



U.S. General Services Administration

U.S. General Services Administration Capacity Assessment for Evidence- Building and Evaluation

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1. Introduction

Evidence-informed decision-making drives impact, improves business value and value for the customer, and maximizes the reach of resources. A culture of evidence-driven decision-making is nurtured in organizations that have robust capacity to not only build evidence but also to use evidence in making strategic decisions.

The capacity assessment framework is a tool to assess and ultimately develop robust evidence-building capacity, in support of the U.S. General Services Administration's (GSA) activities, operations, and strategic priorities. This tool and process provides GSA the opportunity to measure and document its current capacity to build and use high-quality evidence across activities (e.g., programs or initiatives) and operations (e.g., administrative and support tasks), and identify capacity-building priorities and activities in fiscal years (FY) 2022-2026. The capacity assessment will be used to:

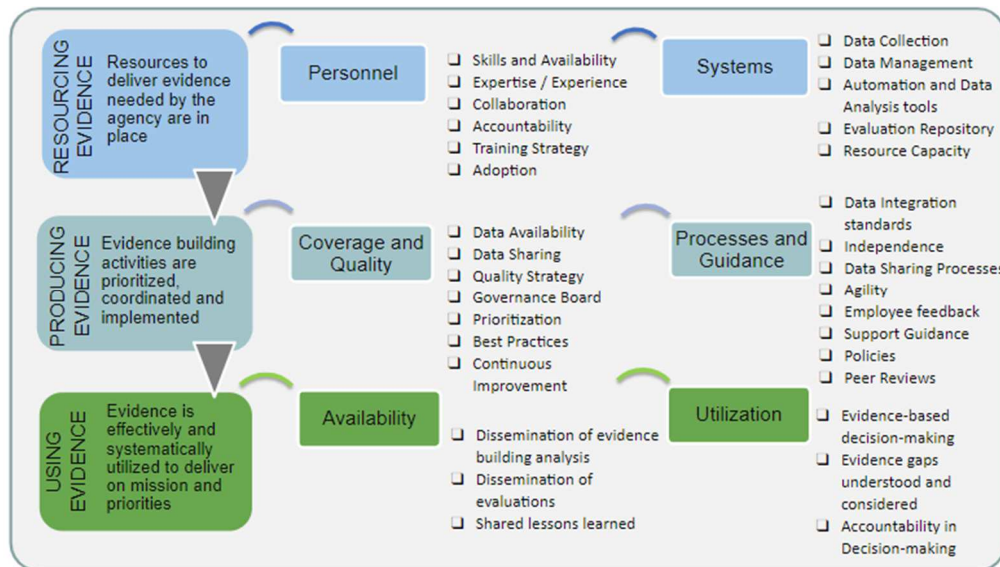
- Identify areas in need of improvement and support strategies to strengthen the organization;
- Inform strategic decisions about resource allocation and investments in capacity building;
- Identify areas of opportunity for internal and external stakeholders to support GSA's capacity- or evidence-building activities; and
- Measure improvement against an agency-wide baseline as GSA coordinates and increases technical expertise available for statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis activities.

2. Methods

GSA conducted an agency-wide capacity assessment in FY 2021, building on initial groundwork conducted in FY 2020. This self-assessment provides a baseline against which GSA plans to measure improvements to the coverage, quality, methods, effectiveness, and independence of the statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis efforts of the agency. Three organizations within GSA participated in the self-assessment: Office of Government-wide Policy (OGP), Federal Acquisition Service (FAS), and Public Buildings Service (PBS). In future years, GSA will aim to conduct a broader GSA-wide assessment with additional organizations participating. The iterative approach in establishing a framework and receiving feedback along with self-assessment scores has enabled GSA to develop a relevant and robust foundation to help modernize its evidence-building functions and statistical efficiency to inform policy decisions.

