Data Intermediary
Organizational Rapid Self-Assessment Tool

By Jake Cowan

This tool was developed for data intermediaries to use as an organizational assessment. It is designed to be completed rapidly, with a focus on select elements of an organization's data intermediary work. The tool covers six areas of business practice that are important to assess and monitor regularly, as identified by data intermediary organizations in the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership.

- Contract and Project Management
- Sustainability
- Communications
- Continuous Improvement
- Staffing
- Governance

It is not a comprehensive tool that is inclusive of all important elements of business practices, but there are many other tools available to meet the demand for a comprehensive assessment.[1] The goal of this tool is to provide something that data intermediaries can use to take a quick step back from day-to-day work, assess the organization, identify promising practices to celebrate and promote, and identify challenges and sticking points.

It can be completed as a data intermediary staff team, which creates an opportunity to develop a common understanding about organizational operations and strategic direction. It can also be used by any individual staff member, who should report out on their findings to the rest of their team.

Findings from the assessment can inform both immediate and long-term decisionmaking about organizational operations.

Findings can also be used in more formal ways. For example, the assessment can be completed at two points in time (such as annually) and results compared over the two assessments. Or this tool can be completed as a precursor to a more comprehensive assessment process.

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[1] For example: https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/organizational-self-assessments

Contract and Project Management

Data intermediary services can be difficult for clients to understand. Clients often need significant guidance on how to work with data intermediaries. Client needs also change over the course of a project as they learn more about what is and is not possible. These dynamics can make it hard to contain costs on projects. However, projects that have cost overruns drain organizational resources, and take away from capacity to do other important work. The following areas of contract and project management represent questions and strategies NNIP Partner organizations observe to mitigate these challenges.

Areas of Practice	*Organizational Responses*
- What percent of contracts/grants are fully-executed before starting work? - What percent of contracts/grants are completed within their budget? - What percent of projects use project or task management software? - Are staff are required to track time spent by project or by task (or both)?	

Assessment and Action
What are our strengths in this area? What improvements can we make?

What are our next steps/action items?

Resources
The Business of a Local Data Intermediary: This resource includes discussion on contracting and developing scopes of work, budgeting for unplanned circumstances, and the use of project management tools.

Example Contract Agreement: From by Data Driven Detroit.

Example Contract Agreement: From by CI:NOW in San Antonio.

Sustainability

Cities and communities are always changing, and as they change the priorities of funders and local governments shift as well. The sustainability of data intermediary work is often tied to successfully adapting to the changing local environment. The elements of sustainability explored below includes strategic plan development and updating, monitoring a changing client mix, and proposal development decisions.

Areas of Practice	*Organizational Responses*

- When was the strategic plan for the organization or the data intermediary business unit last revised?
 	
- Is there a defined strategy or methodology for assessing whether to respond to proposals or requests?
 	
- Is there a guideline for limiting spending on proposal development? Is the guidance followed?
 	
- Describe your client mix in the past 12 months.
  o How many new clients?
  o How many returning clients?
 	
- Are cash reserves available to cover 3-6 months of payroll and organizational costs?	

Assessment and Action
What are our strengths in this area? What improvements can we make?

What are our next steps/action items?

Resources
NNIP Collection of Organizational Planning Materials: This page includes links to business and strategic planning tools and resources.

Example: NeighborhoodInfo DC Business Model Canvas and Plan: This is a specific example of a business plan developed by the NNIP Partner in Washington, DC (now known as Urban–Greater DC).

The Business of a Local Data Intermediary: Includes a suggested methodology for how budget resources for proposal development, and tools for deciding whether to pursue a specific proposal opportunity.

Communications

Identifying the best channels, formats, and methods to reach local constituencies and stakeholders is a key element of data intermediary work. The areas of communications explored below include identifying how communications goals are set and monitored, and whether data is collected in a customer relationship management (CRM) system to help manage communications.

Areas of Practice	*Organizational Responses*

- Is there a plan for communications?
  o When was the plan last updated?
 	
- Are there established targets or metrics for communications?
  o Is there a plan in place for monitoring them?
 	
- Is there a CRM to manage relationships with stakeholders and funders?	

Assessment and Action
What are our strengths in this area? What improvements can we make?

What are our next steps/action items?

Resources
Strategies for Social Media: A set to tools and framing materials from a session at the Fall 2018 NNIP Partners Meeting.

Approaches to Communications Planning: A robust set of tools and framing materials from a session at the Spring 2015 NNIP Partners Meeting.

Telling Your Story: Strategic Communications: Examples of communications strategies as presented at the Spring 2014 NNIP Partners Meeting.

Performance Management Tools: The NNIP guidance on performance management includes examples of ways to measure outputs and outcomes of targets outlined in communications strategies.

Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is an effort to define, measure, and regularly monitor how data intermediary work is making a difference, so that strategies can be adjusted and improved to help better serve the community. The elements of continuous improvement represented in questions that follow in this section assess whether performance measures have been defined and whether they are discussed as a staff team.

Areas of Practice	*Organizational Responses*
- Are there established performance measures for the organization or NNIP business unit? - Are there regular discussions with the team about performance measures? - Do you reach out to past clients to collect information on the impact of your work?	

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Resources
The tools available in these links include a guidebook and framework for performance management for data intermediaries, templates that can be used to develop performance measures, and examples of performance measurement tools used by NNIP partners.

- [The NNIP Guidebook: Monitoring Impact: Performance Management for Local Data Intermediaries](#)
- [Templates for beginning to implement performance management](#)
- Examples From Pittsburgh: [Performance Measurement Framework](#) and [Performance Measurement with Open Data](#)

Staffing

Data intermediaries depend on varied staff expertise, that can include data, policy, and technology expertise, community knowledge and relationships, and communications and outreach capabilities. Staff often need to learn new skills after joining data intermediary teams. The following practices represent ways NNIP partners manage and support staff to be successful in their work, as well as monitoring trends in staffing.

Areas of Practice	*Organizational Responses*

- Do staff have support for professional development?
 	
- Does the organization and NNIP unit have guidelines that support staff diversity and inclusion?
 	
- Does the organization and NNIP business unit have guidelines on:
  o onboarding new staff?
  o offboarding staff?
 	
- Is staff turnover, by staff level, reviewed annually?
 	
- Does the organization and NNIP unit have a succession plan?	

Assessment and Action
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Resources
NNIP Guide to Starting a Data Intermediary: Incudes discussion of staffing structures for data intermediaries.

NNIP Partners' Guide to the Network: This guide is intended to help new NNIP Partner staff learn the basics about the network and how to get involved.

Governance

A board or advisory group can have an important role in supporting data intermediary work, such as through making connections with funders or providing critical feedback on data intermediary products and services. The following elements of board governance include an assessment of what types of board governance are connected with data intermediary work, and whether that connection is positive.

Areas of Practice	*Organizational Responses*

- Is there an Advisory Board and/or Organizational Board?
 	
- How useful is the <u>Advisory</u> Board for:
  o Fundraising
  o Networking
  o Outreach/dissemination
  o Strategic planning
 	
- How useful is the <u>Organizational</u> Board for:
  o Fundraising
  o Networking
  o Outreach/dissemination
  o Strategic planning	

Assessment and Action
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Resources