Section IV

TASK FORCE ON METHODOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT

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In November 1979, the OTA Director established an employee task force on Technology Assessment Methodology and Management with the following objectives:

- to improve the methodology and management of OTA's technology assessment projects;
- to build on OTA's 6 years of assessment experience, and on that of others in the public and private sectors and in other countries;
- to find ways to increase productivity and improve cost effectiveness in OTA; and
- to build a stronger team effort among OTA staff through cross-program and cross-divisional cooperation.

The Task Force, which includes a representative from each OTA program, met 12 times during the year and submitted its recommendations to the OTA Director in August 1980. Following discussions with OTA senior management and presentations to the Technology Assessment Advisory Council and the Technology Assessment Board, the OTA Director is implementing a number of the recommendations.

Dr. Gibbons noted that the work of the Task Force is a major contribution to better understanding and strengthening of the OTA assessment process leading to constructive, internal improvements at OTA.

Task Force recommendations now being implemented are:

- Development of an orientation program to help new staff, contractors, and consultants gain an earlier and more complete understanding of the OTA assessment process. The orientation package will include tape, written materials, personal briefings, and small group discussions.
- Improvement of intraoffice communication, For example, the publication "FOCUS" is now serving as a staff newsletter as well as a library reference document. Information kiosks and publication racks have been in-

stalled on each floor to increase staff awareness of the full range of OTA work. The well-received "Brown Bag" Friday seminar series also is effective in stimulating cross-program discussion on a wide variety of topics.
- Completion of an OTA operations manual which will be looseleaf so that it can be easily updated.

Several additional recommendations will be put into effect soon. These include revised OTA policies and procedures on preparation of project proposals, on internal review and approval of reports, and on project review checkpoints and project followup time.

The checkpoints will help encourage cross-program and crossdivisional review of projects at key points in the process, for example, at the point where the research is complete and a report outline has been developed but before the actual drafting of a report has begun. This should enable OTA to identify problems and provide guidance or assistance far in advance of the final draft.

Effective dissemination of study results is an essential part of the assessment process. The Task Force found that in the past, OTA had frequently given inadequate attention to communicating study findings effectively. A new draft policy would establish a 60- to 90-day period after report publication during which key project staff would be encouraged to take part in a variety of followup activities. These might include informal briefings for the requesting and interested committees, press briefings held jointly with committees, meetings with committees to advise them on possible witnesses and issues for hearings, presentation of OTA testimony, preparation of articles based on the study results for publication in scientific journals, and presentation of findings at scientific conferences. These kinds of activities help derive maximum returns to Congress on the investment in each project, and also contribute to the professional development of

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OTA staff and the stature of OTA in the scientific and technical community.

Finally, there are a few recommendations related to productivity and quality control which will take time to implement:

First, a Task Force working group is preparing a technology assessment "workbook" for internal staff use which will bring together experience from every program about each major step of the assessment process. Lessons learned from new assessments will be folded into the workbook on a continuous basis through the use of project close-out reports, to be completed at the end of each major study.

Second, the Director has appointed an internal task force on OTA information systems. This group will review OTA's current use of information handling equipment, including word processors, computers, electronic typewriting equipment, and telephones, and to determine how to improve it. The task force will draw in part on related work already completed by the House Administration and Senate Rules and Administration Committees. It will also examine whether new services such as computer mailing, video-conferencing, or electronic filing offer any potential benefits to OTA.

Third, over the next several months a series of staff development seminars will encourage a more regular exchange of learning within OTA and help sharpen the skills of the professional staff. Likely topics include policy analysis, Congressional relations, and assessment strategy and methodology.

OTA has already initiated a survey of TA methodology and strategy employed by selected private firms and foreign countries. Retrospective methodology reviews of selected completed OTA studies are also underway. The intent of this effort, in part a followup to the work of the Task Force and closely coordinated with NSF, has two dimensions. One is self-improvement. What can OTA learn from the experience and perspective of others regarding our own TA methodology and strategy? A second is to contribute to the broader TA professional community. It has been more than 4 years since OTA's last effort along these lines, which resulted in TAB hearings and a report on "Technology Assessment in Business and Govern merit,"