

Statistics Iceland's response to the COVID-19 crisis. Using a mixed methods approach to ensure the best possible results

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Abstract

My proposed contribution is a presentation and paper on Statistics Iceland's response to the COVID-19 crisis and how we managed to ensure an unaffected production of statistics while making sure that the health and well-being of our employees would not be negatively affected and that the disease would not spread within the organisation.

I will explain how we used a "mixed methods" approach in order to quickly adapt and respond to the ever changing environment, and how this approach resulted in a positive impact on our main objectives.

Objectives

Our objectives were threefold. All three objectives were considered equally important, and interconnected, which meant that the performance on one objective could have a considerable impact on the other objectives.

Objective one was minimising the negative effect of the COVID-19 epidemic on Statistics Iceland's business. This meant ensuring that the production of statistics would be affected as little as possible and that the end results would be of the same quality and timeliness as usual.

Our second objective was to ensure the health and well-being of our employees. These unprecedented circumstances we were facing did have an impact on our employees, and our objective was to ensure that this impact would not increase because of working conditions.

Thirdly, we aimed to do our part in containing the disease and try to minimise its spread in the organisation, and therefore contributing to the country-wide efforts to contain the disease within the community.

Description

In my proposed contribution I will discuss Statistics Iceland's efforts to achieve the aforementioned three objectives. I will explain the logic behind our organisational setup and how that contributed to the positive results we achieved.

I will also discuss how the rapid change of events and the complexity of the situation called for a high level of flexibility in responses. In order for us to achieve our objectives, we needed to adopt mixed methods approach, where some goals were achieved by adopting a very centralised approach whereas others called for a decentralized strategy.

Results

The results were positive in all three areas.

The results on production were quite positive and the epidemic seemed to have no negative effect on our production. No publications had to be delayed and in fact numbers show that we increased the number of publications during the period. Data collection was also successful for all projects, even though major changes had to be made in the implementation, especially in data collection by interviewers.



On the whole, our efforts to ensure the health and well-being of employees were successful. We were able to reduce discomfort related to uncertainty by ensuring that employees regularly got information on how Statistics Iceland was responding to the epidemic, and by ensuring that we always had a plan of action for different scenarios.

Thirdly, we also did our part in contributing to the containment the disease. By following the guidelines and instructions of the authorities, we managed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within the organisation.

Statistics Iceland's response to the COVID-19 crisis. Using a mixed methods approach to ensure the best possible results

Helga Hauksdóttir, Human Resources manager, Statistics Iceland

Summary

This paper describes Statistics Iceland's response to the COVID-19 crisis and how we managed to sustain full production of statistics while making sure that the health and well-being of our employees would not be negatively affected and that the disease would not spread within the organisation.

It will explain how we used a "mixed methods" approach in order to quickly adapt and respond to the ever changing environment, and how this approach resulted in a positive impact on our main objectives.

Responding to COVID-19

Objectives

During the crisis management period, from the beginning of march until may, we had three main objectives. All three objectives were considered equally important, and interconnected, meaning that the performance on one objective could have a considerable impact on the other objectives.

Objective one was minimising the negative effect of the COVID-19 epidemic on Statistics Iceland's business. This meant ensuring that the production of statistics would be affected as little as possible and that the end results would be of the same quality and timeliness as usual, and we would be able to stick to our original publication's calendar.

Our second objective was to ensure the health and well-being of our employees. These unprecedented circumstances we were facing would impact our employees, and our objective was to ensure that this impact would not increase because of poor working conditions.

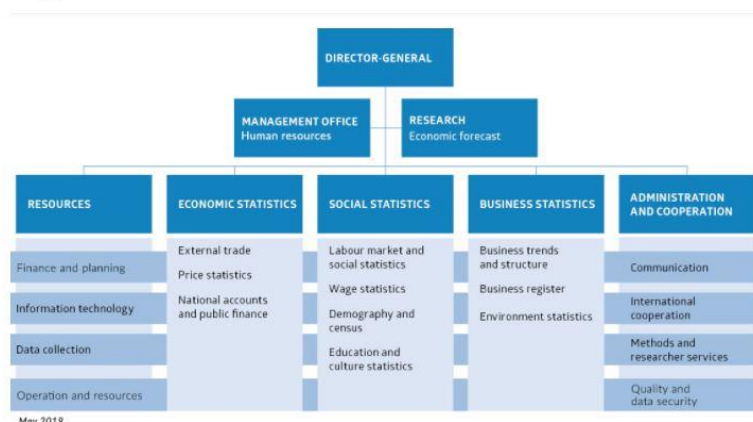
Thirdly, we aimed to do our part in containing the disease and try to minimise its spread in the organisation, and therefore contributing to the national efforts to contain the disease within Iceland.