A systematic approach has been used to understand GSA’s current evidence-building infrastructure and identify where resources need to be targeted to enhance evidence capacity. GSA developed a capacity assessment tool through discussion and feedback from data professionals across OGP, FAS, and PBS. The tool has been refined to provide a meaningful and relevant framework for all three organizations. It has been used to establish a baseline of current organizational maturity using a five-level maturity scale with the following ratings: (1) Nascent, (2) Improving (3) Learning (4) Mature and (5) Optimizing.

Between May and August 2021 each organization conducted working group sessions and internal surveys to determine where they currently rate themselves against this maturity scale for each of the elements of the tool and where additional resources are needed in order to build their capacity infrastructure. The section below describes the features of the capacity assessment tool.



2.1 Capacity Assessment Tool

GSA's capacity assessment tool is organized into three categories:

- **Resourcing Evidence:** The resources to deliver evidence needed by the agency are in place.
- **Producing Evidence:** Evidence building activities are prioritized, coordinated and implemented.
- **Using Evidence:** Evidence is effectively and systematically utilized to drive decision-making and deliver on mission and priorities.

Each category is further divided into sub-categories made up of individual elements that outline specific goals and outcomes. GSA conducted a self-assessment of its capacity along all 32 elements listed.

The sub-categories, elements, and their specific definitions are included below.

Resourcing Evidence

The components of this category are as follows:

Personnel: Skills to deliver evidence goals are in place; sufficient capacity is available to meet the agency's evidence needs.

- **Skills and Availability** Agency has the analytic capacity (skills and time) to collect, store, clean, and synthesize data, and has capacity (skills and time) to disseminate results.
- **Expertise/Experience** There is sufficient bandwidth of staff with expertise to implement evaluation plans and advance the learning agenda (including dissemination activities). Staff have experience in employing a variety of evaluation and research methods. The Senior Agency Official for Privacy (SAOP) and Chief Privacy Officer (CPO) continuously assess the agency's privacy workforce needs and advise OHRM on hiring personnel, in accordance with GSA's Privacy Continuous Monitoring Strategy and the Federal Privacy Council and Office of Personnel Management's "Toolkit for Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Privacy Professionals in the Federal Government".
- **Collaboration** Data analysts and evaluation experts work in multidisciplinary teams and are integrated into business operations.
- **Accountability** Performance metrics provide accountability for evaluation and data quality. Expectations for steering and utilizing evidence are set in performance metrics for leadership.
- **Training Strategy** Training strategy and course catalogue is actively updated to match the evolving skill sets and staffing needs. Trainings on evaluation best practices and tools, data quality standards and data engineering tools are routinely conducted.

- **Adoption** Staff across the organization understand why evidence-building is an important function and how it is used to advance the organization's mission. Non-specialized staff have sufficient knowledge of methods and purpose of data analysis and evaluation, and can interpret and apply evidence to questions relevant to their role.

Systems: Databases, tools, and collection efforts provide information needed to do meaningful analysis and preserve integrity & security of information.

- **Data Collection** Systems are utilized to streamline the discovery, acquisition, and maturation of data. Data is in an integrated environment with access controls that follow the policies and regulations to keep data safe and meet privacy requirements.
- **Data Management** Data management activities are centralized, coordinated and implemented to standardize, transform, and integrate like data across domains.
- **Automation and Data Analysis tools** Automation is routinely used for data processing and synthesis. Data analysis tools are routinely used to execute analysis efficiently.
- **Evaluation Repository** Repository of past, ongoing, and planned evaluations methods and results is in place and actively updated.
- **Resource Capacity** Activities scoped in annual evaluation plans are routinely and sufficiently resourced.

Producing Evidence

The components of this category are as follows:

Coverage and Quality: Rigorous evidence-building activities are ongoing in support of strategic priorities.

