



Economic Commission for Europe**Conference of European Statisticians****Sixty-ninth plenary session**

Geneva, 23-25 June 2021

Item 2 (b) of the provisional agenda

Innovation in National Statistical Offices organization and working arrangements**Summary of key points from the Chief Statisticians' sprint on
"Innovation, business continuity and staff motivation during
the pandemic", 2 June 2021****Prepared by Poland and the Secretariat***Summary*

A "sprint" session for CES Bureau members and a few invited chief statisticians was held on 2 June 2021 to discuss innovation, business continuity and staff motivation during the pandemic. This paper summarizes the key points from the discussion, as an input to the CES Plenary Session, agenda item 2 (b) Innovation in National Statistical Offices organization and working arrangements, organized by Poland, New Zealand and the UNECE secretariat.



I. Background

1. The 2021 Plenary Session of the Conference of European Statisticians will be held on-line due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This format severely limits the possibilities for detailed discussions on substantive topics of interest to the international statistical community. To partly mitigate this, the CES Bureau decided to experiment with the organisation of two on-line “sprints”. The aim was to allow in-depth discussions in small groups, where ideas and opinions would be documented to provide background papers to inform the discussions on the corresponding agenda items at the Plenary Session.
2. The first of these sprints was held on 2 June 2021, and considered the topic of innovation, business continuity and staff motivation during the pandemic. It was attended by representatives of 12 national statistical offices and international organisations (Canada, Finland, Georgia, Ireland, Israel, Lithuania, New Zealand, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Eurostat and UNECE), and was moderated by Mr Dominik Rozkrut, President of Statistics Poland.

II. Key points from the discussion

3. The following points were raised in the discussion:

A. Management and well-being of staff

(a) Managers need to be flexible and adaptable in the face of rapid changes, some long-established procedures and ways of thinking were overturned, and not all staff were comfortable with this.

(b) Many staff adapted quickly to new circumstances and working practices, in some cases, this was fuelled by a sense of public duty and serving the country. For some staff, this meant quickly learning new skills, such as telephone and web-based interviewing, rather than face-to-face.

(c) However, some staff desire a full return to the “old” normal, particularly when offices re-open. This should be avoided where possible, as many of the changes imposed by the pandemic can have lasting positive impacts. The phase of re-opening has to be managed carefully to ensure that positive changes are not lost.

(d) In some cases, the need for rapid change has led to a 2-speed culture, with one group of staff much more open to innovation, whilst other staff remain more cautious. Managing this effectively is a challenge, and publicly celebrating successful innovators can help.

(e) The pandemic has shown that many functions of statistical offices can be performed remotely. Many expect to keep an element of remote working, and some see the opportunity to geographically widen the pool of potential recruits by offering remote working possibilities.

(f) Awareness of staff well-being has been very important, as some staff do not have ideal working conditions at home, and may have childcare or other family responsibilities. Increased flexibility, including a focus on outputs, rather than observance of normal working hours has been important. Regular activities to try to motivate staff, reduce their stress and retain a sense of community to avoid them feeling isolated, have been essential.

B. Data collection and production of statistics

(a) It has been even more important to regularly communicate with users and respondents during the pandemic. User needs have evolved rapidly, and data collection methods have changed in some cases.

(b) Senior management have needed to regularly prioritise between existing and new outputs, taking into account the constraints of data availability and remote working. In some countries there were daily prioritisation meetings in the early phase of the pandemic.

(c) New surveys and data collection activities had to be implemented at very short notice, reducing normal lead times for such activities from 24 months to 24 hours in some cases. This “rapid survey” approach is something that can be retained in the future.

(d) It has also been important to move quickly on the use of administrative and other non-traditional data sources. In some cases, it was clear that policy-makers would use these sources directly if the statistical office didn’t, so it was preferable to move quickly to retain relevance, and to ensure that the data would have appropriate quality assessments in line with the professional standards of official statistics. The label of “experimental statistics” has been used by some countries for such cases.

(e) Legislation was sometimes a barrier to data access, but, in some cases, the pandemic has provided an opportunity or catalyst to speed up legislative change.

(f) Building new partnerships and leveraging existing ones has been important to support effective responses to new data demands. Examples include partnerships with universities, with companies that have useful data holdings, and with geospatial agencies.

(g) There has been a move towards the creation of various dashboards, both as data dissemination tools, but also as tools for internal management of data collection and processing, using tools such as Power BI.

(h) The relative importance of the different components of quality changed, with a much greater focus on timeliness, and, to some extent, coherence. It has been important to be very open about data quality, particularly where data sources have changed and there has been a greater focus on statistical modelling and estimation.

C. Innovation and modernisation

(a) It is important to understand why and how we could innovate so quickly during the pandemic, to be able to retain some of the momentum. Factors include the strong international network, having a reputation for being a professional and trusted organisation, having an organisational culture that is open to change, and having already invested in more flexible and modern technologies, processes and methods. Agile governance, reduced bureaucracy and a focus on providing products that are fit for purpose have also helped.

(b) The pandemic can be seen as a catalyst to accelerate modernisation and innovation in statistical organisations. It has been necessary to encourage a change to a more “can do” or “art of the possible” culture, removing some previous constraints and barriers to change. This has to be accompanied by a greater openness to risk on the part of managers.

(c) In many countries, the pandemic has raised the profile of the national statistical office, providing opportunities to demonstrate relevance and build trust and respect. It is important to use these opportunities effectively, to re-orientate the role of statistical offices in government and society, including in respect of data stewardship roles.

D. Value of official statistics and external factors

(a) It has been and will continue to be important to focus on the value added of statistical organisations, and how to maximise this to build a strong reputation as a relevant, trusted and forward-thinking organisation.

(b) In the broader context, the pandemic has helped to accelerate existing trends in government and society such as digitalisation and the transition towards a greener economy. Statistical offices need to position themselves to respond to these trends.

(c) Exchange of information, ideas and good practices within the international statistical community has been very important during the pandemic. The collective wisdom of the community was a considerable help in many cases, and the sense of community helped to improve morale of managers and staff.

4. Some areas raised in the discussion that could benefit from further reflection include:

(a) How to sustain motivation and enthusiasm over the next phases of the pandemic and recovery

(b) Best practices in managing remote working and teams split across multiple physical locations

(c) How to sustain the process of innovation and embed it explicitly in our core values

(d) Best practices in elaborating and implementing innovation strategies

(e) How to use the current momentum to improve data access (including through legislative changes) and enhance the standing of statistical organisations

(f) Adapting to change versus leading change

IV. Action requested from the Conference

5. The Conference is invited:

(a) To take note of the points raised in the sprint session, refer to them during the plenary discussion.

(b) To reflect on what further activities may be needed to reinforce and disseminate the lessons learned from the pandemic, identifying which changes can have positive impacts over the longer term, and what role the international community can play in consolidating these.