To achieve all our objectives, a number of measures had to be taken. Because of the fast pace of changes in the governments responses to the epidemic, our responses had to be fast as well. Instead of using the same approach for all goals, we decided to use a „mixed methods“ approach, where some goals were achieved by using a centralized form of crisis management, whereas other goals were achieved with a more decentralized form of management.

In some ways, you could say that Statistics Iceland's responses to the pandemic reflected the way the institution is organised. Statistics Iceland follows a rather traditional structure in which the institution is divided into five divisions and each division contains a number of departments. The directors of the five divisions, together with the director general, form the executive board of Statistics Iceland. Each

division is an independent unit where the division manager is responsible for the operations and the executive board does not influence how each division is run.

Organisation chart



This form of management has proven successful for the organisation when it comes to the production of statistics. We therefore went for a similar management approach when tackling the challenges we were facing during the first wave of the pandemic. The pandemic responses and actions reflect therefore in a way, the organisational chart and how Statistics Iceland is normally run. A central operations management team was set up to manage centrally the organisation's responses to COVID-19, which could be compared to Statistic's Iceland's Board of Directors and their conventional role in the organisation. Also reflecting our traditional way of producing statistics, each division manager was responsible for ensuring continued operations in their division, and got full autonomy to do so.

Objective one, minimising the negative effect of the COVID-19 epidemic on Statistics Iceland's business.

The first of our three objectives was to minimize the negative effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on our business.

To achieve this objective we opted for a decentralized approach. This meant that all decision-making related to ensuring that the business ran as smoothly as possible, was made on a division level. Managers of each division had full authority to make the changes they felt were necessary in order to minimize the impact of the epidemic on the activities of their division. This had of course to be within the limits of what needed to be done to ensure that the government's pandemic directives were met.

The rationale for this methodology was that different methods are suitable for different areas of the production of statistics. There is a difference in tasks and work processes between divisions that calls for different responses. Also, the working conditions and work arrangements of divisions can be very different, as some divisions have employees working in open spaces while other divisions have all their employees in private offices while others have mixed arrangements where some are in open spaces and some in private offices.

This method also allowed managers to be very flexible in their responses to different circumstances which meant that for example changes in the government requirements could be dealt with quickly.

The role of the central operations management team was, in this case, solely to be a forum for providing information and sharing ideas. During the meetings the division managers could inform others on the team about what actions they had taken and in general about the state of affairs in their division. There they would also share ideas with the other managers on how they approach problems and challenges in the business. No decisions on the implementation of actions were taken in this forum. Discussions about the divisions' activities at the meetings were therefore always in the form of informing, but the decision-making itself about individual actions was always taken outside of the meetings.

Since decisions regarding operations within each division was taken decentrally, it was possible to better tailor responses to the situation in each division. Different aspects of the production process call for different solutions and therefore it is clear that what works for the dissemination unit for example will not necessarily work well for the methodologist. With this approach, employees also had a greater opportunity to influence their own work arrangements as the decision was made in their field and not centrally from above.

Objective two, ensuring the health and well-being of our employees.

The second objective during the crisis management period from march till may, was to ensure the health and well-being of our employees. To achieve this objective we opted for a central method, where the crisis management team played a bigger role.

In the first wave of the epidemic was characterized by uncertainty on a number of areas. The uncertainty resulted in a reduced well-being of the employees. We as an employer could ofcourse not reduce all uncertainty for our employees, especially those outside the workplace. What we could do was try to reduce all uncertainty factors within the organisation. In order to do so, we tried to ensure a steady flow of information and transparency on measures taken.

Ensuring a good flow of information and trying to ensure that employees always knew what the situation was and what rules and standards applied was an intricate part of ensuring employee satisfaction and well-being. Providing centralized information was thus one way of reducing uncertainty regarding the job and the workplace, and in this way it was possible to reduce the discomfort of those employees who felt some uncertainty.

Central information was provided on what rules applied to number and distance restrictions, on how employees should react if they experienced symptoms, and on explaining what rights they had. Information work arrangements, the projects themselves and project submissions was not distributed centrally. Instead, it was the responsibility of each division to elaborate and provide information on work-related aspects.

