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Career Thinking and Expert Career Paths as a Method of Continuous Learning

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1. Introduction

Continuous learning is now firmly embedded in the culture of the British Government Statistical profession. Learning and development can take a variety of forms and the way that staff learn can change as they progress throughout their careers. In addition learning and development is also vital for the many additional staff who support the government statisticians in their work. This paper examines some of the issues affecting learning for these staff and how these issues are being tackled.

2. Background to the Government Statistical Service

i. Structure

The British Government Statistical Service (GSS) is decentralised and comprises around 1400 professional statisticians and over 6000 support and other professional staff employed in more than 30 departments. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the UK's National Statistical Institute and has an important role to play in co-ordinating statistical activities.

The government statisticians are recruited to a common standard and are required to follow the same competence framework and the same Continuing Professional Development policy.

Whilst statisticians are employed by individual departments there is a culture in the GSS for them to be able to move freely throughout all government departments. In this way they are able to widen their skills and knowledge, increase their flexibility and network constructively. In order to facilitate this all vacancies, wherever possible, are made available to staff throughout the GSS.

There are, in addition, much larger numbers of staff across the GSS who, whilst not professional statisticians, support the statisticians in the production of government statistics. These staff vary from junior administrative staff to staff who are very skilled and experienced in individual areas of statistical production. There is currently no overall GSS learning strategy for these staff – their needs are determined at departmental or individual level. However the GSS is beginning to address this

issue and ONS has a programme of training to develop their skills and prepare them for more technical and senior statistician posts (see para 5).

ii. Drivers

The GSS is driven by a need for staff with high quality professional and statistical skills. The Head of the Civil Service has expressed his desire for good quality analysis to be used routinely in developing policy and in operational delivery. Government statisticians need to be able to work both with other analysts and policy makers to achieve this.

iii. Changing background

There has been a reduction in the number of mathematics and statistics graduates in the UK, so the GSS is increasingly recruiting young graduates from other disciplines that include some statistical content, such as Psychology or Geography. However this can mean that a number of new recruits do not always have the statistical knowledge that managers expected. This in turn has meant that early statistical training has sometimes had to concentrate on filling basic gaps in knowledge. However, recruiting staff from the wider social sciences is also an acknowledgement that skills and experience other than statistical techniques, such as written ability, good communication, assimilating evidence and research experience, are important in a government statistician.

In addition the nature of government statistical work has changed. There is increasing emphasis on working with other analysts and policy makers and a need to be aware of the needs of customers. Information technology is changing and new statistical techniques developed. These changes need to be recognised when considering a learning path for statisticians.

3. Career thinking and career paths

We have approached *career thinking* as the broad framework that is used to develop a statistician's career and *career paths* as being concerned with the implementation of that framework.

i. Career thinking

Government statisticians

The traditional framework for the career of a statistician depends on whether they have been recruited through the Fast Stream scheme (which allows accelerated promotion for the most able young graduates) or the Main Stream. In both cases young statisticians are expected to reach the level of middle management. All staff have the opportunity to apply for Senior Civil Service posts if they have the skills and competences but the Fast Stream staff are expected when recruited to have the ability to reach these grades. Consequently at recruitment most Fast Streamers have the expectation that they will reach the most senior posts.

At the beginning of a statistician's career they are encouraged to discuss their career aspirations with their line managers or statistical mentors (a more senior statistician in the government department) and assess their skills against the appropriate competence framework. They should look for work, either within their existing posts or in a new one, that will help develop their skills in the framework that need developing and help prepare them for promotion. In addition they need to be aware of the requirements of the Professional Skills for Government (see 4.i below) and select posts that will help develop these more general skills. A formal example of this advice-giving is in ONS Methodology Directorate, where a higher grade mentor is assigned to a member of staff and, together, they develop a career plan for the mentee for the forthcoming 3 to 5 years.

Posts in government departments are normally opened to staff across the GSS, so statisticians can develop their skills elsewhere if their own department doesn't offer appropriate opportunities.

Their planned career path, in association with the requirements of PSG and the competence framework, becomes the driver for their continuous learning.

Support staff

The position for support staff varies with department and with their own particular specialism. Most staff are likely to have a competence framework that they are expected to follow, although it may not necessarily specifically reflect the technical nature of the posts. Some areas have formal career structures that staff can follow, but frequently the only way to progress further in the GSS is to join the professional statistician group – an option that may not always be possible if they lack the necessary educational qualifications.

ii. Career paths

Government statisticians

There is no single standard path for a statistician's career. There are 1400 staff, all of whom have different skills, needs and aspirations. And, ultimately, there are not always sufficient senior posts for those who may once have aspired to them.

