CASE STUDY

Predictiv – United Kingdom

PREDICTIV

Predictiv[100] is an online platform for running behavioural experiments. It enables governments to run randomised controlled trials (RCTs) with an online population of participants, and to test whether new policies and interventions work before they are deployed in the real world. After a short design phase, the tests take one to two weeks to complete, enabling policy makers to obtain responses to questions that would otherwise have taken many months (or years) to answer. As such, it has the potential to profoundly change governments' working methods. While time constraints and political realities sometimes make it hard to run "field trials" on live policy, Predictiv makes experimental methods more accessible. However, it remains to be seen whether Predictiv will initiate a wider cultural shift in government departments and regulatory offices regarding the ways policies and processes are changed and implemented.

100. See www.predictiv.co.uk.

THE PROBLEM

Evidence is becoming increasingly important in policy making (OECD, 2016b). Even the best ideas can fail during implementation, because human behaviour is hard to predict, especially in different contexts. However, the policy-making process itself is not always conducive to producing or making use of available evidence. The speed of change is increasing and reacting to new problems on a daily basis does not leave sufficient time to review existing evidence for informed decision making. Parliamentarians or officials drafting a law do not always have six months to wait for their questions to be answered.

Governments possess tools to decrease uncertainty in policy making, but almost no time to use them in practice. For example, RCTs allow policy makers to evaluate what does and does not work in terms of changing behaviour and improving public policy outcomes (see Figure 40). However, they can take a long time to set up correctly and often need to be repeated in different contexts. It can take months or even years to run a research study or to put an RCT into the "field". Furthermore, traditional research methods (e.g. focus groups) are often bound by their size and, in many cases, reveal more about what a small number of people "say they do", rather than what they "actually do" in practice. Practical constraints – both time and money – limit the number of RCTs or focus groups that can be run and the different versions of a policy that can be tested. These complexities inevitably hold back the spread of experimental culture in government.

AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION

Predictiv was launched in 2016 by BI Ventures, a team within the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) (see Box 19) that builds scalable digital products that address social issues.[101] Predictiv was built on the premise that running RCTs with an online pool of participants is a quicker, cheaper and easier method to test for isolated behavioural triggers.

Inspired by academic "lab experiments" run through platforms such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk,[102] BIT started to question if a similar approach could be used by policy makers. Effective use of existing platforms such as Amazon

101. See www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/ventures.

102. See www.mturk.com. MTurk is a marketplace for work that requires human intelligence and enables customers to access an on-demand workforce.

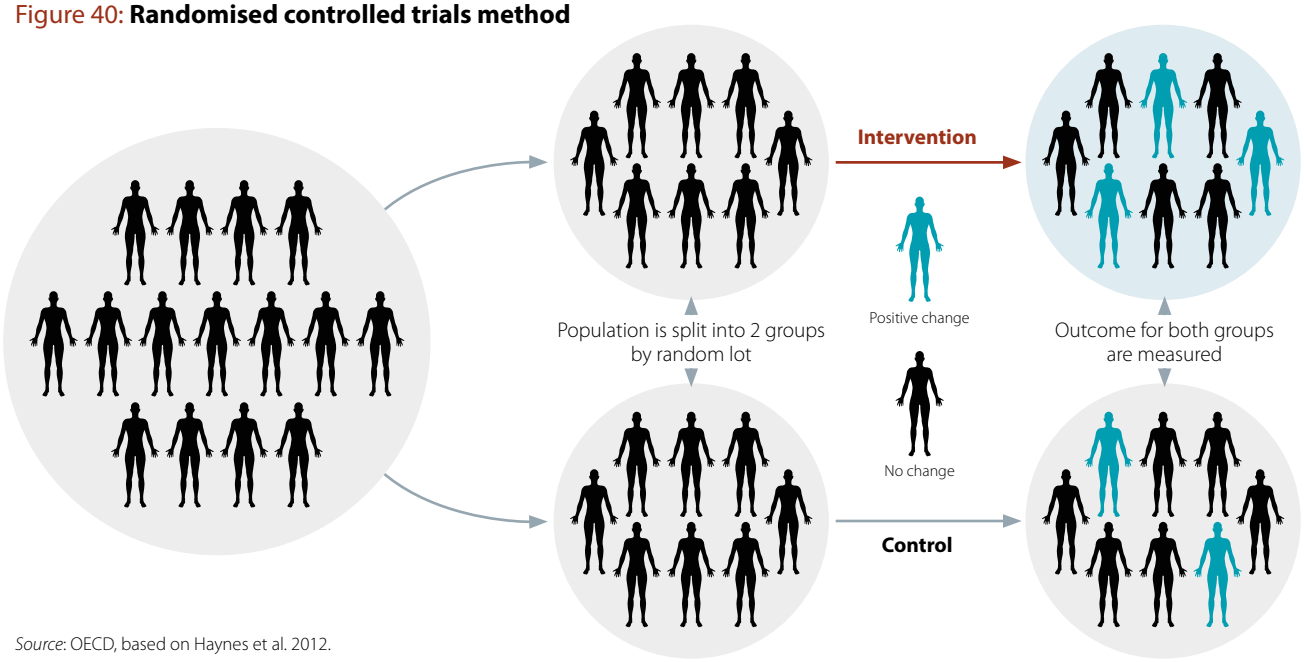
Box 19: WHAT IS BIT?