Another important factor contributing to employees health and well-being is having the necessary equipment. All employees were allowed to take their office equipment home with them, this included laptops, screens, computer mice and keyboards. All employee laptops were already equipped with a digital phone, which meant they could use their work phone from home. The IT department also divided the system administration team between different floors of the building so that each floor had one member of the team on location. This was done so that employees working in the office did not have to go between floors more than absolutely necessary.

Objective three, containing the disease and try to minimise its spread in the organisation

The last of the three objectives was to try to limit the spread of COVID-19 within Statistics Iceland. A central approach was used here as for objective two. In fact this objective was obtained by using a very rigorous form of a central approach where there was no flexibility in how to achieve the goal.

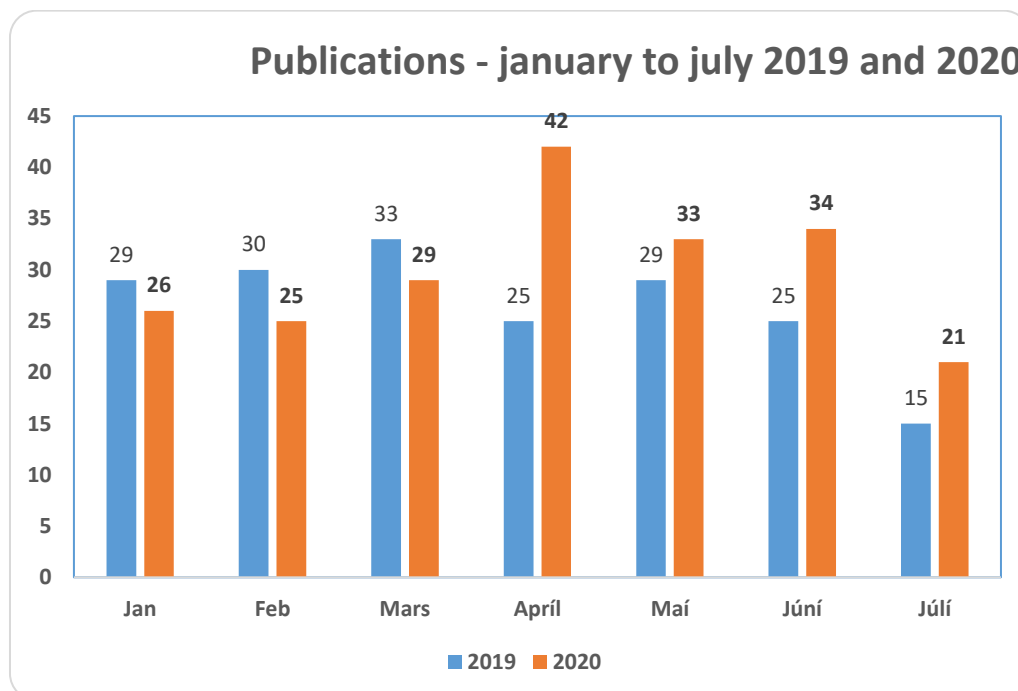
To obtain this goal a plan of action was made to coordinate our responses to possible infections. The plan was comprised of four scenarios, ranging from one employee being quarantined (the least serious), to multiple employees being infected with Covid-19 (the most serious of the four scenarios). In the plan there was a checklist for each scenario, along with a predetermined responsibilities for each item on the checklist. This meant that in a case of employees being quarantined or being put in isolation, there was a clear procedure to be followed and every participant (the employee, managers, the crisis management team members for example) knew what their role was and what items on the checklist was their responsibility.

