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National Evaluation Program, Phase I Final Report: Court Information Systems: An Assessment Framework

B. Kreindel R. H. Adams R. V. D. Campbell S. P. Hobart J. P. Moreschi

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#### ABSTRACT

This report describes the framework structure developed by the project team for its use in performing the judgmental assessment in the area of court information systems as part of the Phase I Evaluation effort.

Although it was expected that the framework would directly result from the information collected during the in-depth field site visits made to a number of jurisdictions and from data gathered during the structured telephone interviews with court personnel, because of a major deficiency in data concerning explicit goals and system assumptions the framework was developed utilizing a broader and more analytical approach.

The framework structure contains elements relating to policy goals for court operations and to general objectives for court information systems and will be useful for system planners and designers as well as for the judgmental assessment of the court information systems area.

iii

Departmental Approval:

MITRE Project Approval:

Lundberg B. Kreinde

ii

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	· 1
	Background	1
	Approach to the Development of the Assessment Structure	3
II.	GENERAL STRUCTURE	5
	Nature of Information Support Systems	5
	Framework Elements	6
	Overall Structure	9
	Organization and Management A Necessary Pre- requisite	9
III.	DETAILED FRAMEWORK	13
٤٧.	SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	23

# LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	
--------	--

- 2-1 Framework Structure General Characteristics
- 2-2 Framework

# LIST OF TABLES

۷

# <u>Table</u>

III-1	Framework	Element	No.	1
III-2	Framework	Element	No.	2
III-3	Framework	Element	No.	3
III-4	Framework	Element	No.	4
III-5	Framework	Element	No.	5
III-6	Framework	Element	No.	6
III-7	Framework	Element	No.	7

15	
16	
17	
18	
19	
20	
21	

PHASE I EVALUATION, COURT INFORMATION SYSTEMS: AN ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

#### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Background

In developing a framework as a basis for the judgmental assessment in the Phase I Evaluation of court information systems (CIS), the project team was guided by the Phase I Study Work Description.<sup>1</sup> That document describes the framework as a synthesis of the assumptions that underlie projects in the topic area and indicate its use in describing the chains of assumptions linking the expenditure of funds to project activity or intervention, the project activity or intervention to immediate outcome, and the immediate outcome to the impact on the problem addressed by the topic area.

Although it was expected that the framework would directly result from the information collected during the in-depth field site visits made to a representative number of jurisdictions which are currently operating court information systems, and from data gathered during the structured telephone interviews with trial court personnel, it was necessary for the project team to draw upon other resources in developing the assessment framework.

This report describes the framework structure developed by the project team for its use in performing the judgmental assessment in the area of court information systems. That assessment is reported in the fourth work product of the Phase I Evaluation effort.<sup>2</sup> It is believed

<sup>2</sup>Phase I Evaluation, Court Information Systems: A Judgmental Assessment

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Work Description for a Phase I Study Under the National Evaluation Pro-gram, NILECJ/LEAA, April 30, 1974.

that the framework will be of considerable assistance to system designers and decision makers in the courts, in LEAA and in the state planning agencies in planning, designing and implementing court information systems.

The field survey and analysis included visits to thirteen jurisdictions with operating systems in courts across the nation. The systems visited were chosen as a result of an extensive data collection and analysis process covering some seventy candidate systems. In each of those jurisdictions emphasis was placed on determining the assumptions underlying the development of the system and the choice of system design. Detailed reports<sup>3</sup> were prepared covering the data collected during the site visits. These reports include descriptions of (a) the background and chronology of system development, (b) court and information system organization, (c) flow charts of the current information system, (d) system development and operational cost, and (e) observations of the system, previous evaluations and impact on the court and the justice system.

The analysis of this data revealed that in no jurisdiction was a formalized set of defined, consistent and measurable goals and objectives established for the development of the court information system. In fact, the system designs were, in general, based only on an implied assumption that the courts would operate more effectively if an information system, utilizing advanced technology, were installed and operating. In addition, in none of the jurisdictions had a detailed and quantitative project evaluation been performed. In only one court had even a qualitative evaluation been attempted.

