THE DATA DILEMMA

Simple Ways to Collect Data, Use It, & Influence Leaders

Quest Cultural Solutions

www.questcultural.com

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Be Green. Keep it on the screen.
Learn about our Sustainability Commitment.

Message from the CEO

Dear Colleagues:

We all feel it. Resources are shrinking. Making the case for new funding, programs, and initiatives is harder than ever.

In this environment, good stewardship is vital. Leaders are under tremendous pressure to allocate resources wisely, and personal stories or anecdotes aren't enough to justify their decisions.

In response to these changes, smart professionals use data. Integrating data into your work may seem overwhleming, but it doesn't have to be. This publication describes several strategies for collecting and using data to support your initiatives. Whether you're advocating for funding or creating a new program, data can help you justify and promote your work.

Photo Credit: Ron Hall

Beth M. Laux, EdD
President & CEO, Quest Cultural Solutions

Whether you're an experienced researcher or a novice, the tips in this publication can improve the way that you use data. Have your own strategies? Share them with us at blaux@questcultural.com. We'd love to hear about your experiences.

Regards,

Beth M. Laux, EdD
President & CEO
Quest Cultural Solutions

The Importance of Data

Everyday, we are bombarded with data. Social media, cell phone apps, and advertisements use data to influence our choices, opinions, and purchases.

This influx of data affects more than our personal lives. It also changes the workplace, and savvy professionals use this to their advantage.

In boardrooms, classrooms, and government agencies, the influence of data is rising. Good data helps us identify patterns, understand needs, & demonstrate impact. Accurate information is often the difference between success and failure, and as a result, data is a valuable currency in our competitive economy.

As information becomes more accessible, the emphasis on data-driven decisions also grows. Within this context, leaders expect data in proposals, presentations, evaluations, and reports.

For many professionals this is a challenging shift. Collecting data can be difficult, and the questions are overwhelming.

What type of data do I need?

Which methods should I use?

Are my results accurate?

Answering these questions requires expertise, but there are resources to help.

By overcoming this challenge, we can increase funding, win support for our goals, and thrive in a competitive work environment.

Information Pathways: Existing vs. New Data

Data creates opportunity. By integrating data into our work, we increase our rate of success. The best part? You don't need to be a professional researcher. Using two strategies, you can find or create the information you need.

Strategy #1 Existing Data

We often assume that our work requires new data, but that may not be the case. Everyday, we have access to free data sets from research institutes, government agencies, and non-profits. By evaluating the information we already have, we can use existing data to support our goals.

Strategy #2 New Data

If you don't have access to the information you need, you can create new knowledge to support your goals. Generating new data is complex, but it can be done. By focusing on the process and purpose of your research, you can create new data to support your goals, programs, and initiatives.

Strategies for Existing Data

It's easy to be overwhelmed by data. At first, it may seem like the data you need isn't available, but existing data sources can be a lifesaver.

From digital public databases to our own filing cabinets, there are lots of existing data sets to support your work. Not sure where to start? Consider two strategies for making the most of existing data sources.

1 Look at What You Already have

Many professionals already have access to the data they need. Among other sources, data is found in files, software systems, and applications. It's also found in annual reports, client lists, surveys, and program evaluations. With some creativity and formatting, you may be able to use the data you already have.

2 Use Others' Expertise

If you're struggling to answer important questions, others are probably struggling, too. That means that someone else may have already done the work for you! Before you create new data, consider using others' research to meet your needs. Journal articles, publications, professional organizations, and government reports are a great starting point.

Generating New Data

If the data that you need isn't available in existing data sets, you may have to create new resources.

New data is generated through research. Conducting research can be highly complex or very simple. By thinking through both the *process* and *purpose* of your research, you can create valuable information to support your work.

There are many ways to conduct research. Commonly used methods include surveys, interviews, statistical analysis, and focus groups. When selecting your methods, consult your organization's research office. Many agencies and institutions have strict research policies, and following those guidelines is critical to success.

Not sure where to begin? Here are some tips to get you started!
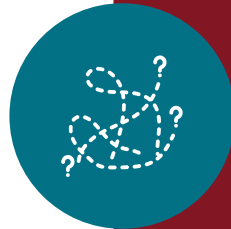
DON'T OVERCOMPLICATE IT

You may not need a large, complex data set. Small samples might do the trick. For instance, consider polling your counterparts at other organizations. Their informal insights can be very compelling.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Good research starts with good questions. *What information do you need? Where can you find it? How will the process affect participants?* Think through these important questions before you start collecting data.

HAVE A PLAN

Effective research doesn't happen by accident. Before you begin, create a detailed outline of your procedures. Think through how you will collect, store, analyze, & interpret your data.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Creating new knowledge is a big deal. It impacts people and organizations. Before you start, determine if you have the expertise to conduct the study effectively. If not, get the support you need to do it right.

Data vs. Storytelling

In today's competitive economy, narratives aren't enough to win support for your goals.

To increase your chances of success, include data in your reports, evaluations, and proposals. But don't abandon personal anecdotes yet! Combining data with storytelling is a powerful strategy.

Setting the Stage

Despite the rising need for data, storytelling is still a critical part of decision-making. Stories create context for the data you present. They put a human face on the details, and this taps into your audience's hopes, experiences, and motivations.

By combining data and storytelling, you can demonstrate why facts matter. So how do you effectively merge data and narratives? Consider some key questions to get started.

Key Questions

WHAT DOES YOUR AUDIENCE PREFER?

