing this trend.

Ditto with the e-government agenda, which advanced the Clinton-era goal of delivering more services and information online to citizens. While critics say the initiative should focus more on information security and defining a standard IT infrastructure, the overriding concentration on e-gov is here to stay.

Obama will have little choice in adopting the Bush administration's human capital plan for improving the federal workforce and boosting recruitment and retention. In April, the Office of Personnel Management quietly posted a notice in the Federal Register cementing the administration's entire human capital plan, including key metrics for knowledge management and workforce planning, in federal regulations.

"Regardless of the administration, we think that what is in regulation is just good business sense," says Kevin Mahoney, OPM's associate director of human capital leadership. "And it makes sense to follow the framework and use the framework to keep the progress that we have made over the past six or seven years going." The notice does not tie the next administration's hands, he says, and the metrics can be changed as needed.

Mark Roth, general counsel for the

American Federation of Government Employees, called the notice "ludicrous." It would "take less than two months to rescind it with one sentence in the Federal Register if [Obama] chooses a different PMA program," he says. "So ultimately, very little harm is done."

Two controversial PMA objectives - performance improvement and commercial services management, formerly known as competitive sourcing - are in the most jeopardy. Obama has pledged to drastically restructure the Program Assessment Rating Tool, which evaluates the performance of every federal program. Critics say PART has supplied a significant amount of useful data, but they complain that it's ideologically driven and should be better integrated with the budget process.

Officials are confident that some form of program review will continue. "There are some opportunities to assess government performance differently than we've done," says Dustin Brown, the Office of Management and Budget's deputy assistant director for management. "But the core principles are the same. We've just begun to scratch the surface at new and innovative ways to look at government performance."

The same can't be said of competitive sourcing. Private sector job competitions are wildly unpopular with Democrats and the labor unions, all of which backed Obama. Federal contractors have grown tired of Congress repeatedly overturning competition results and largely have thrown in the towel. A pair of bills that would have suspended new job competitions for the next year at civilian agencies and for three years at the Defense Department failed to become law, but most agree competitive sourcing is all but dead.

"The landscape in Congress is against it," says Robert Shea, OMB's former associate director of administration and government performance and now director of consulting firm Grant Thornton's global public sector. "It's hanging on by a fingernail."