

Transforming Data into Action for Executive Level Program Review

SHERRI ROSENBERG

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Have you ever looked at a report filled with data and wondered—**Who** is responsible? **What** is the information? **When** was it verified? **Where** is the source? **Why** is it important? These are some of the questions that can surface in any organization and many would be at a loss to answer. Sonoma County Human Services Department (SCHSD) sought a solution to these typical questions and found it in Trendex. Trendex was developed in-house and is a customized “monthly report of current and trended workloads, outcomes and staffing to inform themselves (Sonoma County), partners, and the community about the breadth and depth of their services.”¹

The Trendex report contains data about all areas of the Sonoma County Human Services Department, such as Adult and Aging Services, Economic Assistance, Employment and Training, Family, Youth and Children Services, Fiscal-Ops, Information Integration and the Office of the Director. Trendex provides comprehensive metrics in the form of executive summaries, as well as department-wide data snapshots. In short, Trendex has the capacity to deliver data to decision-makers in short or long reports and in segmented or complete digests.

Before the development of Trendex, many of SCHSD’s business decisions were made using anecdotal information, and policies were frequently based on single or isolated incidents. Trendex’s unique and detailed reports enable leaders to make solid decisions using current and historically validated data. They use the monthly report to respond to questions from the community, media and the Board of Supervisors; and they stand behind the data whether it is favorable or not.

Trendex continues to evolve as management and staff request new elements, as trends surface, and as welfare reform continues to change the shape of human service agencies. The addition of Trendex Supplements has allowed SCHSD’s Executive Team to use its bi-monthly data snapshots to dig deeply into program issues quickly and easily, as well as to focus on strategic and long-term planning.

As San Mateo County moves forward with making data-driven decisions, it should consider creating a Trendex style reporting tool to capture agency data in a central location.

¹ Trendex Purpose—report month March 2012

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Background

Sonoma County Human Services Department, like many Bay Area counties, was hit with major staff reductions between 2000 and 2004. This staffing challenge, along with the escalating backlog of pending Medi-Cal renewals and impending CalWIN implementation, sounded the alarm for change.

Building on the agency strength at tracking incoming demands for service, the department decided to direct its resources and energy towards the design and implementation of a best-in-class data system to capture and monitor ongoing demands, such as Medi-Cal renewals and other time-sensitive activities.

Sonoma County’s vision was to provide decision-makers with systematic and reliable data to drive informed versus reactionary decisions. They recognized the need to have data in order to measure

performance and outcomes, and to look at past trends to predict future goals.

In August 2007, the Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) division was created to design a system to realize this vision. The PRE division, initially composed of three full-time employees, conducted a data assessment to determine what was in place and what was needed. The assessment pointed to the need for an internal agreement that identified agency strategies, the desired outcomes, and how PRE could help leadership achieve these outcomes. This need was met by implementing a formal agreement within the agency called Datascript. It was approved by the Executive Team in November 2007. Datascript identifies how data, both internally and externally, will be employed to meet specific goals and services. There are several action steps within each of the strategies identified within their Datascript: The table below is an example of one:

Strategy A	Foster an HSD decision-making environment that values and successfully uses empirical evidence for strategic change.
Action 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Promote the effective and efficient use of accurate data.
HSD Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ HSD responds quickly and accurately to stakeholders’ requests for information and easily answers questions about types of services and numbers of clients. ▪ HSD data collection, analysis, and reporting is managed efficiently and without redundancy. ▪ Utilization of accurate data promotes HSD employee confidence and reduces reliance on anecdotal information and data myths.
PRE Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop automated, centralized, standardized and easily accessible reports (for instance, via a data warehouse and dashboards). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Maintain an inventory of HSD information (electronic, manual, and anecdotal). ○ Create a system to prioritize and create ad-hoc reports. ○ Manage data collection resources based on what should be measured (based on program) rather than what can be measured (based on technology or convenience). ▪ Develop and maintain trended information ▪ Assess HSD employee learning needs regarding the creation and use of information and coordinate learning opportunities.

With Datascrip in place and the needs assessment complete, the PRE staff began producing reports. Their initial reports were a compilation of many existing reports with only one month's worth of data, which were not very comprehensive, despite having 600 databases. The data needed to be synthesized, and program experts were needed to validate the data. To meet this objective, PRE increased its human resources from three to seven positions and transitioned from PRE to Planning Support within the Information Integration Division.

The first "official" Trendex report was created in March 2009. The report included all agency programs and 18 months of comprehensive data for each component. Trendex's report was robust and useful in 2009 and continues to be so with the regular additions of new data elements, as needs and demands change.

The Role of Trendex

Sonoma County saw the need to not only have data, but to pull existing data and its sources into a central location. Prior to the implementation of Trendex, the agency utilized a significant amount of resources to answer questions, such as "*How do you know?*" or to research inquiries such as "*Can we look at that?*" The answers to such questions produced results as varied as the data sources examined and as unique as every specialist who conducted the research. A consistent approach and strategy were needed. To that end, Program Support staff now collaborates with agency leaders to clearly identify data needs, seek the appropriate data queries, and work to validate the resulting data. This activity culminates in storing the data source for future reference by incorporating it into the Trendex for immediate use.

