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(iii) Internal cCommunication

How to improve communication by the use of workshops - a case study

Submitted by Statistics Denmark¹

I. BACKGROUND

1. One of the visions of Statistics Denmark is being one of Europe's most *user-friendly* and data supplier-friendly statistical institutions. The view is that, if statistics are not used, the efforts are wasted. Statistics Denmark exists to serve the democracy and the national economy, in order for Danish society and the international community to benefit from this vast amount of statistical knowledge. These are the ambitious goals set by the organisation.
2. To achieve these goals, the staff must be focused on and skilled within the field of communication. This is done by professionalising the work with communication on a daily basis and in the longer perspective. Statistics Denmark has an extensive internal education programme, utilising internal and external instructors, including compulsory courses in communication and press contact.
3. Another element in professionalising the communication in Statistics Denmark was the founding of the Communication Centre (CC) in 1999. Until then, the subject matter units had the full responsibility of the dissemination of newsletters, as well as publications. Today, this responsibility is shared with the staff of the CC. This has both been a change - and a challenge - for the organisation. CC is placed at the same organisational level as the divisions producing the statistics.
4. The aim of this paper is to describe one of the methods we have applied in CC to improve the communication skills in an environment of different work cultures and educational backgrounds. This is done by describing how the use of workshops in this process has evolved over the past few years. A workshop setup has existed for more than ten years, but in the recent two years CC has changed the way it works radically.

II. The culture in national statistical institutes

5. The culture of a group can in general be defined as: A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Edgar H. Schein).

¹ Prepared by Ulla Agerskov, uag@dst.dk.

6. Most of the employees in Statistics Denmark have a strong sense of shared common values based on a long tradition within the field of statistics – and because of that a very strong culture. Producing statistics is characterized by a high level of continuity. To make figures interesting you must be able to compare them over a long period of time and not change the basic assumptions and methods behind the production of data. This leads to an organisation, which is not that willing to make changes, - unless for a very good reason. This is probably the case for any national statistical organisation.

7. To be able to implement changes, a communication unit in a national statistical organisation must therefore know, respect and be aware of the culture described above, in the process of implementing changes. CC and the subject matter units represent two very different professions and cultures. The subject matter units are characterised by a high degree of professionalism within the fields of statistics and economics. Professionals within the field of communication are oriented towards getting the numbers out to the press in a user friendly form that everybody can understand and with a catchy headline. This can be viewed on, as being populist. The communication staff is usually new comers in the statistical organisation and not fully respected as a key collaborator in the production of statistics to the society.

8. However, the society of 2011 wants fast and easily understood facts, and the target group for Statistics Denmark has changed over the years. Earlier, the primary stakeholders were professionals and administrators, while today, the primary target for a large part of Statistics Denmark's external communication is the media. This has changed the way most statistical organizations work within dissemination of data. Subject matter units are now more aware of the importance of the communication aspect of produced statistics. The culture of the organization is gradually changing.

III. The work with “News from Statistics Denmark”

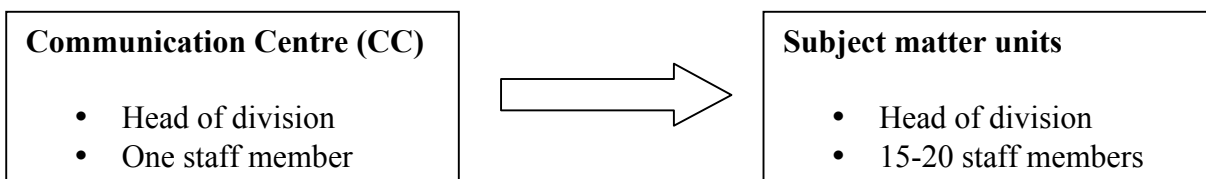
8. Statistics are published in “News from Statistics Denmark” (NSD). It is an external newsletter with the press as primary target group - primarily the web news media - but it also has other users, including officials, businesses, researchers, etc. NSD is published more than 500 times year and about twice a day. The manuscript is prepared by the subject matter units and completed in dialogue with the staff from CC.

9. In the daily work with NSD, CC often has linguistic and substantive suggestions for improvements, which are discussed with the responsible NSD-author in the subject matter unit. However, to make time for discussions around the further development of the publication, a dialogue between CC and subject matter units in the form of “NSD-workshops” is arranged periodically. The purpose of the workshops is to discuss fundamental issues and ideas to improve the communicative quality of the publication. Workshops are held 6-8 times a year with participants from the different subject matter units.

10. Over the past two years the workshops have been developed to make the outcome of the workshops more fruitful and to enhance the process. The purpose is to improve the subject matter units understanding and acceptance of alterations and new suggestions to be dealt with during a workshop and improve the dialog between CC and subject matter units. I will in the following describe the two different workshop forms: “before” and “after” the alteration.