- **Data Availability** Teams have the data needed to deliver the agency mission. Administrative data sets are routinely utilized across teams to answer meaningful learning and evaluation questions.
- **Data Sharing** Data held is routinely shared with other stakeholders for purposes of answering a learning question in a timely and secure fashion.
- **Data Quality Strategy** The policies, processes, guidelines and metrics for the data quality strategy are widely disseminated across teams. Designated staff are responsible for ensuring that data quality is routinely measured and reviewed.
- **Data Governance Board** Data governance boards are chartered and collaborate with other data governance boards within and across teams. Data governance boards establish executive accountability for data quality and establish robust data sharing processes.

- **Prioritization Strategy** There is a clear and strategic prioritization process for evidence-building and evaluation activities. Prioritizations are aligned with organizational strategy and funding allocations.
- **Adoption of Best Practices** Methodological best practices are shared and adhered to within and across teams to perform data analysis and evaluation activities.
- **Continuous Improvement** Addressing questions scoped in the learning agenda are actively underway and targets for activities scoped in annual evaluation plans are met.

Processes and Guidance: Governance, standards and processes consistently ensure quality and reliability. Guidance makes clear and explicit the standards and processes needed to ensure quality.

- **Data Integration standards** Data standards are utilized and constantly evolving to ensure information stored in different places can be integrated for analysis and learning.
- **Independence and Objectivity** Findings and recommendations from evaluations and evidence-based and capacity-building activities are independent from external influence in accordance with GSA Evaluation Policies. Evaluation activities are carried out objectively, free from bias, conflict of interest, and inappropriate influence.
- **Data Sharing Processes** There are defined processes that make sharing data with other teams/units/agencies feasible within appropriate timelines.
- **Agility in addressing emerging needs** There is a clear process for identifying new/outstanding data needs and communicating these to data governance boards. Emerging data needs are incorporated into capacity data collection and analysis.
- **Employee feedback** Leadership surveys employees for their views and feedback on ongoing or needed evaluations.
- **Support Guidance for needs** Guidance exists to support staff across the agency to identify relevant questions, develop evidence-building plans, and address their evidence-based needs.
- **Evaluation Policies** Policy on appropriate methods to use in evaluation exist and are routinely updated per evolving best practice. All evaluations adhere to guidance set in agency evaluation policies and evaluations are routinely monitored for following best practice guidance.
- **Evaluation Peer Reviews** Processes and protocols for evaluation ensure results are free from bias and undue influence. Evaluations undergo peer review.

Using Evidence

The components of this category are as follows:

Availability: Evidence is accessible and shared. Findings are widely disseminated.

- **Dissemination of evidence building analysis** Results and conclusions from analysis and evidence-building activities are systematically tracked and published. Repository of results is accessible and utilized by teams.
- **Dissemination of evaluations** Results and conclusions from evaluations are systematically tracked and published. Repository of evaluation results is accessible and utilized by teams.
- **Shared lessons learned** There is consistent publication of results and evidence-building activities. There are robust internal and external dissemination and communication efforts to share learnings from evidence-building activities.

Utilization: Evidence routinely informs decision making.

- **Rigor in evidence-based decision-making** Leadership and decision-makers routinely use rigorous evidence to inform decisions about priorities, program changes, and investments.
- **Evidence gaps understood and considered** Evidence gaps are communicated to data and evaluation staff. Evidence needs are effectively prioritized, solutioned, and utilized.
- **Accountability in Decision-making** Staff are empowered and held accountable by leadership to groundwork in what we know (supported by data and informed by relevant evidence). Leadership routinely pushes teams to utilize data and evaluation to answer questions that will support the mission.