Despite the intensive data gathering effort the project team was, therefore, unable to find, either in one of the jurisdictions visited or

<sup>3</sup>Phase I Evaluation: Court Information Systems: Project Descriptions and Flow Diagrams. in the aggregation of all court information system projects examined a sufficient basis for constructing an adequate assessment framework based entirely on the information gathered in the data collection phase of the Phase I Evaluation effort. Because of this major deficiency in data concerning explicit goals and system assumptions the project team adopted a course of action different from that initially planned. The assessment framework was, consequently, constructed utilizing a broader and more analytical approach.

### B. Approach to the Development of the Assessment Structure

The members of the project team were not, of course, dependent only on the field site visits for information on court information projects and systems, and for information concerning system goals and assumptions. Rather, there was a considerable background of past experience in court information systems and in various related fields upon which the project team was able to draw. Such experience included project analysis, evaluation, design and implementation in a number of diverse criminal justice and law enforcement areas. In addition to drawing upon this experience, the project team made use of the extensive general information system design and development literature.

Working from this background, as well as from the information obtained during the various tasks of the Phase I Evaluation effort, the project team first considered three broad questions: (1) What have been identified as the major problems that trial courts face at this time? (2) What actions would be most effective in dealing with these problems? and (3) Which of these actions would require data from a court information system in order to be carried out successfully? After the construction and review of generally recognized court problems, a small set of fundamental problems was agreed upon and then restated in the form of goals, and corresponding sets of information-based court actions that could help solve these problems were selected. A similar process was

then used to identify generic goals for information system designs which would collect, process, store, retrieve and communicate the information required to support such court actions. Corresponding sets of information system program actions that would help meet the goals were also identified. In both exercises (court operations and information system) economic goals were considered as well as functional ones. In addition a tentative set of measures of accomplishment to be used in court information system evaluations was developed for each of the identified goals.

With these preliminary conceptual and analytical exercises completed, a preliminary assessment framework was constructed by combining the results of the two parallel activities, and the rationale embodied in the framework was described in narrative form in an informal concept paper for project team use. Consideration was also given to how an individual court information system project evaluation could be implemented, either as a full evaluation component of a system project from its inception, or as a more limited effort, planned and conducted only after the system had been fully implemented.

After review of the preliminary assessment framework, and tests of the framework against some of the data collected in the field site visits, the framework was considerably recast, and an organization and management component was added. The results of this process are described in this report and were used, along with observations resulting from the in-depth field site visits, to perform a judgmental assessment<sup>4</sup> of the court information systems area.

4

### II. GENERAL STRUCTURF

Before discussing the general structure of the assessment framework that has been developed, we must identify certain fundamental characteristics of information support systems.

#### A. Nature of Information Support Systems

Many actions can be taken that will have a direct impact on court operations and the results obtained from these operations. For example, increasing the number of judges assigned to trial work, together with making corresponding increases in other associated resources, can be expected to directly increase the rate of case dispositions. By contrast, establishing a new or improved information system to support court operations and management cannot have this kind of direct impact. Of itself, the information system will not improve the speed with which cases are handled, or the quality of the judicial process. It will not improve the image of the court, and will probably not reduce court operating costs. Indeed, it is only when the outputs of the new or improved information system are suitably utilized by court personnel, and made the basis of their activities and decisions, that the information system will have a beneficial operational impact. Like other support functions, information activities have only an indirect influence on court production or court results.

To impact directly on court operations, one first needs a person -- a staff worker or manager -- who is motivated and able to take action. If such a person is provided with better information, through a new or improved information support system, he can use this data to improve court activities.

The indirect nature of the support provided by an information system leads to more complex relationships within the assessment framework than would otherwise be the case. The framework, in fact, has been constructed using two largely separate areas, a court operations area and

<sup>4</sup>ibid

and a CIS area. Within each area a set of framework elements (i.e., a set of broad goals or objectives) is defined, assumptions are made concerning what actions are needed to support the goals or objectives, and measures of achievement are established. This general framework structure is indicated in Figure 2-1.

Although largely separate, the court operations area and the CIS area do interact, as also shown in Figure 2-1. Specifically, the CIS program actions provide information support to enable the court actions to be carried out.

#### B. Framework Elements

As explained in the previous section, the assessment framework for a court information system contains elements in two different areas: first, elements relating to Policy Goals for Court Operations; and second, those relating to Court Information System Objectives. The former represent desirable attributes of court activities and management, while the latter identify CIS objectives that will contribute indirectly to the realization of these attributes.

