



Data Governance

A Key to More Effective and Efficient Performance



Katherine Barrett & Richard Greene

The pandemic—as well as the effort to vaccinate Americans as efficiently as possible—heightened the need for local governments to move away from data silos and toward a more consistent approach to data sharing and use across departments. This has led many to focus fresh attention on data governance, the set of policies and practices that attempt to ensure that data assets are professionally and consistently managed in state and local governments.

The reliance on data during the pandemic has made data governance “more important now than probably at any time in the past,” said Jim St. Clair, who has advised both public- and private-sector organizations on this topic for more than two decades.

The need for heightened cybersecurity also provides impetus for such efforts. “With the rise in cyberattacks that we

are seeing, our defenses have to be top notch, and data governance needs to be at the top of the list,” said Rita Reynolds, chief information officer at the National Association of Counties.

Additionally, performance management—an important effort for many state and local governments—relies on timely and accurate data. But out-of-date, inaccurate, or misleading data can be used when there’s insufficient oversight, and that can lead governments to move in directions that aren’t beneficial to the public.

A varied playing field

The emphasis on data governance varies widely across states and localities. One starting point is the appointment of chief data officers or the equivalent. Twenty-seven states have already done so, according to Tyler Kleykamp, director of the state Chief Data Officer network, which is currently housed in the Beeck

Center for Social Impact and Innovation at Georgetown University.

But the accomplishments of these data officers in establishing policies and practices to strengthen data governance has been inconsistent, with some states more advanced than others. One factor that can either expedite or inhibit data governance, Kleykamp said, is that “it needs executive attention, and it can be hard to get governors or legislators to understand the value. It’s not something you’re going to put in your mailer for election. You can’t stand in front of it or cut a ribbon.”

Kleykamp, who was chief data officer for the State of Connecticut before becoming a senior fellow at the Beeck Center, believes that cities are currently somewhat ahead of states and counties in developing data governance practices. “At the county and state level, it’s very early in the process,” he said.

Chippewa County, Minnesota, provides a good example of a small county that is just getting started. With a population of approximately 12,000 and 150 employees, the county was still largely relying on paper processes when the pandemic launched it into a world where digital services expanded rapidly.

The need for speedy change presented IT managers and business partners with multiple tasks that are key to data governance: deciding what data should be saved and what can be purged; training employees on where to store data so it can be easily retrieved; and setting rules governing privacy issues. “There needs to be a complete process wraparound of digital data,” said Terry Ocaña, Chippewa County IT director.

With that in mind, “education is the biggest next step for us,” Ocaña said. “We have to educate our employees to make sure we are protecting and managing data correctly and not making mistakes with citizens’ data.”

The City of Charlotte, North Carolina, which has approximately 885,000 residents, started to develop strong data governance practices a couple of decades ago when initiating its geographic information systems (GIS). This provided the foundation for expanding data management more broadly a few years ago. “We’re building on the foundation of

our GIS network and elevating it to all data,” data analytics officer Rebecca Hefner said.

In describing data governance actions, Hefner emphasized the importance of consistency. “How the data originates and however you plan to use and share it, there’s a consistent process and consistent practices,” she said. “That crosses over department lines. It crosses over functional areas and philosophical areas.”

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The challenge of culture change

Establishing solid entity-wide data governance isn’t as simple as turning on a power switch. The key is making sure the people in the room actually want it to be well-lit.

One major challenge has been departmental resistance. “You start running into some territorial issues,” Ocaña said, noting the difficulty of communicating the need for change to those employees who feel that past ways have worked just fine.

“One of the challenges commonly faced is our inability to persuade our [departments] that data is a business concern, not an IT concern,” said Nadia Hansen, who took on the role of chief information officer in Clark County, Nevada in early 2020, moving up from a deputy role.

She immediately launched a technology plan that had data governance as a key element. The county, with its 10,000 employees, had already been working on data integrity issues and had software tools that could help provide a consistent framework for data management.

To move forward, she needed to better align IT strategy with departmental business goals across the government, involving stakeholders in the decisions that are being made.

One key to success, according to both Hansen and Charlotte’s Hefner, is partnering with departments in the process. “This works in Charlotte because we weren’t coming forward with a mandate and trying to pull people along. We set up a collaborative working group and empowered them to come up with guidelines on the way we would work together,” Hefner said.

The work goes on

While governments are at very different places in setting up data governance policies and practices, conversations with a number of experts in the field revealed that this effort is the technological equivalent of swimming toward a receding shoreline.

Shifting government operations, external threats, and technology that changes with the speed of summer lightning mean that the work to establish solid data governance is never truly complete. To make sure it continues with solid and steady attention and support, experts say that setting up a committee or governing body is an important step.

“Honestly, it’s an evolution. It’s not something that can be fixed overnight,” said Clark County’s Hansen. “At the end of the day, we’re all working toward the key goal of having data integrity and consistency. We’re looking for accuracy, timeliness, accessibility across the enterprise, and the mitigation of risk.”

NACo’s Reynolds added: “Data governance is a huge undertaking. It’s not once and done. It’s a continuous process of assessment and ongoing maintenance.” ■

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