Maturity Scale

The maturity level of each element of the capacity assessment tool is graded from level 1 to 5. Maturity is a measure of the organization's current capacity and the opportunities for an organization to improve in a particular discipline. Each level provides a layer in the foundation of continuously enhancing the capacity infrastructure of the organization. The five levels of this rating scale are described below:

1. **Nascent:** The beginning phase of maturity where processes and activities are not in place or are poorly controlled, but there may be some initial interest in improving data maturity and adopting evidence-based practices.
2. **Improving:** This phase is characterized by a few breakthrough capabilities scattered within the organization and the beginnings of structure and management priorities to begin making it happen. There is the willingness to facilitate change and adopt new evidence-based practices that align with GSA maturity goals.
3. **Learning:** This phase is characterized by the establishment of adopted structure, processes, and policies that prioritize data- and evidence-based practices. Capabilities are beginning to make noticeable differences in operations and there is a focus on improving data and evidence.

4. **Mature:** The structure and capability is fully in place and provides the organization with the ability to build evidence and adopt evidence-based practices. There is sufficient organization, infrastructure resources, and capabilities to meet the organization's needs.
5. **Optimizing:** Highest level of maturity. Not only is the capability in place, but it is scalable, efficient, and has a measurable impact on operations. The organization and capabilities are flexible and able to rapidly change to adopt new technology and meet coming challenges.

Each organization developed organization-specific assessments for each element, which were rolled up into a GSA-wide assessment and score.

2.2 Assessing GSA's Capacity and Evidence Maturity

Determining the current capacity of the organization is the first step to building maturity. All three organizations have engaged their Data Governance Boards to spearhead this effort through facilitated group discussions with leadership and board members. In addition, they have scoped out the opinions of data professionals across the organization by conducting surveys using the Qualtrics survey tool to make sure that staff are empowered and engaged in building a forward looking strategy. Through facilitated discussions, surveys, polls, and other forms of electronic elicitation, over 130 data professionals were engaged in the capacity assessment and planning exercise.

Facilitated Group Discussions

Sessions were led by the Data Governance Boards for OGP and FAS to engage with senior leadership to discuss, rationalize, and self-score each of the elements of the original Capacity Assessment tool categories based on the predefined maturity scale. The outcome of the sessions was two-fold: (1) capture self-assessment scores and (2) provide recommendations to change and improve the Capacity Assessment Tool. Modifications and updates were made to the tool and the revised version was used by PBS for conducting a similar self-assessment.

Survey Tool

OGP conducted a Qualtrics based survey, which was distributed to 39 data professionals across the organization. The results of the survey helped inform the final self-assessment ratings for OGP. FAS conducted a similar survey of their Data Guild, a community of practice composed of approximately 200 FAS analysts, to confirm and validate the self-assessment scores given by their board members. Board members and Data Guild Members provided relatively comparable FAS capacity ratings across most categories with the board providing slightly higher ratings.

2.3 Evaluation Inventory

Building on an initial pilot data collection activity conducted in FY 2020, GSA fielded a brief survey in June 2021 to gather a comprehensive list of all ongoing or planned evaluations GSA-wide. This data collection activity also resulted in recommendations and ideas for future evaluations, which we will review and consider for inclusion in GSA's future Annual Evaluation Plans. GSA requested survey responses from leadership for each major GSA business line, SES-level GSA employees, and other employees these leaders deemed to have relevant input. The survey results revealed a total of 21 evaluation related activities across the agency. The activities are broken down into the below classifications.

- FY 2022 Annual Evaluation Plan - active: 4
- FY 2023 Annual Evaluation Plan - planned: 1
- Other GSA evaluation related activity - active (not considered formal evaluations): 14
- Other GSA evaluation related activity - planned (not considered formal evaluations): 2

GSA plans to repeat this type of data gathering activity each year to update and maintain the agency-wide evaluation inventory.

GSA Aggregate Rating

Across the agency scores range from (1) Nascent to (3) Learning. On average each organization rated their capacity to use evidence for informed decision-making as higher than the availability of resources to deliver evidence or the maturity of their evidence-building activities and infrastructure.

All organizations reported that personnel skills to deliver on evidence goals are improving, while the databases, tools and collection efforts needed to do meaningful analysis are either nascent or just starting to improve. Similarly, evidence-building activities around data governance and quality are at the lower levels of the maturity scale, and are just starting to improve. There is very little guidance and defined standards and processes to ensure quality of data, as shown by the self-assessment ratings that ranged from nascent to improving.