The Behavioural Insights Team was created by the Prime Minister's Office in 2010 to apply behavioural science to public policy. In February 2014, BIT became a social purpose company, owned by the UK Government, Nesta (an innovation charity) and its employees.

BIT aims to make public services more cost-effective and easier for citizens to use; improve policy by introducing a more realistic model of human behaviour; and wherever possible, enable people to make "better choices for themselves".

Source: www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/about-us.

Figure 40: **Randomised controlled trials method**



Source: OECD, based on Haynes et al. 2012.

Figure 41: **Evidence-based decisions for government**

Practical

By drawing on a large online panel of participants, Predictiv avoids many of the practical constraints of traditional research and can run research programmes that wouldn't be possible in the 'real world'.

Rapid & robust evidence

Predictiv recruits participants, runs the online research and summarises findings, generating quantitative evidence fast. We can create nationally representative samples or target specific groups, e.g. men 18-25, in work, with incomes <£20k.

Test a range of ideas

Predictiv tests different versions of a new policy, programme or communication campaign at lower cost vs. traditional research. For example, Predictiv can evaluate many versions of a letter for recipient comprehension.

Source: www.predictiv.co.uk/governments.html.

Mechanical Turk (MTurk) required substantial technical expertise, which represented a major barrier to entry for everyday users. Accordingly, BIT decided to develop its own more user-friendly platform, leveraging its team's technical expertise in behavioural end experimental economics to design and test interventions. The key question was how to reach large numbers of people. In an effort to address this issue, BIT partnered with organisations with experience in using online panels for simple survey-type research. The biggest technical challenge involved randomly allocating different "arms" of a trial to different participants in ways that maintained scientific rigour. Once this challenge was solved, BIT validated the platform through a series of tests to ascertain whether the results were consistent with equivalent, rigorous academic research.

Since its launch, Predictiv has enabled policy makers to obtain answers quickly, within critical time frames, allowing changes to policies as they are being developed. Predictiv makes it easier for a policy team or organisation to run an online RCT from start to finish, without requiring a team of behavioural scientists (see Figure 41). Users can choose from a selection of experiments designed by BIT and based on robust behavioural science and experimental economics methodologies. The platform then recruits the participants, runs the online research and summarises findings, generating quantitative evidence fast.

Predictiv also draws participants from a high-quality and large-scale online pool of adults across the United Kingdom (up to 4 million people) who have consented to taking part in online research. This allows Predictiv to target research by demographics such as gender, age, income and education. This approach avoids many practical constraints of traditional research and enables Predictiv to conduct tests that would not be possible in the "real world". The online platform also allows testing of different versions of policies, programmes or communication campaigns at a lower cost compared to traditional research. This helps to identify which iteration is most effective at achieving the desired outcome.

Government departments are using Predictiv to tackle a wide range of policy questions. These include testing whether citizens understand new policies and processes (interpreting risk, knowledge of actions they need to take, and data consent and sharing); the effectiveness of new ways of working (e.g. how the new online component of a government programme will function); and responses to different choices (e.g. the impact of changing the way prices are presented). For example, Predictiv has been used to test, among others, whether changes to the presentation of credit card statements will increase the size of monthly payments consumers are prepared to make, whether changes to the way consent is sought will increase the number of citizens who agree to share their data with public service providers; and whether changes to an online tax form will increase the accuracy of the information provided by users. In each of these cases the answer was "yes". Apparently small changes can have a big impact on the choices people make.

BI Ventures plans to increasingly automate the platform by building and making available standard "templates" that cover the full range of questions policy makers might want to answer. It is also possible to use Predictiv outside the United Kingdom, as the platform already has links to international online panels.