Results

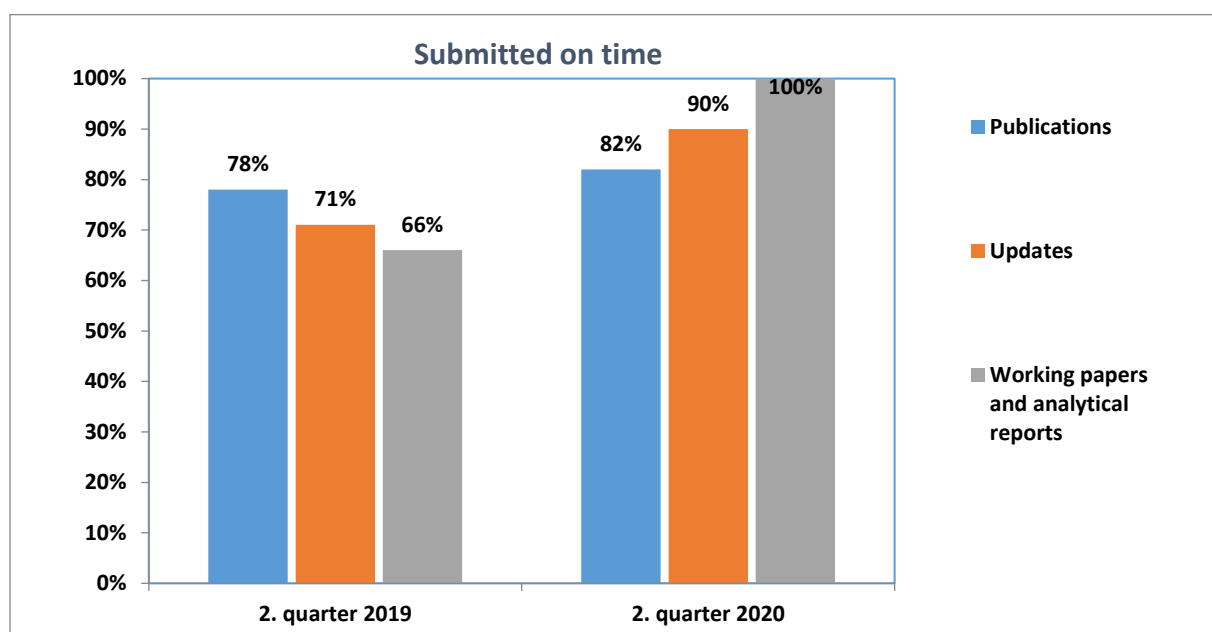
The results were positive in all three areas.

Objective one, minimising the negative effect of the COVID-19 epidemic on Statistics Iceland's business.

The results on production were quite positive and the epidemic seemed to have no negative effect on our production. No publications had to be delayed and in fact numbers show that we increased the number of publications during the period.



These trying times also do not seem to have had a serious impact on employees ability to do their work effectively. Numbers from the dissemination report of the second quarter of 2020 show that a higher percentage of news, tables and reports were submitted to the dissemination unit on time.



Data collection was also successful for all projects. Data collection in Statistics Iceland is carried out only by CATI and by web forms, and those methods could be maintained unchanged throughout the period.

The interviewer shifts had to be changed, going from a flexible two shift system to a fixed three shift system with no communication between shifts to prevent cross contamination. When we look at the response rate in the labour market survey for example, we see a rise in response rates between years. The labour market survey response rates from beginning of March to the end of May were 65% this year compared to 61% for the same period in 2019.

Objective two, ensuring the health and well-being of our employees.

On the whole, our efforts to ensure the health and well-being of employees were successful. We were able to reduce discomfort related to uncertainty by ensuring that employees regularly got information on how Statistics Iceland was responding to the epidemic, and by ensuring that we always had a plan of action for different scenarios.

Preliminary result from a survey on remote work during wave one of COVID-19 show that a vast majority of employees thought working from home went well (92,6%). Most employees said that their projects took a similar or shorter time to complete when working from home (Similar: 66,7%, shorter: 21%). The reasons given were often that there were less distractions and easier to focus when working from home.

When asked about the flow of information to and from managers, 90% of respondents said relaying information to managers and co-workers went well or very well, and 88,8% said that getting information from their managers went well or very well.

Objective three, containing the disease and try to minimise its spread in the organisation

Thirdly, we also did our part in contributing to the containment the disease. By following the guidelines and instructions of the authorities, we managed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within the organisation.

A few employees had to be quarantined due to proximity to an infected individual. All of the quarantines were because of connections with an infected individual that happened outside of the organisation and was not connected in any way to their job at Statistics Iceland.

One employee got infected by COVID-19 and had to be isolated while infected. Because of our plans of action, we were able to prevent any other employees to get infected or to be quarantined because of this isolated incident.

Summary and lessons learned

When all things are considered, it is safe to say that Statistics Iceland's experience with tackling the difficult circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 epidemic were positive. We were able to respond quickly to the ever changing turn of events and achieve positive results on all the objectives we tried to achieve. Even though it is clear that many things contributed to the results, it is also clear that our mixed methods approach by making decisions in a centralised way when needed and by using a more decentralised method in other areas, did contribute to our success.