The four Policy Goals defined for Court Operations are:

- 1. Reduced Time to Disposition,
- 2. Improved Public Image,
- 3. Improved Quality of Justice,
- 4. Cost Reduction or Avoidance.

It can be seen that these goals epitomize four aspects of a sound judicial process, which can be summarized as follows:

6

- a. The process provides a speedy trial -- i.e., does not involve undue delay.
- b. The process interacts well with the involved members of the public, and commands their respect.
- c. The process meets generally accepted criteria for the impartial administration of justice.

#### COURT OPERATIONS AREA

(Several) FRAMEWORK

ELEMENTS

(or Policy Goals) ASSUMPTIONS regarding Court Actions that are needed

MEASURES OF ACHIEVEMENT

# Figure 2-1 FRAMEWORK STRUCTURE

General Characteristics

### CIS AREA

(Several) FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS (or General Objectives)

> ASSUMPTIONS regarding CIS Actions that are needed

> > MEASURES OF ACHIEVEMENT

d. The process is carried out in a cost effective manner.

These four aspects reasonably characterize the major requisites of an effective court system, and also realte to the most frequently cited court problems. Other methods of classifying the goals could of course be used, but presumably the same factors or attributes should be included.

Three general Objectives defined for the CIS itself include:

- Improved Information System Outputs. (Greater usefulness of system outputs to the users of the information.)
- 6. More Effective Data Handling. (Availability of efficiently produced timely, accurate and accessible information.)
- CIS Cost Containment or Reduction. (Efficient use of material and personnel resources.)

The rationale for selecting these objectives is described below:

- a. The <u>outputs</u> of the information system are the only portions of the CIS that are useful in court operations. Presumably any functional benefits of the CIS will be provided through the effective utilization of these outputs: they are, therefore, worthy of separate attention.
- b. A number of information handling functions must be carried out effectively in order for the CIS outputs to be produced. Although these functions are not directly useful to court operations, they are requisites for a successful CIS.
- c. Since cost reduction or avoidance is a goal for the court operations as a whole, it must also be a goal for the CIS, the cost of which will add to total court operating cost.

In summary, then, there are seven elements in the main evaluation framework: four are elements applicable to Court Operations, three are applicable to the CIS.

#### C. Overall Structure

The framework structure for assessment is depicted in Figure 2.2, which provides an elaboration of the concepts introduced in Figure 2.1. The seven framework elements, four in the Courts Operations area, and three in the CIS area, are depicted separately in Figure 2.2. Each element is comprised of a general goal or objective, such as <u>Reduced Time to Disposition</u>, and two or three subgoals or subobjectives, referred to only by abbreviated titles. Below the framework elements the supporting Assumptions, namely, the Information-based Court Actions and the CIS Program Actions, which if undertaken would contribute to the achievement of the goals, are indicated (but not defined individually). Below the Actions, the Measures of Achievement -- parameters, ratios or indices of the degree of success in achieving the goals -- are also referenced but not defined. (Detailed definitions of all of these components are given in Chapter III.)

It should be noted that the Assumptions that are relevant to the assessment structure are those that both support a Policy Goal for Court Operations, and also are information-based. The phrase "informationbased" means that CIS outputs are required in order for the actions to be successfully carried out. While there may be many non-informationbased actions that would be helpful in meeting the stated goals, these are not relevant to the information systems assessment.

The CIS Assumptions referenced in Figure 2.2 also have a dual aspect: they are designed (collectively) to meet CIS Objectives and also to support the Information-based Court Action.

## D. Organization and Management -- a Necessary Pre-requisite

The assessment structure just discussed, and the seven goals that are included in it, are only part of the assessment picture. In order for the goals to be accomplished, a suitable management structure is required, both for the court operation itself, and also for the CIS



project. This is portrayed in the upper part of Figure 2-1. Although the requirement for an effective management structure may seem obvious, our studies of court operations and of information support projects show that lack of effective management is commonly the greatest problem.

