

Turning to e-learning: How Statistics Norway started using e-learning extensively, including for the inception of new staff members.

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One year ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic, Statistics Norway established a Forum for e-learning, an informal group gathering two or three times per semester to exchange knowledge and ideas on e-learning. Colleagues give short interventions on work they do related to e-learning, inspiring others in terms of methodologies to foster learning and the use of tools. Statistics Norway also invested in several tools for e-learning ahead of the pandemic. Courses on questionnaire design and testing, security awareness, API, training of interviewers and prevention of attacks towards SQL databases were on the way or already in use before the pandemic. The pandemic forced us to expand the use of e-learning to other areas, to build competencies and allegiance to the organisation. We are faced with a challenge that we have a growing number of staff members that have never set foot in the premises of Statistics Norway. The challenges and how we addressed them will be addressed in this article/presentation.

Turning to e-learning: How Statistics Norway started using e-learning extensively, including for the inception of new staff members

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One year ahead of the Covid19 pandemic, Statistics Norway established a Forum for e-learning, an informal internal group gathering two or three times per semester to exchange knowledge and ideas on e-learning. The pandemic forced us to expand the use of e-learning to other areas, to build various competencies and allegiance to the organisation. We are faced with a challenge that we have a growing number of new staff members who have never set foot in the premises of Statistics Norway. They have to integrate and learn how to do their work mainly through electronic means.

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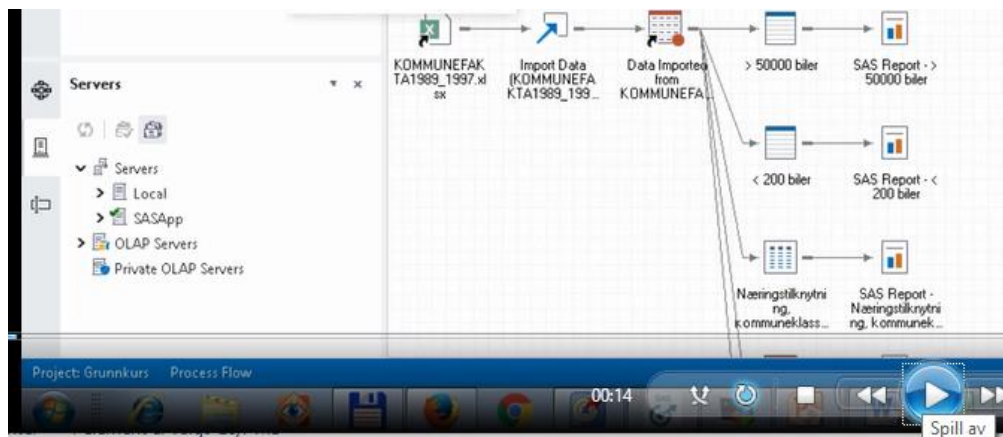
E-learning in Statistics Norway before and during the pandemic

Several initiatives on e-learning have been existing in Statistics Norway. Many colleagues have produced e-learning and many have benefited from e-learning produced by other organisations. One challenge with e-learning in Statistics Norway, was that the existing initiatives were scattered out over the organisation; the colleagues behind the different initiatives often did not know of each other, not having the opportunity to benefit from exchanging ideas and experiences on the use of tools and learning methods. This is what we tried to help by establishing the Forum for e-learning. At the Forum colleagues give short interventions on work they do related to e-learning, inspiring others in terms of methodologies to foster learning and the use of tools. Statistics Norway also invested in several tools for e-learning ahead of the pandemic. Courses on questionnaire design and testing, security awareness, how users can customize the statistics they can access, training of interviewers spread around the country and prevention of attacks towards SQL databases were on the way or already in use before the pandemic. Following the pandemic, interest in e-learning has increased and the number of participants at each gathering of the Forum has doubled.



Forum for e-learning before and during the COVID – 19 pandemic.

The initial response to the pandemic was that planned and ongoing face-to-face trainings were cancelled. The only way to give training was to shift to electronic means. This made many colleagues look for ways to offer different kinds of e-learning. Even though we did not prepare for a pandemic, we had already invested in authoring tools for e-learning, as well as video editing software, cameras, microphones and a studio. The Forum for e-learning helped colleagues become aware of the existing possibilities, including the availability of existing free-ware and getting help in how to use the tools available. The statistical package SAS is widely used in Statistics Norway, and new staff often need training in order to work productively. The in-house introductory training in SAS has recently been re-created as video-based e-learning in order to accommodate the learning needs of new employees.