The department-wide Trendex reports provide high-level information to the Executive Team. For example, the March 2012 Trendex report was eighty-three pages long. The completeness of the Trendex report allows each director the ability to look closely at his/her program area and, if desired, compare those results with data from the entire agency as a

point of evaluation. To facilitate its use, the Trendex report has several sections.

The first section is the Executive Summary. This one page document displays 18 months of data and is by far the most utilized section by the directors and their Executive Team. To augment comprehension and recall a companion, a "definitions" page is included. The "definitions" page provides an explanation for each line of data including data definitions, data sources, the agency employee responsible for validation, and a notes section for any updates or changes to the data line.

The next section is the department-wide section. As before, the section displays data for the same 18 month period as the Executive Summary. Included in the department-wide section are five pages displaying program, staffing, training, safety, contracts and media data. Subsequent sections are broken down by the various divisions within the agency to provide specific target information for the directors.

During a recent Executive Team meeting, the directors reviewed the current Trendex report and discussed emerging trends. At this meeting, most of the directors reported that they searched Trendex daily for some type of information. The reason for Trendex's common usage at SCHSD is because the data is all in one location and is available at their fingertips in hard copy, soft copy or as Jerry Dunn, the agency director demonstrated, easily downloaded to an iPad. Prior to Trendex, the directors stated they used to guess or make assumptions. Now they have agency and community trends readily available. As a result, they are able to speak to issues and concerns that affect the community with rigorous internal and external data sources. They also reported that with the advent of Trendex, the agency's leadership had a better sense of where they want to go and the capacity to drive decisions quicker, faster, and more accurately in order to get there.

Program Directors and managers have also seen the benefits of Trendex. Economic Assistance; Medical, the County Medical Services Program (CMSP), Non-Assistance CalFresh, and General Assistance,

each have a cover page which outlines basic program regulations. This data allows day-to-day access to “mission critical” information, as well as to data from other programs they don’t directly manage. Access to a wide range of data encourages cross-dialogue and learning.

Specifically, the Economic Assistance management team uses the report to identify and justify priorities, compare information reported by staff, disprove fallacies, and assist in making informed decisions. They compare caseload trends and projections to justify staffing, and for use in union negotiations. When information is requested from other counties they are able to provide data immediately using Trendex. Rarely is there a need to request data since this report is so comprehensive.

The validation of data by program experts and the documentation of data sources has paved the way for Trendex to be considered a viable working report with integrity. The journey to implementation created an enormous culture change. Three years later everyone seems to agree that Trendex has developed into a tool that is necessary and vital to the operations of the Sonoma County Human Service Department.

Challenges

Using Trendex data in Performance Evaluations was cited as a challenge by supervisory staff. The supervisory staff was resistant to incorporate this type of information since they knew there was always more work than could be accomplished. Due to budgetary constraints most Bay Area counties continue to experience difficulty with staffing caseload sizes; thus, even the most seasoned staff struggle to accomplish all of the work coming through the doors. As an agency, Sonoma County Human Services Department made decisions surrounding what work would be a priority and used that data for employee performance measurements. They found the supervisory resistance was minimized due to acknowledging these concerns.

San Mateo County Discussion

After visiting with Sonoma County Human Services Department and meeting with their Executive Team, Economic Assistance management, and the Planning Support staff, it is apparent that Trendex was not created overnight; however, it has become a tool that is used agency-wide on a daily basis. It is a leading factor in most, if not all, of their decision making processes.

San Mateo County has many different dashboards in use within different program areas. Some of these dashboards resemble a single report card page, while others are quite lengthy. This suggests that the agency might benefit from having a consistent practice for capturing, displaying and analyzing data.

Using Sonoma County’s Trendex report’s Excel 2010 format, a draft of Quality Assurance data was created for Economic Self-Sufficiency and shared with the director and regional managers for review and comment. Subsequently, a second report was developed specifically for the Health Insurance and CalFresh Service Centers. The format of these “draft” reports and the type of data included was well received by the leadership of Economic Self-Sufficiency in both cases. An agreement was reached on next steps that involved the Economic Self-Sufficiency Regional Managers sharing these reports with their supervisory staff and using them to drive decisions around quality improvement.

Recommendations

Sonoma County Human Services Department reported tremendous gains in quicker and more effective decision-making as a result of investing in the planning support activities and the development of Trendex. Decisions are data-driven, and their outcomes are measurable and reportable. Trendex is a tool that provides data in a clear, concise and user-friendly format for decision-makers.

San Mateo County Human Services Agency can benefit from the lessons learned from Sonoma

County Human Services Department and should consider the following:

- Creating a reporting unit to synthesize all of the current agency reports and data requests;
- Establishing an agency Datascript to identify actions, outcomes and the role of a reporting unit; and
- Developing a report mechanism that is universal for the agency.

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