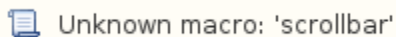


Chapter 5: Considerations for the successful public acceptance of a National Data Strategy



Governments, worldwide, are increasingly dependent on data. This data revolution is forcing governments to consider data as a strategic asset and is transforming the way governments collect, share and use data – fundamentally changing the way they make decisions and deliver services to their citizens. Many countries are developing government-wide strategies focused on the protection, use, management and sharing of data – with statistical organizations playing the critical role of data stewards.

The June 2019 Conference of European Statisticians featured a seminar on the Emerging role of national statistical offices as offices for statistics and data. The seminar focused on a discussion paper^[1] prepared by Estonia, with contributions from Canada, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the UNECE Secretariat. This paper has since been updated through the work of a task force led by Estonia, with contributions from Albania, Canada, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland and the UNECE Secretariat. The revised paper is entitled 'Implementation of the New Role of National Statistical Offices at the Time of Expanded Possibilities'.

What has emerged from the initial international discussion on this topic is that different models are being adopted based on the country's governmental, political and social landscape. Each has distinct strengths and challenges. The provision of clear guidance on communicating such strategies would be premature, as national interests and priorities differ.

However, it is understood that data strategies will need to pass the test of public scrutiny to be successful. Ratified and implemented correctly, they will enhance the reputation of an NSI and sustain public trust.

This chapter focuses on factors to be explored, **from a communications perspective**, as countries consider the adoption of national data strategies. In developing these considerations, the Strategic Communications Project reviewed the aforementioned discussion papers and all the papers submitted to the 2018 CES Bureau meeting^[2] as well as the June 2019 Conference of European Statisticians (<http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=48575>).

5.1 Value proposition

Defining the value proposition is the most important first step. An NSI must be able to clearly articulate the benefits of a national data strategy for citizens, as it is only through the understanding of these benefits that risks can be mitigated, and in some cases accepted.

A successful proposition will resonate with citizens by demonstrating its relevance to their daily lives: it should be about them, their needs and expressed in simple terms. For example, it could focus on how the strategy will help understand the cost of living or promote better healthcare.

5.2 Data types, safeguarding and protection

A successful data strategy will bring together data from a variety of sources, including but not limited to:

- Administrative
- Survey
- Private and acquired (big data, etc.)

By nature, an NSI knows how to ethically manage, safeguard and protect data. These features must be built into a national data strategy from the outset and not applied at the end of the process or when data collection begins.

Communication teams must remain cognizant of this in everything that they do. For example, data on an individual's health or financial position will be much more sensitive than aggregated migration data. Likewise, information about businesses will be of commercial value and require the proper access levels.

5.3 Methodologies

A national data strategy will unite potentially disparate data sets, making coherency and consistency problematic. The NSI must articulate these differences, as otherwise citizens may be unable to correctly use the data, providing further challenges to perceptions and trust, consequently reducing the overall use of the data.

As an ongoing initiative, an NSI should work to impart the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics^[3] to providers to drive continuous improvement in the acquired datasets.

5.4 Privacy

A national data strategy increases the amount of data held exponentially, and this sheer amount of stored/linked data could raise citizens' concerns. As such, citizens must be assured that their privacy will always be protected and an NSI should promote its strong track record in doing so.

The use of a framework, such as the five safes that are used to help make decisions about the effective use of confidential data, should be considered as a foundation for communicating widely to reassure citizens.

5.5 Transparency

For trust to be gained and maintained, there must be complete transparency about the methods, processes and types of data held. This should include the necessary safeguards that are in place, as well as any recorded breaches or changes to what could be considered to be the public record.

An NSI often leads the way across government in this and, as part of a national data strategy, should seek to raise standards within the entire system.

5.6 Accountability

It is essential that the owner or partners of a national data strategy – who do not necessarily have to be the NSI – have clear accountability for the management, protection and design of the data holdings. This should include escalation routes and clear points of contact for citizen questions or concerns.

Public trust can be further increased with the designation of an independent commissioner or ombudsman to represent citizens' rights and views, including the management of dispute resolution.

5.7 Social License

Social license is created and maintained slowly over time as the statistical institution, through its actions, builds trust with its stakeholders, users and the public in general. As the NSI considers this new business model, it must consider the impact of its established relationship with its community. It is no longer sufficient for an NSI to rely on its reputation. It must be transparent about the changes it is considering, be seen as operating responsibly with the data to which it has been entrusted, and take care of its employees and the environment.

When problems do occur, the NSI must be transparent with the public and move quickly and definitively to resolve the issue. Without such actions, the social license is at risk.

Conclusion

The considerations described above represent initial thoughts from a strategic communications perspective.

As countries embark on the design of their national data strategies, the communications team of the NSI should be engaged as a strategic partner. Communications are constantly monitoring the external environment (governmental, societal and political) and can help assess the public acceptability of different strategic models or proposals in order to provide professional advice that will ensure successful adoption and engagement

[1] The Role of National Statistical Systems in the New Data Ecosystem, CES meeting June 2019 <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=48575>

[2] http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/bur/2018/October/04-Redefining_national_statistical_systems.pdf

[3] Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, <http://www.unece.org/?id=3207>

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