Courts by their nature involve several different types of professional personnel and corresponding functions -- judges, prosecutors and clerks, for example -- which though inter-related are often relatively autonomous. Frequently, there is no mechanism that manages the several functions, or that is concerned with the overall management of cases. The autonomy is to some extent necessary, since the judicial and prosecutorial functions, for example, cannot be merged without compromising the quality of justice. But the autonomy tends to extend beyond areas in which it is necessary, to areas, like caseflow management, where it is not. Also, judges, who are recognized to be the most senior court personnel, are not usually "managers" by either training or experience. Even in those courts that have established the position of court manager or administrator, that position is often ineffective because of lack of real "clout" (managerial mandate), lack of resources or other factors. But clearly a court improvement program, to be successful, requires mechanisms not only for planning the necessary changes, but also for implementing them. These mechanisms could be provided through a number of different organizational forms -but the mechanisms must exist, and must be effective.

Similar considerations apply to the management of the CIS Project. For such a project to have a high probability of success, it must meet several conditions. There should be an orderly sequence of phases, including setting objectives, development of requirements, analyzing alternative systems approaches, detailed design, acquisition of the necessary equipment and software, documentation, training, installation and test. There must be full participation by court management, systems analysts, court personnel who will use the system, and data processing experts. There must also be suitable policy and decision mechanisms to resolve

10

issues and make trade-offs between conflicting interests, and long- and short-term sources of funds. Many information system projects, in the courts and elsewhere, have been conducted without adequate recognition of the importance of these conditions -- with results that have varied from mediocre to disastrous.

12

### III. DETAILED FRAMEWORK

In this Chapter, the general framework structure developed in Chapter II is expanded to a detailed description of the seven framework elements. For each such element, identified by its broad goal or objectives, a set of subgoals or subobjectives is defined. Next, the corresponding Assumptions -- namely the set of Court Actions or CIS Actions that is necessary to meet the goals or objectives -- are delineated. Finally, the Applicable Measures of Achievement are listed.

A few comments concerning the assessment framework are appropriate before the details of the elements are presented.

The four court operation framework elements are intended to reflect immediate end goals of court operations -- functional and economic -- but not the ultimate role of the courts in society, or the long-range outcome\* of court activities. The "subgoals" are more specific aspects of the "policy goal", and characterize the scope and general content of the goal. The assumptions or court actions listed are still more specific. Only court actions that require CIS outputs for their success are considered here: this limitation greatly reduces the number of actions that are relevant.

The three CIS Program framework elements are generic to almost any information system that supports an operation. Only one of these elements (Improved Information System Outputs) is closely tied to the substance of court operations. Even for this element, a few changes in wording would make the element suitable for a non-court application.

The measures of achievement that are listed for each of the framework elements are of several types. Some are simple and quantitative, (e.g., reduced average time to disposition), others are more qualitative and judgmental (e.g., degree to which decisions are influenced by system

There is, however, a reference to recividism rate in a measure of achievement for framework element no. 3.

outputs). Some of the "single and quantitative" measures may require well structured data collection (both before and after) and care that extraneous factors (such as change in case mix) do not dominate the observed changes.

For each framework elements, several measures are listed, typically some quantitative and some qualitative, that address different aspects of achievement. They are intentionally somewhat redundant -- e.g., the same issue may be addressed from complementary points of view. They are not claimed to be "necessary and sufficient" to evaluate the element: an adequate evaluation could perhaps be obtained using fewer than the whole set, and other measures not listed could be found useful in special cases.

One-page descriptions of each framework element, covering the characteristics identified earlier, follow in numerical sequence, as indicated below:

#### COURT OPERATIONS AREA

- 1. Reduced Time to Disposition (Table III-1)
- 2. Improved Public Image (Table III-2)
- 3. Improved Quality of Justice (Table III-3)
- 4. Cost Reduction or Avoidance (Table III-4)

#### CIS AREA

- 5. Improved Information System Outputs (Table III-5)
- 6. More Effective Data Handling (Table III-6)
- 7. CIS Cost Containment or Reduction (Table III-7)

## TABLE III-1 FRAMEWORK ELEMENT NO. 1

## Reduced Time to Disposition

Policy Goal:

Assumptions:

Measures of

Achievement:

Subgoals:

11

# Time to Disposition

- legitimately not available.

- scheduled events.

# Disposition

- annual workload.

- speedy trial.
- per judge, etc.).

