2020 February Technical e-Update Volume 29: What is Data Demand and Why Is It Important?

We are all familiar with the economic principle of supply and demand (don't worry this is not an economics lesson). Supply and demand, in an economic context, is the relationship between the availability of a commodity that producers wish to sell and the quantity that consumers wish to buy, which drives its value. The greater the demand the higher the value, and ideally the more available it can become. Let's take this out of a marketplace and apply it to our day-to-day work.

In the context of our programming, data is a **_seriously_** valuable commodity. If understood for the fullness of its value data provides the answers to almost everything, we could want to know about who, what, when, where and why of our work in communities. Data speaks into our organizational effectiveness, our impact and creates justification for more support to scale our efforts.

However, more often than not, data is seen as the commodity belonging to our donors, with limited to no internal value. We collect it and pass it upwards and outwards for reporting purposes. We spend little to no time asking ourselves the critical questions like "**_what does this tell me about the work we are doing?_**" More often than not the value of data is under-estimated because we are not placing a demand on it in a way that serves our most valuable internal organizational needs. And without an internal demand, the availability of relevant data to serve our internal growth remains limited. Which takes us back to our opening analogy.

We often discuss the importance of using data to inform our decision making, however data-demand is a critical pre-cursor to this. Furthermore, data will only be in demand if our organizations take the critical first step to change our relationship with it: **Own all information** as an **invaluable resource** that is intended to **enrich** and **grow** your organization at every level **internally before it serves external audiences**.

A Starting Place: How to Create an increased demand for data

To begin this shift in perception and at **the most basic level,** you must take stock of a few important defining elements:

1. Prioritize the decisions that need to be made, or questions that need to be answered, by whom and at what frequency
2. Identify, or define, what information is needed to inform your decisions or questions
3. Determine whether or not that information currently exists within your data collection processes.
4. Create the place for it to be collected and accessed by the most relevant people, at the right times and in the most user-friendly formats

When you take stock of your current systems and processes, you can find yourself totally overwhelmed! There are potentially hundreds of decisions, users and priorities to consider! So drill down to the most **critical** to start with.

Still feel overwhelmed? There is a tool that can help! **The Decision Calendar** is a management tool, developed by the team at MEASURE Evaluation. This tool serves to provide both a **_template and process_** to support you to achieve three key objectives:

- **Encourage greater use of information in decision making—**Identifies and documents key policy/program decisions that must be made, and from that understanding, identifies the information needed to support those decisions

- **Encourage better use of existing information—**Identifies existing data resources and uncovers new ways to use that information to support evidence-based decision making
- **Monitor the use of information in decision making—**Provides a timeline for monitoring progress in the decision-making process, and a systematic way of identifying data use by program managers, donors, and consultants

This tool can be applied at various levels of operation and in varied contexts – from national policy to grassroots community implementation. The tool acknowledges that decision-making processes and stakeholders will vary in different arenas—political, programmatic, or policy—and accommodates these differences. **Keep in mind that The Decision Calendar is a *working document* that should be routinely reviewed and revised as a program develops and changes.** This is a good place to begin the stock-taking process, if you feel particularly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task of delving into your organization's data systems.

 The great thing about starting with demand creation is that it actually ***forces*** you to take a step back and see if and where the gaps exist in your current M&E processes: between what information you have access to, versus what is ***most relevant, critical and in highest need*** for internal decision making purposes.

More Resources:

If you choose to take small steps into becoming a data-driven organization, the Decision Calendar will set you up for success! But, for the brave at heart that wish to delve deeper into the world of applied data use, please see the following resources below. It represents a mix of **online courses**, **training toolkits** and **best practices** that can be explored and applied to take your organization from an externally reporting machine to one that processes information for the benefit of communities and missional effectiveness!

1. **Data Use for Program Managers:**

This is a self-paced online free course made available by the Global Health Learning Center. The purpose of this course is to promote data use for evidence-based HIV/AIDS program planning and improvement. By the end of this course, learners will understand concepts of data use and approaches to facilitate data use in HIV/AIDS programming.
- Understand the concepts of using data for program management
- Describe the process of how to prepare and plan for data use
- Understand how data can be applied to decision making and program planning
- Explain how to synthesize and communicate data to answer key priority questions
- List ways in which data have been used

https://www.globalhealthlearning.org/course/data-use-program-managers

2. **Data Demand and Use Concepts and Tools: A Training Tool Kit**

This training toolkit is for a course that aims to provide the conceptual basis for data use within an organization or program, or at the national, state, or district levels of government. Included in the course are several tools created by MEASURE Evaluation to facilitate the use of data in decision making. Specific learning objectives include
- Improving the understanding of the role of data in decision making, the context of decision making, the determinants of data use, and the importance of data sharing and feedback
- Building skills for applying data demand and using tools

The course is intended to be delivered to teams of individuals from the same organization or government level. Each team should include both data users and data producers. *Data users* are

health professionals, policymakers, and other key health decision makers who use data to inform the design, implementation, monitoring, and improvement of health programs. *Data producers* are professionals who acquire and analyze health data and prepare them for distribution to audiences of users. These include monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specialists, data clerks, or researchers. The team approach has proven effective because it ensures that all of those involved understand their respective roles in data demand and use, and how the roles interact with each other.

https://www.measureevaluation.org/resources/training/capacity-building-resources/data-demand-use-concepts-tools/data-demand-and-use-3-day-training-materials.html

3. **The Principles for Digital Development: Be Data Driven**

This initiative is the result of development practitioners coming together to set standards and principles to guide the most effective and sustainable use of digital tools and platforms for programs. This is a community and practitioner lead set of standards which are not meant to be compulsory but are intended to provide useful guiderails to ensure that efforts to take development practice onto digital platforms has longevity and relevance. There are 9 principles for Digital development and for the purpose of this newsletter, I have selected the 5th: Be data driven. Although drafted in the context of digital activities, this guide is transferrable when exploring what it means to be a data driven organization:

https://digitalprinciples.org/wp-content/uploads/PDD_Principle-BeDataDriven_v2.pdf