From a video centric SAS introductory e-learning course developed by Mr. Kristian Lønø

Statistics Norway has two locations 100 kilometres apart. Meetings using some kind of video connection was quite frequently held, being increasingly more used over the past decade. Hence, we had considerable experience in using remote meetings, and did not start from scratch when the pandemic forced us all to work from home. But we were not prepared for the transition needed to build and sustain institutional competence. Discussing and sharing knowledge and experiences build competence in an institution, but has mostly been done face-to-face. We need to find ways to sustain discussions and sharing of information to foster and spread the knowledge and skills we have as a group.

Linking up staff – online on-the-job training

Competence is built through training, but most importantly through what we learn from daily interaction with colleagues. Sharing knowledge and best practices is necessary in order to ensure high-quality products and processes. It is also necessary to develop and retain the right expertise in the organisation. During a recent reorganisation process, tasks were shifted between staff members. Many recorded their screen to document work processes for colleagues taking on their task to learn from. Others have created fruitful on-line arenas for various tools and methodologies. Linking colleagues using similar tools, having similar interest and tasks, enhances learning and professional development.

Social interaction between colleagues also had to be accommodated by electronic means. Interacting with, discussing, seeing, greeting and smiling to colleagues can be an important aspect of work, in particular for colleagues who have limited social interaction in their discretionary time.

Interacting with colleagues is also particularly important to another group: Those who have recently joined the organisation. New recruits need to get into their tasks, establish a network and build a corporate identity. This is challenging without having the possibility to meet colleagues. A number of meta-analysis have found positive effects of staff's commitment to their organisation, of autonomy

at work and motivation for work itself (intrinsic motivation). This is found to make staff more productive, to make them more motivated, and to reduce turnover. Development of staff skills, career opportunities, delegation of responsibility and a high degree of autonomy are core elements in this respect (see e.g. Verburg, Den Hartog and Koopman 2007, Combs, Liu, Hall, and Ketchen 2006, Kuvås 2016). It is assumed that the staff through this will identify with the goals of the organisation, cooperate constructively, be loyal and work harder, smarter and more responsible (Pfeffer and Veiga, 1999). These are challenges we need to rethink how to address in times of the Covid-19 pandemic.

New ways to meet – new ways to get to know each other

In September 2020 Statistics Norway has about 40 staff members that have always only been working from home. Most of them have been at Statistics Norway's premises to meet their supervisor, maybe their colleagues and to collect the equipment they need for their home office. Working on-line limits the social interaction that makes us feel we get to know each other. This includes small-talk at lunch, having a coffee, stopping by to ask a question or sharing something about the weekend or your family. We tried to create a bounding process using Teams, a tool used for meetings and communication in Statistics Norway. In other words, we tried to make new staff get to know more colleagues and feel part of statistics Norway.



On-line gathering for new staff members

The gathering was initiated by a check-in process, aiming to make participants feel welcome. They were greeted as they entered the electronic meeting room. We were trying to recreate the atmosphere you could find when meeting your colleagues by a coffee machine on your way into a physical meeting room.

People exchange personal information with their friends. To encourage emotional connection between colleagues, we asked them to share something personal about themselves. It is often a challenge to keep people active. In our experience participants were most active when we had group discussions as part of the gathering. The discussions took place in video-chats, moderated by a facilitator also responsible to take people to the chat, and bring them back in time for summing up in a plenary session. To enhance activity, it is also possible to invite contributions from selected participants in advance. Further, we tried to make participants more active by asking them to keep their cameras and microphones on, as far as the technical system allowed.

The topics of the web-based inception for new staff included mostly the same that were part of earlier face-to-face inceptions. The topics include the legal foundation, strategies and goals of Statistics Norway, and being introduced to the executive managers and trade unions. New staff were also learning about the history and visions for the future of the organisation, statistical quality and examples from the statistical production, as well as salaries and career opportunities, training and capacity building and international cooperation. Current initiatives in Statistics Norway were also presented to new staff, as part of the process of bringing them on board.

Final remarks

Our expectation is that web-based inception in combination with electronic interaction between colleagues and e-learning courses will help integrate new staff members in the organisation to a sufficient degree.

The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us that e-learning is more than taking training online. The pandemic forced us to find ways to do on-the-job training and integrate new staff members socially on-line. Tools and training material developed in this context, will also be used later, when we once again can benefit from the advantages of closer human interaction.

Litterature

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