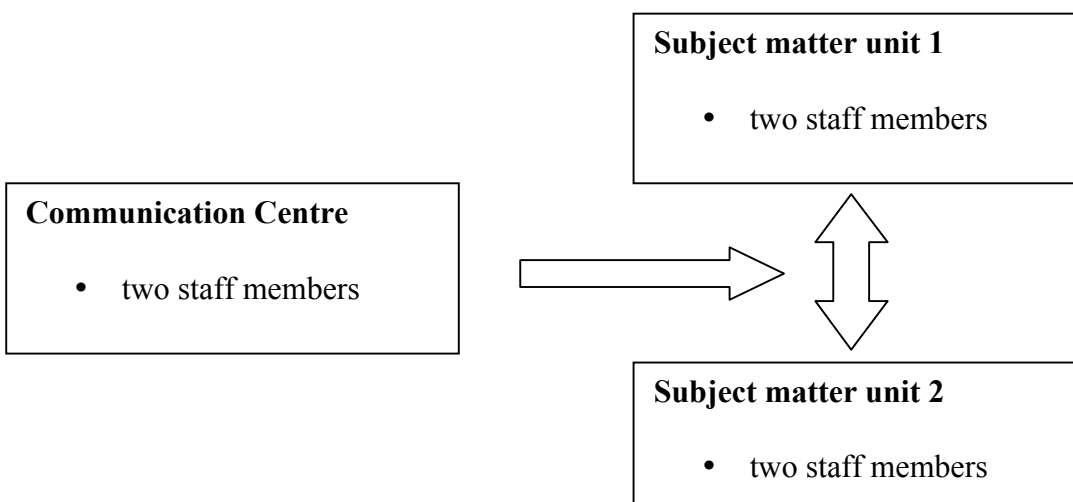
IV. Workshops – before and after

11. In the previous workshops, two persons from CC participated with the staff from the subject matter unit. The head of division from both CC and the subject matter units attended the workshop. Usually a meeting would involve around 20 people. CC was in the lead during the meeting, presenting issues to be dealt with and changes to be made in order to meet the demands of the press and other end users. Usually a discussion took place and ended up with a kind of agreement on future actions, which was written down and referred to in the future corporation around the NSD on a daily basis. This method could however result in conflicts and an unconstructive atmosphere both during and after the workshops due to different focus deriving from the different cultures. An example could be different perceptions of who the target groups are. These conflicts could lay a significant damper on the outcome of the workshops.



12. In the new workshop setup, two subject matter units are invited to the same workshop as opponents, giving each other feedback on their specific NSD. It could be two persons from labour market statistics, and two persons from foreign trade statistics. CC will function as a kind moderator or coach, and participates with a staff of two or three. Usually six people attend the workshop and not as earlier 15-20. Two preparatory meetings are held before each workshop between each of the opponents from the subject matter units and CC. At these meetings, different topics and potential initiatives to improve the NSD are discussed. CC also presents some more general central issues and principals for the opponents, which CC finds important to focus on at the actual workshop. There is usually a constructive atmosphere during these meetings and a willingness to move forward and make changes to improve the content of the NSD's. These positive experiences have created good relations and a better understanding, which also leads to an improved working environment in the daily work around the publication of NSD.

13. The actual workshops are held in an informal environment and focus is on the process, not on the concrete agreements made. No official statements are made or written down. Both the opponents and the receivers of feedback learn a lot from the process; the opponents from having to formulate and suggest other ways of presenting the NSD in a more user friendly way. The receivers from listening to the advice from other persons with a statistical background in the organization, persons with whom they share common values and culture. The process has further improved the direct communication between the involved units as a positive side effect.



V. Conclusion and perspectives for the future

14. The result of the new workshop setup is a better corporation between the CC and the subject matter units and more respect despite differences in cultures and educational background. The cultures are integrating more. A small survey made, shows that the participants of the workshops prefer the new setup. Using a laboratory setup improves the work atmosphere and creates an innovative environment where focus is on the professional interaction. This is opposed to the previous setup that was dominated by conflicts and fights between demand for change and maintaining status quo.

15. However, there are still challenges for CC to overcome. It is not certain that changes agreed on at the workshops are actually implemented in the dissemination of data through NSD. The heads of divisions do not participate in the workshops in their new form. Changes might therefore be overruled and suggestions not implemented, as management might disagree with the suggested changes. Another challenge is to make sure that the opponents choose the right issues to focus on at the workshop. The subject matter units have the initiative, but not the professional insight within communication. It is important that CC is able to persuade the NSD opponent to buy in to the key issues at the preliminary meeting before the actual workshop is held.