**Data Literacy:**

**The Importance of Speaking the Language of Data to Public Sector Missions**

*Data literacy and a culture of evidence can lead to creative problem solving and innovation*

In previous articles, we focused on how enabling the right environment and recognizing the importance of the role of the government Chief Data Officer (CDO) can support the impactful use of data.  On this post, we contend that speaking the same “data language” is also crucial in achieving impactful, data-driven results.  In a recent Data Foundations webinar highlighting Information as a Second Language™ (ISL), Valerie Logan, CEO of The Data Lodge and former VP Analyst with Gartner asserted that business models today can no longer be transformed by just people, process and technology.  In other words, “Data literacy is the new literacy of the Digital Age.” Data is an equally important vector to digital business, agility, and the effective transformation of organizations.  Data must be considered core to the business and mission.



Operating with data at the core of business and mission means having a common language to communicate the importance of data to support organizational decisions beyond just ontologies or common data models.  Embracing a common lexicon and fostering “data literacy” focuses an organization’s ability to employ, analyze, and explore data.  A common degree of fluency is needed to define effective options, determine proper actions and foster innovation. When there is no shared language, especially in the absence of data literacy, a Tower of Babel scenario emerges with diverging opinions and actions, even when looking at the same data.

“Speaking data” across the public sector is particularly relevant. Government organizations often deal with societal-scale, urgent, and complex issues. They are able and obliged to reach across organizations, sectors and boundaries. Today, the need for constructive interorganizational data exchange and integration is more critical than ever before. In recent events in pandemic management, public health initiatives and economic programs, data literacy serves as a critical foundation for more effective cross-agency collaboration, program decisions (management) and enablement of citizen services. Speaking “information as a second language” is a concept that is fundamental to the Federal Data Strategy being embraced by CDOs and program leaders across agencies.

“With the steady emergence of the CDO role over the past several years, especially in the Public Sector, data literacy now has a home base and a champion”.

*Valerie Logan, CEO, The Data Lodge*

The strategy is grounded in the Federal Evidence-Based Policy Making Act that calls for the implementation of learning agendas. These learning agendas precipitate conversations about critical mission accomplishment questions and fosters collaboration among stakeholders and decision makers on the data needed to answer those questions.  This process helps drive a culture of data and a common language that is needed to realize the full power and benefit of an evidence-based approach. A number of government organizations are instituting actions to accelerate data literacy and proficiency. Here are some strategies employed by forward-leaning government leaders to foster data literacy to drive better results.

**Widely train the workforce**.

The Social Security Administration was at the forefront of driving data literacy in their organization. An expert judge developed an analytics virtual training course specifically geared toward disability claims determination. The training gained momentum and widespread acceptance as a foundation for working effectively with data the claims adjudication process.

Data literacy focuses on the skills and proficiencies involved in working with data.  The CDO establishes core data management, governance and analytic processes to enable the organization, which serve as a foundation for fostering data literacy across the workforce. The CDO should also initiate core training programs to educate cross-organizational teams on data and analytics fundamentals. The government CDO can be the champion and spark data literacy in the organization, but CDOs can’t go it alone. They also need broad support from other data literate executives, thought leaders and change agents, as well as a programmatic approach to driving sustained impact past the initial spark.

**Everyone sees and shares the same data**.

In the Navy, Commander of Naval Air Forces (CNAF) [Vice Adm. DeWolfe Miller said](https://news.usni.org/2020/04/22/mission-capable-how-the-navy-harnessed-its-data-to-achieve-80-fighter-readiness) he “made sure that everyone – from the squadrons up to the chief of naval operations – has access to the same data on unit readiness and manning …to ensure the proper alignment and prioritization of money, manpower, parts and leadership attention”. The naval aviation community’s effort to build better readiness created collaboration that changed “the future of naval aviation”.

“The whole goal is to help others join the practice, so they can use their data in the same way” *Commander of Naval Air Forces (CNAF) Vice Adm. DeWolfe Miller*

Sharing the same data, and a common understanding of its meaning, is part of the benefit of a data literate organization; decision-making and resource allocation is the rest. “That’s where we’re really finding, at least through that leadership, that alignment of that data, we can get in front of a lot of the issues we’re facing,” Miller said.

**Teaming with data literate partners to accelerate results.**

NOAA needed help and additional capacity from data literate partners that could work effectively with NOAA and its customers. They launched the Big Data project to deliver NOAA data through a consortium of commercial partners that offered industry expertise, scalable and tested platforms, and value-added services. This expanded the ecosystem of partners delivering NOAA’s mission. NOAA also deepened data literacy within their own organization through access to tools, techniques and experts that accelerated understanding, insight and innovation.

“Data literacy is not just a work skill- it extends to a life skill. Citizen data literacy is as important, and it all begins with fostering a shared language across public sector agencies. This is just the beginning, and Public Sector CDOs are on the forefront of this value for employees, and eventually all citizens.”

*Valerie Logan, CEO, The Data Lodge.*

Information technology was once an esoteric language. It is now mainstream. Similarly, the language of data and analytics has become essential in the world today.  Critical management decisions require common data understanding to drive impactful actions and current public issues underscore its importance. Data is at the heart of issues affecting how government serves citizens every day. We are all learning in near real- time that data literacy is no longer optional.

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