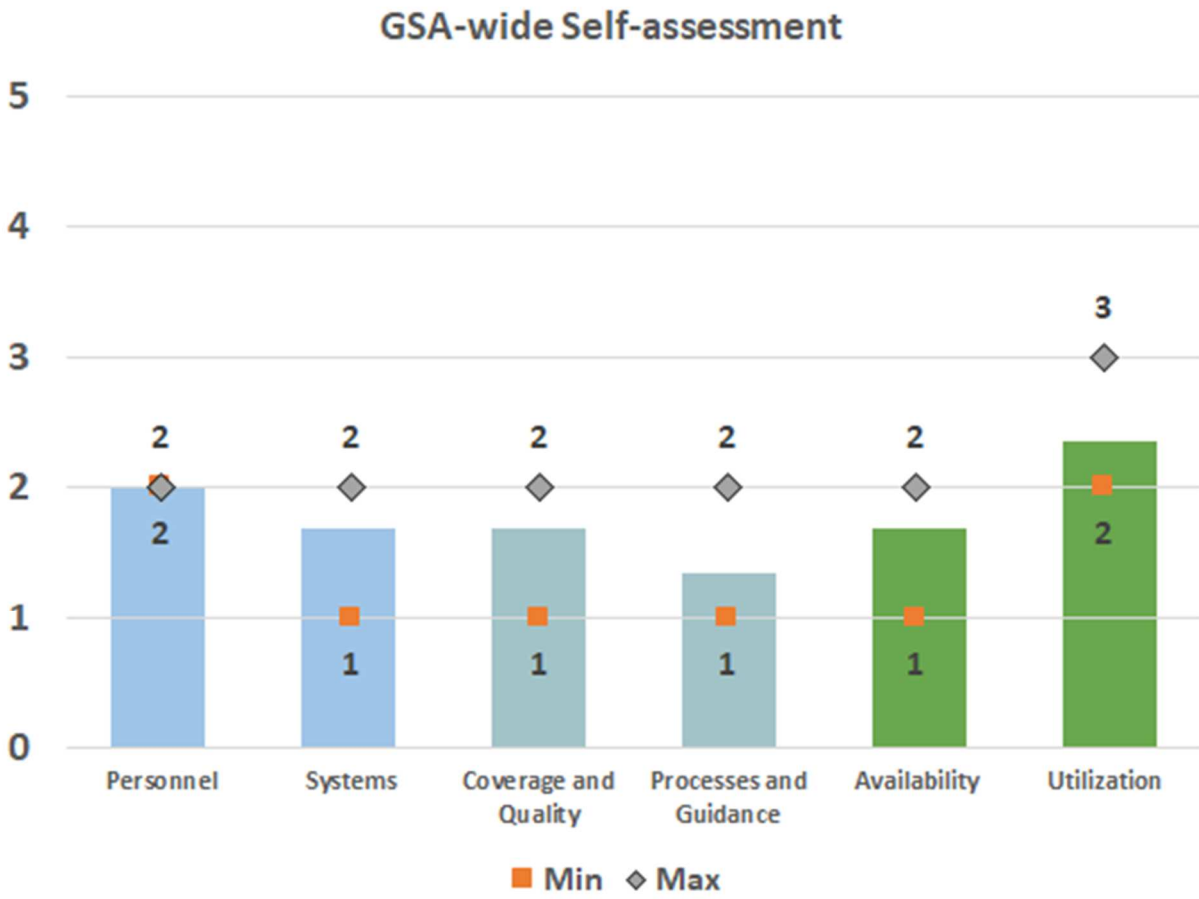
With regard to communication and dissemination of evidence and making it widely available, the organization ratings ranged from (1) Nascent to (2) Improving. The category that received the highest ratings was around evidence utilization where OGP rated themselves as a (3) Learning organization. For OGP, evidence routinely informs decision-making and is key in supporting their mission of creating and updating policies to ensure fair, efficient, and cost-effective management practices across the Federal Government. Both FAS and PBS assessed themselves as (2) Improving in this category.