 Reduced number of required court appearances • Greater use of procedures (e.g., Master sessions, pretrial conferences) not requiring court appearances.

Information-based Court Actions that should Reduce

Avoid scheduling cases when participants

 Identify overdue cases at several points in the case-handling process and take remedial action.

 Identify potential problems and work toward solution (e.g., attorney with excessive caseload)

Ensure all participants get timely notice of

# Indices that are Associated with Reduced Time to

Reduction in case backlog as fraction of

• Reduction in number of continuances per case. • Reduction in average time to disposition. Reduction in number of dismissals for lack of

Increase in number of cases disposed (per month,

# TABLE III-2

### FRAMEWORK ELEMENT NO. 2.

Pol	icy	Goa	1:

Assumptions:

#### Improved Public Image

- Better treatment of case participants Subgoals:
  - (e.g., Victim, Witness, Defendant) Tidy, efficient, business-like atmosphere.
  - Information-based Court Actions that should Improve Public Image
  - Ensure all participants get timely notice of scheduled events\*.
  - Schedule events by hour as well as by day.
  - Keep participants appraised of schedule 0 changes and current status.
  - Provide prompt accurate responses to inquiries.
  - Provide prompt remittances (child support, alimony; attorney, witness & juror fees).

Measures of Achievement:

# Indices that are Associated with Improved Public Image

- Reduction in number of required appearances by witnesses and victims (per case).
- Reduction in average waiting time in courtroom . for participants.
- Existence of notices, schedules throughout day.
- Adequacy of responses given to queries by 6 participants.
- Timeliness of remittances.

Also an assumption for Framework Element #1.

# Policy Goal:

# Subgoals:

resources.

TABLE III-3

justice agencies.

Quality of Justice

## Assumptions:

Measures of

Achievement:

- dant before proceeding.
- Utilize management reports to allocate necessary resources.
- justice agencies.

- of Justice

- The non-recidivism rate

  - not defaulting.

FRAMEWORK ELEMENT NO. 3

## Improved Quality of Justice

 Equitable bail setting and sentencing. Greater assurance of assignment of necessary

Improved communication with other criminal

# Information-based Court Actions that should Improve

Review bail and sentence patterns.

Assure counsel assigned to each indigent defen-

• Transmit appropriate data to other criminal

# Indices that are Associated with Improved Quality

 Percent of cases not reversed on appeal. Percent of cases that go to trial. • Percent of bail bonds not defaulted. • Extent of data sharing with other agencies. Percent of defendants on personal recognizance

## TABLE III-4 FRAMEWORK ELEMENT NO. 4

### Policy Goal: Subgoals:

Assumptions:

Cost Reduction or Avoidance Use resources more effectively.

- - Improve collection of receivables.

# Information-based Court Actions that should Reduce or Avoid Costs

- Assign and utilize personnel and other resources (including space) efficiently.
- Reduce expenditures for equipment, services and supplies.
- Utilize operational and statistical reports to improve planning & management.
- Call jurors only when trial is certain, and witnesses only when required.
- Follow-up on overdue receivables (bail, fines, court costs).

Measures of Achievement:

# Indices that are Associated with Cost Reduction or Avoidance

- Disposed cases (by type) per unit cost.
- Disposed cases per judge, per other court employee.
- Reduction in average expense per case for witnesses and jurors.
- Increase in income from fines and other collections.

# General Objective: Subobjectives:

Assumptions:

Measures of

Achievement:

Π

# court activities.

TABLE III-5

- use to management.

- participant queries.

#### Indices that are Associated with Improved Info. Sys. Outputs

- is for decision makers.

19

### FRAMEWORK ELEMENT NO. 5

# Improved Information System Outputs

Working documents more useful in daily

• Statistical and analytical reports of greater

Improved responses to participant queries.

CIS Program Actions that should Meet Program Objectives and also Support Court Actions

Provide timely operating documents in support of stated court objectives: calendar, jail list, notices, file indexes.

 Provide exception reports useful for case and resource management: overdue actions, delayed cases, cases handled, workload dynamics, scheduling effectiveness.

• Provide means for effective response to

• Solicit user comments on system outputs, and make system improvements as necessary.

• Provide statistical summary reports on cases handled; facility & resource utilization.