NOVELTY

While Predictiv was inspired by academic online experiments running on private platforms, it is the first initiative of its kind to make RCTs accessible to policy makers. Policy makers can perform rigorous experiments online in a fraction of the time normally taken, without the need for a PhD in experimental economics. This enables them to test policy suggestions in a matter of days to ascertain whether they have the desired effect.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

More than 30 trials have been conducted via the Predictiv platform to date and the results are already shaping government policy. For example, the Government Equalities Office and the Department for Work and Pensions are using the results of one trial to change government communications around Shared Parental Leave. In addition, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority is rolling out a version of simplified Privacy Notices following another trial. Predictiv is only getting started and many other trials are in the pipeline.

USER PERSPECTIVE

User experience with Predictiv has been positive. The initiative has helped the Money Advice Service run a range of online RCTs as part of its Financial Capability Lab, which was created to test a large set of initial ideas to address financial challenges affecting people in the United Kingdom. "Predictiv enabled us to economically generate robust evidence of whether the ideas could help people overcome some of the key barriers to building a savings buffer, managing credit use and seeking financial help" (Money Advice Service).

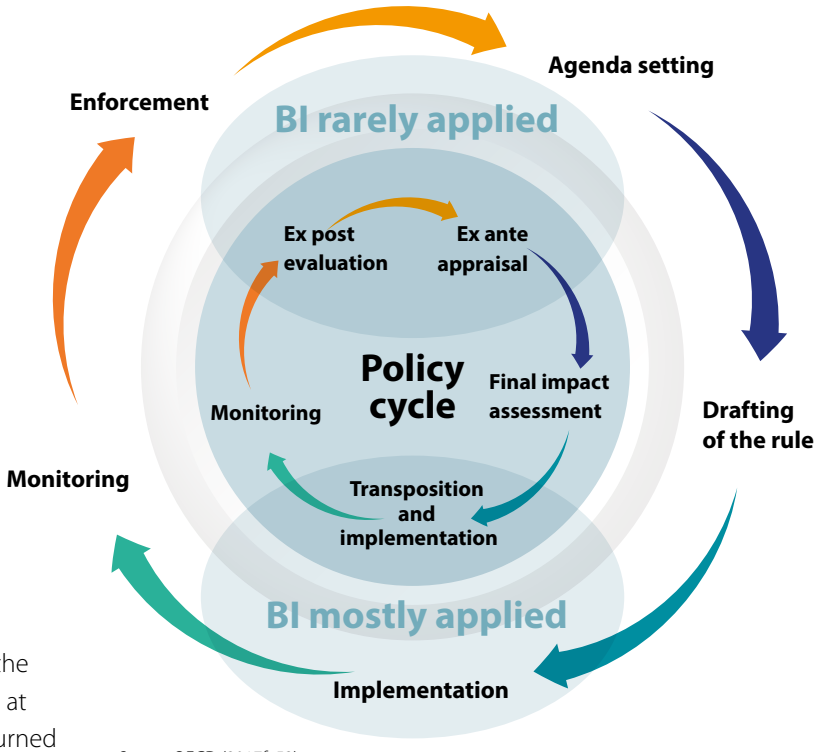
The United Kingdom's Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) used Predictiv to optimise a letter targeting disengaged energy customers: "We were delighted with the efficiency of the setup process, the helpful advice provided by the team and the speed at which we obtained results – the whole thing was turned around in a matter of days. We are definitely hoping to use this service again in the future."

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

In general, BIT takes a portfolio approach to supporting innovations. Some innovations will fail, while others succeed. With Predictiv the main challenge was to identify a technological solution for the interface between the experiment and the online panels. As the platform is not restricted to a defined set of trials, the team continuously develops the platform to keep up with government interest.

Predictiv as a whole has great potential, as it makes robust experimental techniques more accessible to policy makers, who in many cases lack the skills or time to set up larger experimental trials. However, once this "low-hanging fruit" has been captured, the challenge will be to design increasingly complex experiments that closely mirror decisions in the "real world", and then integrate this approach with the full policy cycle (Figure 42). Moreover, digital platforms that permit the inclusion of near real-time user perspectives in policy development indicate a more systematic change in the making – the advent of real-time digital governance, where the public sector can iterate, test and change policies instantaneously in the present.

Figure 42. **Behavioural insights and the policy cycle**



Source: OECD (2017f: 53).