The table and the figure below show aggregate ratings across GSA. Please note that ratings in table and chart below are an average of the three organizations: OGP, FAS and PBS.

Table 1: GSA-wide Aggregate Self-assessment

Capacity Category	Capacity Sub-Category	Aggregate Score	Rounded Score
Resourcing Evidence	Personnel	2	2
Resourcing Evidence	Systems	1.7	1
Producing Evidence	Coverage and Quality	1.7	1
Producing Evidence	Processes and Guidance	1.3	1
Using Evidence	Availability	1.7	1
Using Evidence	Utilization	2.3	2

Figure 1: GSA-wide Aggregate Self-assessment



4. GSA Capacity Targets

To enhance evidence-based practice and policy-making, GSA is looking ahead at setting capacity targets for FYs 2022 to 2026. If a component based assessment tool approach is utilized for future Capacity Assessments, tailored component targets could be developed to allow GSA to determine when and where there is a need for specific capabilities and coverage. Planning ahead will not only help meet Federal requirements but also help GSA progress as an organization. This will enable streamlining and operationalizing evaluation, research, analytical procedures, and data use for maximum efficacy and effectiveness. The sections below identify initiatives for enhancing the capacity infrastructure in the next five years. Data Governance Boards within the GSA organizations have been meeting to discuss and gain consensus on initiatives that are important to them. It is expected that these initiatives will help support budget discussions and be a reference point for budget allocations associated with the implementation of the Evidence Act.

4.1 GSA Summary Targets

GSA organizations are looking to set targets with more specific goals and outcomes in the next year while the out-year initiatives are more notional. The table below is a consolidation of initiatives that each of the Data Governance Boards in OGP, FAS, and PBS have been discussing as they progress through their planning process.

Note: items in bold in the table are areas of focus identified by more than one organization.

Category	Sub Category	Capacity Element	Org.	F Y 2 2	F Y 2 3	F Y 2 4	F Y 2 5	F Y 2 6
Resourcing Evidence	Personnel	Personnel Capacity	OGP, FAS	X	X	X		
Resourcing Evidence	Systems	Automation & Data Analysis Tools	OGP, PBS	X	X	X	X	X
Resourcing Evidence	Systems	Data Management	FAS	X	X			
Producing Evidence	Coverage and Quality	Data Quality Strategy	PBS, FAS	X	X	X		
Producing Evidence	Coverage and Quality	Data Governance Board	PBS	X	X	X	X	
Producing Evidence	Processes and Guidance	Data Integration Standards	OGP, PBS	X	X	X	X	X
Producing Evidence	Processes and Guidance	Data Sharing Processes	OGP, FAS	X	X	X		
Producing Evidence	Processes and Guidance	Evaluation Policies / Guidance	OGP	X	X	X		
Using Evidence	Availability	Dissemination of Evaluations	FAS	X	X			

Overarching: GSA-wide Coordination, Governance and Leadership	PBS, FAS	X	X	X		
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GSA-wide coordination and leadership participation will help shepherd the agency toward a more mature organization committed to evidence-based policy making. Parallel initiatives across OGP, FAS, and PBS in conducting capacity assessments has led to the identification of common areas that need attention in the FYs 2022 to 2026 time frame. Improving evidence activities has been identified as a key agency function for advancing GSA’s capacity infrastructure. These activities include providing analytical support and progress monitoring to meet the goals and priorities set forth in the five-year strategic plan.

Many GSA organizations surveyed identified the following capacity elements that need to be enhanced as part of their capacity building efforts.