In addition, as their career progresses, other aspects of their life are also likely to change and their aspirations might also change. Some will, for example, still aspire to very senior posts, accepting the possible sacrifices in terms of work-life balance and a reduction in the technical content of their jobs that are likely to occur. Others are happy to remain in middle management posts, perhaps becoming topic experts if the financial and other rewards are sufficient. They are less likely to move around the GSS. At this point they still have to maintain their non-specialist skills, such as people and project management, but are otherwise likely to concentrate on furthering the technical and statistical skills required for their particular area of expertise. This can cause problems if they do decide to move posts for any reason, for example if their post is relocated to another part of the country. They may have problems finding another post in a similar topic area and may be regarded as too narrow for a number of available posts.

Support staff

The support staff have a wide range of career types. Some work only for a brief period in the statistical areas, and develop skills that are simply required for their posts. Others work for a number of years and become experts or managers in aspects of the statistical process, developing their skills to a high degree as they do so. Some of these areas develop their own career structure for these staff, but in many cases there is little that is formally organised for these staff and they have to develop their own careers. Some staff who are interested in a career in statistical production use an informal implementation of the mobility policy found in professional group. Using the performance appraisal systems, they assess their own strengths and weaknesses. They look at the opportunities that are available (normally within their own departments but sometimes elsewhere) and move posts and attend appropriate training. They consequently develop their skills and gain relevant experience and are thus able to progress to middle management grades and beyond.

4. Framework for continuous learning for government statisticians

The GSS has developed a framework for statisticians in order to help them and their managers direct their learning. It is based around a civil service wide analysis of the skills required by managers and a statistical competence framework and is supported by a continuous professional development initiative. These are described in more detail below:

i. Professional Skills for Government

This is a government wide initiative that sets out the skills that all managers are expected to have. By using the framework civil servants, including statisticians, can find out the mix of skills and experience they should have in their current jobs, and what skills they might need to gain in order to change roles or seek promotion.

The framework covers:

- leadership
- core skills (which include people management, project and programme management, financial management and analysis and use of evidence)
- professional skills (the GSS Competence Framework -see below- is used to identify these for statisticians) and
- Broader experience. This might include working in a policy area if most of a member of staff's previous experience had been in, for example, operational delivery.

ii. Competence framework

The GSS introduced a competence framework in 2000. There are 4 levels:

- Junior statisticians within a year or so of the beginning of their career

- More experienced junior statisticians after 3 or 4 years
- Middle management, main grade statisticians
- Senior management statisticians

The framework is divided into different aspects of the work of a statistician:

- Data collection
- Data analysis and interpretation
- Dissemination
- Professional issues

Statisticians are expected to meet the competences as set out in the framework and if they are weak in any area would be expected to participate in learning activities in order to improve their skills.

We aim to review the framework in the next year or so, to ensure that it has kept pace with the changing face of work in the GSS.

iii. Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

All statisticians are expected to participate in CPD. They have to undertake a minimum of 60 hours per year, at least half of which should be statistical learning. Learning is interpreted widely and does not simply include formal training. Learning must be discussed and agreed with a statistician's line manager or statistical mentor and statisticians should be aiming to develop skills as set out in the competence framework. All learning should be recorded in a log book, which is also looked at by statistician selection panels. An individual's attitude to their CPD will be taken into account when considering their suitability for a post.

5. Learning and development for statistical support staff

There are no government wide frameworks for the development of support staff that are comparable to those of the government statistician group although the Professional Skills for Government initiative is used by departments to inform their departmental frameworks for more junior staff. Some departments, such as ONS, have a wide range of training available, from basic numeracy training through academic qualifications in mathematics and statistics to specialised statistical courses. Departments frequently develop training which is specifically tailored to the needs of the job and many are also supporting staff who want to acquire formal statistical qualifications in order that they can join the government statistician group. In addition, whilst movement across the GSS for support staff is not as common as with the statisticians, opportunities for movement do arise as many posts are increasingly advertised throughout the civil service.

The issues surrounding the learning and development of support staff are currently being considered by the GSS Human Resources Committee.