Some leaders respond to narratives. Others rely on quantitative data to make decisions. If possible, learn about your audience's preference and tailor your approach accordingly.

IS THE STORY CONNECTED TO THE DATA?

To effectively merge data and storytelling, there has to be a relationship between the data you present and the narratives you share. Make sure that your stories clearly connect to the data you select.

DOES YOUR STORY CLARIFY THE DATA?

Data can be abstract. It can be hard to understand why your findings are important. To enhance your data, make sure that your stories clarify the complicated aspects of your findings.

DOES THE NARRATIVE SUPPORT THE DATA?

Storytelling is only effective if it supports your data or clearly illustrates a need. Before including narratives in your proposal, evaluate whether or not they support the data (and vice versa).

The Ethics of Data

Data is a powerful tool. It can dispel misconceptions and create opportunities. But data is imperfect. In many cases, data only provides a snapshot of our reality. As a result, using data to make decisions can create ambiguity.

Balancing data with experience is a critical part of ethical leadership. To protect individuals and communities, leaders need a framework for using data safely and effectively. Not sure where to start? Consider the following tips.

Ask Who Benefits (And Who Doesn't)

Every decision has consequences. When making data-driven decisions, make sure that you understand the positive and negative impact that each option will have on different stakeholders.

Consider Different Perspectives

We all have limitations, and this affects how we understand and use data. Before making a data-driven decision, get different perspectives. Ask for insights from people with vastly different experiences, identities, and roles.

Interrogate Contradictions

Contradictions between data and narratives aren't necessarily bad. Those contradictions may be a warning that the data doesn't provide a full picture of the situation. When there are contradictions between data and personal experiences, thoroughly investigate them.

Get Help When Needed

Leaders are faced with tough choices every day. If you're overwhelmed or unsure, seek the advice of a consultant. Outside experts can provide valuable perspectives and identify new options.

Theory to Practice

In today's competitive economy, leaders need effective, compelling data to support their decisions. In this publication, QCS identified multiple strategies for finding and using data effectively. Ready to get started? Here are some suggestions for applying these insights to your work.

- **Consider both data pathways.** Data comes in all shapes and sizes. To make the most of your opportunities, consider using existing and new data sets.

- **Merge data & storytelling.** While the need for data is increasing, stories still matter. Combine data and storytelling to improve your chances of success.

- **Use data wisely.** Data is useful, but it has limitations. When making decisions, use an ethical framework to balance data with lived experiences.

Quest Cultural Solutions

Get Started

QCS researchers are experts in their fields. Our projects are designed to meet your unique needs. Common methods include:

- Cost of living analyses
- Impact studies
- Quasi-experimental research
- Needs assessments
- Descriptive & inferential statistics
- Customer service surveys
- Benchmarking
- Focus groups & interviews
- Process or experience mapping
- Literature reviews
- Background research
- Program evaluation
- Community-based research
- Efficiency measurements
- Cost-benefit analyses

Contact us to get started!

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ABOUT QCS

Work is changing. Technology, the economy, & communities are evolving at unprecedented rates. For government agencies, businesses, and nonprofits, this is the perfect storm of high expectations and shifting needs.

With 20+ years of experience, QCS helps our partners thrive in this environment. We empower our clients to:

- Evaluate impact
- Deliver high quality programs
- Make data-driven decisions
- Build relationships

OUR SERVICES

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

CONSULTING

RESEARCH & ASSESSMENT

WORKFORCE TRAINING

CULTURAL EXPERTISE

PUBLICATIONS

Quest Cultural Solutions

WHO WE ARE

A 20-year veteran of public service, Beth Laux saw a growing number of agencies, organizations, and businesses struggle to meet the demands of their work. To address this issue, Beth founded Quest Cultural Solutions (QCS).

QCS is a registered LLC in the State of Ohio. We are eligible for federal and state small business, disadvantaged business, and woman-owned small business set-asides. Our mission is to help clients meet rising expectations. From research design to data analysis, we help our partners increase efficiency, access, and impact. Our experts bring cutting-edge insights to every project, creating effective recommendations and better outcomes.

Photo Credit: Ron Hall

Dr. Beth M. Laux, Ed.D.
President & CEO, Quest Cultural Solutions

DIFFERENTIATORS

EXPERIENCE
20+ years of research and public service expertise

INNOVATION
Support for new initiatives & routine operations

EFFICIENCY
Cost effective, customized, & scalable solutions

FORWARD THINKING
Initiatives & certifications for women, small business, DEI, & sustainability

FLEXIBILITY
Virtual, in-person, and hybrid service options

GLOBAL REACH
Experience with 15+ IAF countries & cultures

OUR COMMITMENTS & CERTIFICATIONS

Business lifts communities and economies. To do our part, QCS has commitments and earned certifications that help our community thrive.

Inclusion

QCS is an equal opportunity employer. We participate in the Ohio Affirmative Action Program. Our commitments include income equity and increasing access.

Small Business

QCS is a disadvantaged small business. We have certifications from the U.S. Small Business Administration, State of Ohio, & Ohio Department of Transportation.

Empowering Women

QCS is a proud woman-owned enterprise. We have certifications from the U.S. Small Business Administration, State of Ohio, & Ohio Department of Transportation.

Climate Change

QCS protects the planet through sustainable business practices. Last year, our efforts significantly reduced our carbon footprint.

SBA U.S. Small Business Administration — **EDWOSB CERTIFIED**

SBA U.S. Small Business Administration — **WOSB CERTIFIED**

Connect with QCS today!

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