Workforce Intelligence - Applying Decision Support Systems to Workforce Programs

As the workforce development system moves toward even a more outcomes-driven culture, the ability to mine and understand data becomes more critical. For years, both public and private organizations have recognized the need to understand the stories data can reveal, beyond just mere reporting of the data up the chain to operational managers and policy-makers. They have discovered that the stories their data tell build the organization’s overall intelligence and this greater intelligence ultimately leads to more informed decisions and continuous improvement.

For the Workforce Development system, the issue we face today isn’t whether we are collecting the right data, or even enough data, but more importantly, are we getting access to the data we have to discover their hidden stories. Are we using our data to build our “Workforce Intelligence?” Is it enough to know that based upon people exiting our program a year and a half ago, that our employment retention rate is 91.4%? Or is there more in the data? Does the training we provide make a difference? Do the workers who achieved this performance have similar backgrounds as those in our program today? Did we effectively match our services to economic conditions then? Are we now?

Tapping into data is a big part of an outcomes-driven culture. Within this culture, we are engaged in a cycle of analysis, reflection, and informed action, a cycle that is designed to improve performance.¹ In order for this cycle to work effectively, data plays a central role. The stories we learn through analysis of data build our “Workforce Intelligence” and provide the basis of our informed action. As we repeat the cycle, our organizational intelligence grows. Through the insights gained we adapt our services and 91.4% becomes 93.1% and then 95.5%. Successes are leveraged, weaknesses are strengthened and effectiveness increases – performance continuously improves.

How can we tap into our data?

In the early 80’s, with the explosive growth of computer systems and information management, the private sector was faced with this question. It was imperative they find an answer. The more efficient a company is at understanding the stories behind the data means the more competitive it can be and the more profitable it would become. Effective decision-making required an understanding of data.

The answer came in the form of Decision Support Systems (DSS), an interactive computer technology that’s sole purpose was to make data more accessible for analysis. Not only did it bring data to a manager’s desk, it gave that manager control of it, so that as the manager asked questions, she had to tool at her disposal to dig in and quickly find answers. It was revolutionary at the time.

Today, Decision Support Systems are commonplace in the private sector. The technology used to deliver them is streamlined, frequently Web-based and increasingly affordable. Most importantly, Decision Support Systems enable culture change to a performance-centric organization. Management discussion takes place around a single version of the truth. Nearly all private sector companies see business intelligence systems as essential to being competitive, and with an increased focus on greater accountability, the public sector as well has begun to recognize that they are necessary.

Several states and local areas employ Workforce Intelligence Systems to provide the interface that administrators, managers and analysts need to pull the stories from WIA data.

¹ From “Good Stories Aren’t Enough: Becoming Outcomes-Driven in Workforce Development,” Martha A. Miles, Public/Private Ventures, 2007
They are helping workforce professionals efficiently analyze the data they capture, track outcomes over time, and easily see what is working and what is not. Through benchmarking with similar programs, and slicing through the characteristics and services provided to the database population, insights are gained. These give rise to understanding and understanding leads to effective policy change. In other words, stories unfold and the culture changes.

Decision Support Systems are designed as a component to interface with pools of transaction detail and other sources of warehoused data. This provides several advantages over integrated reporting systems; multiple data sources are supported, data sources can change over time without affecting the “face” of the Workforce Intelligence System, and decisions surrounding the lengthy implementations and expense of transaction systems can be disconnected from driving a culture of performance management.

For example, in the State of Minnesota, they have employed a Decision Support System that helps them monitor their WIA and State Dislocated Worker programs. “Through a variety of robust, flexible views we are able to slice the data to track trends which inform program planning,” says Annie Tietema, Senior Planner for the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. “The Scorecard, a special view which combines the WIA and State Dislocated Worker program performance, allows Minnesota Dislocated Worker service providers to track and manage their performance. This tool not only encourages collaboration and discussion between providers and the State of Minnesota, but it also directly benefits customers by supplying them with accurate, timely information about provider performance. We are very pleased with our Decision Support System.”

In the City of Los Angeles, they utilize a Decision Support System for understanding their WIA data down to the contractor level, while at the same time tapping into their own Balance Scorecard data, all within the same system. “Because our system is so large, we’ve found we have to drill down to the populations within the data to evaluate and manage the system effectively, which has helped us set our performance goals for the year,” says Julie O’Leary, Operations Manager for the Workforce Development Division, City of Los Angeles.

Each of these workforce development areas have recognized the importance of understanding data to facilitate the decision making process for program and policy decisions. These organizations have focused attention on the importance of performance by implementing an easily accessible common language. They are well on their way to building a comprehensive “Workforce Intelligence.”

FutureWork Systems is the leader in Web-based Decision Support technology and Performance Management services specifically designed for the Workforce Development community since 2000. The company delivers performance management technical assistance and expertise coupled with their owned and operated decision support web application service, Performance Matters Plus, to states and local workforce areas across the country.

FutureWork Systems’ Chief Technology Officer and Partner Thomas Ryan, Sr. has been active in Performance Management and Decision Support technology and software development for over 30 years.

FutureWork Systems’ CEO and Partner Ken Ryan has been active in the Workforce Development community for over 30 years at both the state and local levels.