Common and Cross-Cutting Risks Facing Statistical Organisations

Statistical organisations across the world are facing similar challenges and are working together to build capability and modernise in the face of significant opportunities and threats.

One area of recent collaboration is in the management of risk, the standards and frameworks for effective risk management and the substance of the risks we face.

Effective Risk management is fundamentally about appropriate decision making. We all make decisions every single day; some decisions will create threats or opportunities whilst some will mitigate threats. Risk management helps us take decisions which are appropriate to the level of risk we are willing to take.

Statistical Organisations in different countries operate in a similar environment with common challenges, albeit with different political, legal and functional contexts. For those organisations seeking to build their understanding of how to manage risk this document contains a list of some specific risks faced by a number of statistical organisations, gathered through several engagement mechanisms.

How can this be used?

The list of common and cross-cutting risks can be used as a starting point for those countries seeking to implement or improve a risk management approach. It is a starting point for consideration at senior levels and throughout organisations.

For more information about how to manage risk in statistical organisations see [ADD LINKS]

POLITICAL

Actual, attempted or perceived manipulation of the statistical office by Government leading to lack of trust, questions over independence and struggles to deliver without influence.
Possible mitigations: independence enshrined in law, use of an independent regulator, proactive public relations.

Blockage of professional initiatives for political purposes leading to the inability of statistical organisations to change and deliver strategic objectives.
Possible mitigations: independence enshrined in law, use of independent influencers across the statistical landscape.

Government and opposition use of statistics for political point scoring leading to public questions about accuracy, and potential misuse of statistics.
Possible mitigations: public statement from the statistical organisations when misuse occurs, building capability in statistical use, publications clear on use and limitations.

Lack of communication and engagement between government institutions leading to a disconnect between policy and evidence.
Possible mitigations: embedding statisticians with policy areas across government, active re-prioritisation of NSI resource onto key policy questions.

Political criticism of the statistical office or statistical outputs for political purposes leading to inability to show the true position to the public.
Possible mitigations: proactive public relations, compliance with international frameworks and standards to demonstrate quality.

Opportunity to drive user led activities which are independent from political influence and grow trust and reputation.
Possible mitigations: active re-prioritisation of NSI resource onto areas of user need, innovations in dissemination to reach a broad range of users.

ECONOMIC

Competition from private sector organisations for staff leading to a loss of skills and expertise and the inability to deliver outputs or innovate.
Possible mitigations: differentiation strategy – showing the benefits of a public sector environment in terms of access to data, quality of the work, and ability to work for the public good.

Dependence of the statistical office's financial position on government funding and the economic position of the country leading to a lack of ability to plan for the longer term or make significant investments.
Possible mitigations: make the case to Government for the value of statistics to effective decision making, explore different additional funding opportunities i.e. income from analysis or data collection for private sector organisations.

Inadequate labour conditions (space, equipment) leading to inability to deliver work at particular points.
Possible mitigations: invest in equipment over time, explore options for support from international organisations.

The majority of the statistical office's budget allocated to staff and ongoing production leading to only a small share of budget for modernisation, transformation, maintenance of quality and development.
Possible mitigations: seek continuous improvement in core functions in order to free time and resource for transformation.

SOCIAL

Low salaries in the statistical office leading to struggles to recruit high quality staff particularly in areas such as analysis and data science.
Possible mitigations: develop bespoke training in new skill areas such as data science, use of apprentices and other training schemes, sell other benefits of working in public sector statistics (i.e. access to data).

Aging of the population leading to an older workforce and more consideration around health and care issues.
Possible mitigations: build a health and wellbeing strategy, introduce flexible working and home working options.

Increasing influence of industrial unions leading to struggles to maintain the balance between staff expectations and flexibility to meet them.
Possible mitigations: build working relationship with industrial unions, seek representation and engagement with unions in decision making.

Lack of staff engagement due to limited flexibility around reward and recognition, leading to struggles to retain and motivate people.
Possible mitigations: seek alternative approaches to reward i.e. facilities available, staff discounts, peer-to-peer reward schemes.

Limited opportunity to build capacity, to train staff in new and innovative approaches. Leading to a lack of capability to deliver new outputs and services.
Possible mitigations: develop bespoke learning focussed on key skill requirements, introduce a clear policy on the importance of learning and encourage managers to allow time for development.