Personnel Capacity

Across GSA there is a need for a data and analytics-savvy workforce. The agency will need to enhance not only personnel skills but also staffing capacity to effectively deliver on evidence-building activities. Staff need to have the know-how and required bandwidth to collect, clean, synthesize, and disseminate data and employ a variety of evaluation and research methods for sound and effective decision-making. Training strategy and course catalogs need to be updated to support more of a data-driven organizational culture.

Automation & Data Analysis Tools

There is a need to improve the level of automation and data analysis tools to conduct efficient analysis. GSA organizations wish to develop all four levels of analytic capacity: descriptive, diagnostic, predictive, and prescriptive. In order to make the agency future-ready, there is a need to leverage advances in Artificial Intelligence / Machine Learning. Establishing an agency/bureau/sub-component mapping system to fully align governmentwide datasets for efficient comparisons of administrative management and performance across the Federal Government is also warranted.

Data Quality Strategy

Data quality strategy needs to be widely disseminated across teams and gaps need to be identified. Further, there is a need to identify and improve the real and perceived issues with data quality by measuring the usefulness/utility of data according to criteria: timeliness, completeness, consistency, accuracy, and availability.

Data Integration Standards

OGP recommends that the Federal Integrated Business Framework (FIBF) be expanded and a determination be made of potential areas where standards would have the greatest impact. For reliable analytics initiatives there is also a requirement to have data and meta-data that is not only well defined and searchable, but also tightly integrated.

Data Sharing Process

GSA has a need for formal data sharing agreements across organizations that are grounded in defined guidelines and communicated broadly across the agency for timely access to data.

GSA-Wide Coordination, Governance and Leadership

As part of the integrated assessments, the FAS, OGP, and PBS Executive Data Governance Boards all recognized the need for greater coordination across GSA, a stronger integrated agency wide data governance structure, and leadership from the agency's top executives to ensure successful implementation of improvement initiatives. It was noted that the recently established GSA EDGE Board is a positive step forward, but more must be done to coordinate with and integrate requirements from component (FAS, PBS, OGP) data governance boards.

Without strong established agency wide data policy, decision-making procedures, and representation, component data governance will continue to operate through ad-hoc means. This has proven ineffective and wasteful for initiatives that require shared centralized policy and strong coordination such as data sharing, shared infrastructure and investment. To bridge the gap, the EDGE Board will need to engage with and incorporate the requirements of component data governance boards, and work with GSA leadership to establish the structure and authority to make lasting change.

5. Summary and Next Steps

GSA is striving to build a capacity infrastructure that will help the Agency base its decisions on facts arrived through rigorous and systematic analysis, using scientific principles. As a result each organization within the agency is committed to institutionalizing the collection, disseminations and use of high-quality evidence based on diverse perspectives and approaches. The capacity self-assessment within GSA currently rates all the categories within the capacity assessment tool as (1) Nascent or (2) Improving. Across the organization, personnel, systems, coverage and quality, processes and guidance, availability and utilization related to evidence capacity are at the lower ends of the scoring vector.

The key to the effectiveness of GSA's capacity building initiatives is the development of effective processes to strategically plan for evidence-building, and the availability of adequate resources that will help shepherd the agency toward that goal. GSA organizations have been working on identifying supporting initiatives that will help increase the maturity of the capacity infrastructure and improve the ratings from (1) Nascent to (2) Improving and from (2) Improving to (3) Learning for the categories that have been assessed.

If GSA pursues future Capacity Assessments, we will consider utilizing unique assessment tools for each discipline - statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis. If this approach is determined feasible it would allow GSA to determine when and where there is a need for more specific capabilities and coverage.

Between FYs 2022 and 2026, GSA will utilize the findings of the Capacity Assessment to develop the resources needed to build robust evidence-building capacity, in support of the GSA's activities, operations and strategic priorities. The results will inform strategic decisions and investments, help leverage stakeholder support, and measure progress against the baselines identified in the capacity assessment.