6. Methods of learning for the Government Statistician Group

The CPD initiative makes it clear that learning does not simply revolve around attendance on courses. Such attendance is important of course, but learning also takes place at events such as conferences, in seminars organised in the work place, in private research and whilst doing new tasks during the normal working day. Statisticians are reminded that all of these methods are vital (and to include them in their CPD log).

i. Use of secondments

Secondments have frequently been used as a way of developing a statistician. The secondments can take a number of forms - it may be a short period in another government department in an area related to their current area of expertise or could be a period ranging from a few months to a couple of years in a National Statistical Institute. It could be a period in a totally different employment sector. Secondments allow statisticians access to different cultures and different ways of working. However whilst they are popular with individual members of staff and seen as a good development opportunity by many managers, financial constraints often mean that proposed secondments do not take place. There may be no-one to back fill the post created by the secondment or, if someone wishes to go elsewhere, neither the sending nor the receiving institution may be able to fund the move.

ii. Developing formal learning opportunities for statisticians

Formal qualifications in statistics, such as the five-year, part-time MSc in Official Statistics (run jointly by ONS and the University of Southampton), are available for government statisticians. However many, especially as they proceed through their careers, are not able to devote the time to such a lengthy qualification and it may not necessarily provide them with the specialist skills they need for their particular posts. The GSS is consequently working with Methodology Division of the Office for National Statistics to develop a framework of statistical learning. This will aim to identify appropriate training for each stage of a statistician's career, linked to the requirements of the competency framework. Attendance at such courses will provide an indication that the statistician should have reached an appropriate point when assessing competence. Once this approach is endorsed work will take place to identify current training events to support the framework or, where none exists, to design and deliver appropriate training. This information will then be made available across the GSS.

There are in addition existing learning initiatives for staff. These include:

- All professional statisticians are expected to attend a three day residential induction into life in the GSS. As well as discussing areas such as the UK statistical infrastructure it covers topics such as career planning and personal development.
- Conferences are organised both for junior statisticians and more senior managers on a regular basis. These allow statisticians to network, learn from each other and hear about new developments in government statistics.
- The GSS is working with the Royal Statistical Society Professional Development Centre to develop short, one or two day, courses on areas of interest to government statisticians;

- Encouraging departments to develop seminars on topics in which they have particular expertise and opening them to statisticians across the GSS
- ONS Methodology Division is establishing a consultancy service whereby they can work with individual departments to develop tailored short courses appropriate to their needs

The GSS is also working with other analytical groups within government, such as economists and social researchers, to open up their formal learning events to interested analysts from other professions.

iii. Managed moves

Some government departments, or indeed groups of government departments, develop their staff's careers by arranging a set of moves between departments. Staff, up to main grade Statistician level, are eligible to move every 12-18 months and vacancies are identified that are eligible for the process. Staff prioritise their preferences and managers in the departments allocate staff to the posts, taking the preferences into account. This system allows staff to work in different areas and different departments, developing their skills and competences. Departments regularly get new and developed staff without needing to hold time consuming selection panels.

7. Other support for Government Statisticians

Whilst line managers and mentors are the main sources of career support and guidance for statisticians, others are available. The Statisticians in Government Team (SiGT), part of the Head of the GSS's team in ONS, is dedicated to issues surrounding the recruitment and career and professional development of government statisticians. It can provide practical advice and examples of good practice to staff and managers when requested. In addition, those statisticians who are members of their trade union can access its advice and guidance on how to get the best out of the PSG framework and how to improve access to high quality, accessible and accredited learning opportunities.

8. Summary

The title of this paper indicates that career paths and career thinking influence a statistician's continuous learning. Experience in the UK shows that this is true - at least in the early stages of a statistician's career. Statisticians make decisions about their learning based on both the competency frameworks that are in place and on their aspirations for the long term. However as their careers progress they may need to review their plans. Changes in government priorities, restructuring of departments and relocation of work, allied with changes in personal circumstances and preferences, can affect an individual's priorities. Their career paths may change and their learning priorities have to be re-evaluated in order to meet the new circumstances.

There is a different picture for many of the support staff, at least in their early years. Frequently there is no career plan at the beginning of their career as staff are allocated to vacancies as they occur. However as their expertise and preferences develop they

identify their strengths and weaknesses and the competences that they need to work on. Any learning is directed towards strengthening those areas. As they reach more senior grades and develop their expertise their learning and development strategy may mirror that of the statistician grades. Their learning and development may reflect more generic management and leadership roles plus the need to develop their specialist skills.

For both sets of staff flexibility is vital. Increasingly no government statistical job is for life and all staff need to develop skills that are transferable across a range of posts.