• Extent of user knowledge of system and dependence on it, integration into court operations; absence of parallel systems.

 Degree to which decisions are influenced by system outputs; how relevant output data

 Adequacy (timeliness, accuracy, completeness) of responses provided to queries.

#### TABLE III-6

## FRAMEWORK ELEMENT NO. 6

General Objective: S bobjectives:

Assumptions:

# More Effective Data Handling

- More efficient data gathering processes.
  - Improved data processing.
  - More effective data and file maintenance.

# CIS Program Actions that should Meet Program Objectives and also Provide Basis for CIS Outputs

- Establish clear channels for data collection; single responsibility for each element of data; eliminate redundant data collection.
- Provide appropriate data collection forms, formats, training and procedures.
- Establish common data base, suitably structured for convenient access.
- Collect and process data with adequate frequency.
- Perform necessary input data quality checks, detect and (immediately) rectify all errors and omissions.

#### Measures of Achievement:

# Indices that are Associated with More Effective Data Handling

- Input data quality achieved.
- Adequacy of controls to assure data accuracy and completeness and to prevent data base deterioration.
- Degree to which data base is maintained 0 adequately current.
- Suitability of access modes and query structures.
- System reliability and availability.
- Adequacy of operating manuals and procedures.

#### TABLE III-7

#### FRAMEWORK ELEMENT NO. 7

### CIS Cost Containment or Reduction

Subobjectives:

General Objective:

Assumptions:

Measures of Achievement:

- Cost effective acquisition.
- Efficient use of personnel.

- wherever possible.
- automated techniques.

- provement capabilities.

#### Indices that are Associated with CIS Cost Containment or Reduction

- life of system.
- tion.
- documentation.

21

System design for efficient operation.

CIS Program Actions that should lead to Cost Containment or Reduction

Eliminate redundant and parallel processes

 Design efficient information gathering, storing, processing and reporting system.

Use most effective combination of manual and

 Make cost-effective decisions re. equipment purchase or lease, or use of service bureau.

Improve personnel selection, training, supervision and evaluation.

• Provide efficient system maintenance and im-

Reduction in system cost per case.

Reduction in cost per guery handled.

 Adequacy of provisions for equip. & software maintenance and upgrading to extend effective

Appropriateness of type and degree of mechaniza-

Adequacy of maintenance provisions and system

#### IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Utilizing data collected during the knowledge gathering and site visits tasks of the Phase I Evaluation effort, as well as the project teams' broad experience in court and related agency operations, and in information and data systems, the project team developed an assessment framework for use in the judgmental assessment. This development approach, different from the one originally planned, was necessary because of the lack of sufficient data concerning explicit goals and system assumptions found in the data collection phase of the program.

Briefly, the assessment framework, described in Chapter II and III was developed by building upon two ingredients: an analysis of the major operational problems faced by trial courts, and an understanding of the general characteristics of a generic information system.

The resulting assessment structure contains elements relating to policy goals for court operations and to general objectives for court information systems. The court goals relate to time to disposition, public image, quality of justice and costs; while the information system objectives relate to system outputs, data handling and costs. The structure also contains assumptions regarding the actions necessary to meet the goals and objectives, measures of accomplishment, and requirements for organization and management. It should be noted in this regard that a court information system can have only an indirect impact on improving court operations, not a direct one, since a suitable management structure is required to achieve the system's goals through appropriate action.

The framework developed in Chapters II and III of this report has been utilized as part of the judgmental assessment of the data collected from jurisdictions currently operating information systems.

The framework could be useful, in addition, to anyone planning a new court information system project -- to identify project goals and to

assist in the design of a suitable evaluation component as part of the initial project concept. The individual measures of accomplishment that are identified could assist project planners in determining what baseline data must be collected to allow meaningful before-and-after data comparisons. With some rather modest changes in interpretation, the assessment framework can also be adapted to use in (a necessarily more limited) an after-the-fact evaluation of a court information system project in which system implementation has already been completed.<sup>5</sup>

The assessment framework could also be used by criminal justice planners, including State Planning Agencies (SPAs), to help analyze the value of existing information system projects, prior to reviewing current policies and procedures, and in making new resource allocations.

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<sup>5</sup>To be reported in work product 6 of the Phase I Evaluation effort, the single product evaluation design.