Reducing staff numbers due to government efficiency savings and austerity measures, leading to struggles to maintain delivery.
Possible mitigations: seek technological solutions in order to continue to deliver with a decreasing staff level, find areas which can be stopped in order to focus resource.

The existence of vulnerable population groups within the country leading to social unrest and therefore struggles for the statistical office and wider government to operate effectively.

Possible mitigations: identify possible difficulties and build clear business continuity plans, horizon scan at a senior level for broader trends and consider there impact.

TECHNOLOGICAL

Lack of integrated IT infrastructure leading to silo based working and a lack of ability to change, for example to integrate administrative data into production on old systems.
Possible mitigations: invest in new systems even if it means taking a risk, move to an agile approach to systems development, use international best practice and approaches.

Lack of technology and infrastructure in rural areas (i.e. internet access) leading to struggles to roll-out online collection and other delays to delivery and inefficiencies.
Possible mitigations: work with Government agencies to continue to improve access, focus data collection resource on hard to reach areas.

Limited capability to work with modern technologies leading to a delay in implementation and improvement.
Possible mitigations: build a training plan for the use of new technologies, partner with training providers to develop skills, invest in business change as well as system change.

Limited possibility to support and develop information security due to budget restraints and capability limitations, therefore exposing the statistical office to increasing cyber threat.
Possible mitigations: identify areas of most significant threat and target resource on these areas.

Concerns over quality or the ability or the statistical organisation to manage sensitive data, or evidence of data loss leading to a lack of trust.
Possible mitigations: develop quality management tools at each 'line of defence', implement clear data security policies and invest in these areas.

Difficulties in managing the implementation of new data sources (administrative, commercial and big data) and integrating this data into production, including Census delivery.
Possible mitigations: parallel run census with new data sources vs traditional methods, learn from international best practice (i.e. UN global platform), create an internal research and development function to test new methods and techniques, deliver iterative progress over time rather than seek a 'big bang'.

LEGAL

Difficulties and complications in amending and influencing legal acts, leading to bottlenecks and an interruption in harmonisation.
Possible mitigations: build internal capability in legal and stakeholder engagement, explore the benefits from legislative change to make a clear case, build a consensus amongst the user community.

Incomplete reforms in the public administrative system, leading to weaknesses in governance and questions around the position of the statistical office and its ability to influence.
Possible mitigations: highlight international best practice and the associated benefits.

Lack of complete framework for access to individual and confidential data leading to the inability to use microdata for research and development.
Possible mitigations: introduce data sharing legislation (learning from those statistical organisations which have this legal power), develop a secure service for research and development.

Lack of formal legislative basis for statistics (in some countries) leading to a struggle to comply with generic law or the inability for the statistical office to be in a stable position.
Possible mitigations: use international examples of best practice to make the case for change, use external influence to encourage adoption of generic legislation.

Lack of legislation to allow for the use of admin data leading to continued burden of survey collection and slow change.
Possible mitigations: make the case for Data Sharing Legislation if it is not in place, highlight international best practice and the associated benefits.

Non-fulfilment of legal acts by other government agencies leading to the supply of data being interrupted and risking delivery of outputs.
Possible mitigations: build working relationships with other government agencies, prioritise areas for data supply to ensure key outputs are delivered, use legal channels if necessary.

ENVIRONMENTAL

Lack of government programmes on sustainable development leading to an inability for the country to develop a stable position.
Possible mitigations: highlight impact on the delivery of the organisation's objectives, use external support as needed to assist in delivery.

Low level of trust leading to a high demand for background information and metadata. Leading to the statistical organisation constantly having to make the case for statistics rather than concentrating on delivery.
Possible mitigations: proactive media strategy in order to put the NSI on the front foot in the debate, use of the broader statistical community (i.e. academia) to make the case for statistics.

Lower level of statistical literacy among users at all levels leading to misinterpretation of data and questions around integrity.
Possible mitigations: robust defence of misuse, working with schools and universities to build statistical literacy.

Natural disaster or extreme climate leading to disruption in business continuity and the inability to deliver outputs.
Possible mitigations: identify business continuity risks and put clear plans in place to address, focus continuity plans on the delivery of key outputs.

Opportunity for the statistical office to use its resources rationally and appropriately leading to lower spend and greater efficiency.
Possible mitigations: identify areas of inefficiency in resource use and address.