**Reconnecting to a Fact-Based Ethos**

*What does success look like?*

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**Abstract**Rapid change at an unprecedented speed is the new normal. Globalization, interdependence and speed of change sparks an ever-increasing demand for credible and speedy information in all walks of life.

Government Statistical Agencies (GSAs) might to some extent have been living a relatively quiet life in comparison to other parts of government.

But those days are over. GSAs will to an ever-increasing extent find themselves in the midst of the wake of change. They will be called upon – within an increasingly volatile decision environment - to deliver timely, relevant and high-quality raw material for evidence-based decision-making

This calls for an explorative and innovative journey into the creation of next-generation visions and missions for GSAs.

This paper offers some food for thought, raises some of the key questions and suggest some answers to that GSAs need to address within the next couple of years.

**Keywords:** New Vision and Mission. The Welfare State Ethos. Business Development. Mission-Critical Competencies.

**1. *What does success look like for Government Statistical Agencies (GSAs)?***

Modern life sometimes appears out of control.

Globalization, interdependence and speed of change are creating ever-increasing demand for credible and rapid information for all parts of our lives. The Nordic welfare state itself is based on an innovative production and open exchange of fact-based knowledge.

But the very concept is under global pressure from powerful players who consider instability, mistrust and misinformation as one of the main pillars of their future political capital.

There are so many factors that point to the need for a new vision for the GSAs to coping with the future in a robust and proactive way.

And at the same time the new trends - at least – raise an urge to taking a stand and pushing back on the Internet trolls, the misinformation factories, the prejudices of public debate. To assume a much more active role in a value-driven debate built on facts. On data. On a joint understanding of what knowledge is built on.

**2. How do we re-subscribe to this fundamental principle of democratic dialogue?**

The large public databases are increasingly becoming the focus of the welfare state's knowledge production. There will be a need - in an increasingly volatile decision-making environment - to provide timely, high-quality, relevant raw material for data-driven decision making.

This happens at a time where a small number of global agents are competing for dominance in the global data market place. Some of them far more influential than small Nordic states (the likes of Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Google).

At the same time many private companies and public organizations are struggling to design future business models both for releasing data and for using them effectively and ethically.

How do GSAs react to this challenge? In a globalized and volatile environment.

How do we facilitate the discovery and the virtues of statistical literacy which we - by the way - believe so firmly in?

A very simple question for the large state statistics agencies (GSAs) - in the light of this development - will be: How does success look like in the future?

**3. A citizen's perspective**

We like the classical concept of education and the information ideal of personal insight, authority and self-determination, and a deeply rooted democratic approach to the individual's participation in social life.

Being human means being aware of the cultural, social, historical and technological context in which you are embedded.

Thus, there is a great demand for everyone to equip herself with the basic resources needed to navigate out into the society of the future.

**4. And then we add "digital":**

The digital age is a new technological context, and here too, the virtues of education must be ensured - from trust and empathy to respect, responsibility and authority to community ownership and democratic citizenship.

Digital formation should contribute to fostering resourceful and autonomous individuals who use reason and critically relate to themselves, the local community and to society as a whole. Otherwise, democracy and freedom will be in dire needs in the age of digitization. Digital mastery and judgment therefore are important goals for digital education.

We are all involved in the great experiment of living in the digital age. No one is an expert, we are all novices with different conditions and in different ways, depending on who we are. The time has come to look at the new structures, conditions and paths to education and formation, so that in the future we among other things can create not a SoMe but a SoWe that brings us together in a human-centered way.

Digital formation ultimately points to the ability of acquiring an overall understanding of and insight into how to behave and to act as a human being in the structures and dynamics of the information age.

**5. The Challenge**

* Can we establish a whole new ethics based on a combination of the traditional concept of education and a new digital consciousness?
* And where do you look for credible facts in a busy everyday life?
* Can we provide insight in a quick, accurate and easy way that facilitates and qualifies the democratic dialogue?
* And perhaps the crucial question: Can we win?  
  Can we re-establish a generally aceepted regime where you have to know something before you mean something. Where wisdom and evidence is the oil of conversation.  
  Or will misinformation, fake news and echo chambers prevail?

**6. A new vision and mission**

The time to radically rethink the GSAs quite fundamentally might be now.

And it might start with a zero-based design process: If GSAs did not exist and no one had an understanding or recollection of what a GSA is, how would we design the GSAs of tomorrow?

Future strategies require beyond any reasonable doubt a new and exploratory mind-set. Here are a few key questions:

* What will be the core task of the future?  
  Does authenticity, credibility and ethics become increasingly central assets for GSAs?
* If data quality is the key value propositions for the GSAs, is this fact reflected in their investment pattern?   
  Are we constantly investing heavily data quality?
* Can these values ​​be reconciled with delivering data to a much wider stakeholder community than today in real-time and in sufficient quality?
* What does a partner strategy look like?  
  Would it be the virtues of embracing the new world of social media and external data silos?
* How do you bulid enough sex appeal to attract the best and the brightest?  
  Not only data scientists, but also mission-critical competencies such as method development specialists, IoT people and communication experts.

**7. And on the wild side...**

* How do the GSAs become a visible part of everyone's everyday life? How do the GSAs enter the battle for our attention?   
  The weather forecasts are a good example of large data suppliers that is an integral part of everybody’s daily life throughout the Nordic region.
* What would happen if all data was free or if external parties were free to add data to the GSAs?
* Could GSAs take an open stand as Fake News Fighter - a much more proactive and visible role in shaping public debate on key agendas based on an undisputable and uncompromising commitment to facts?
* Should GSAs engage in business development on key issues such as the SDGs, climate change, smart cities, pandemics, chronic diseases, etc.?
* Do the GSAs have the right communicative skills and competences to be a competitive player in a global market for facts and news, moving at a furious pace?  
  Example: Cool websites, Youtube Channels, Instragram Profiles.
* How does the GSA create sufficient political capital to assume a visible and significant role as a supplier of facts in the general media circus?   
  In light of the fact that the vast majority of grants come from public funds, read: changing political constellations.

**8. And at the end: The unthinkable**

* What about the unthinkable: GSAs without data?  
  Data collection and infrastructure is outsourced to the market. And the GSAs become clearing houses or authorizing authorities that monitor the information market and issue quality certificates to those who offers access data or produce and publish knowledge.

# **9. How to move forward**

There is no simple quick-fix to the challenges mentioned above. And we do certainly not have all the answers

But we know for sure that It will take a consistent and long-term effort of turn-around management to bring the GSAs into a position where they will be a natural and integrated part of everybodies life.

Some of the question above roam into a political turf, and might be difficult just to implement by the sole force of the GSAs

But a lot can be done by moving towards a more extrovert and visible organization culture. By for instance offering more and easier approachable user interfaces that help high and low, children and adults, everybody actually, to fact check the enormous stream of information hitting us every hour of the day.

Why do we google (a verb commonly used by everybodiy) everything? Why don’t we go to the local source, the national GSA, and look for facts, news and wisdom?

Part of the journey will involve the introduction of a wide range of practices on how to get new knowledge across to the public. Methods like gamification, hackathons, virtual reality and 4D printing might attract customers (!) that normally would not look in your direction.

It will also consist of using tools and tricks from the marketing tool box to creating to a much higher degree the nescessary visibility and relevance. And to gain internal acceptance of that this is a vital part of the DNA of every modern GSA.

This is not a zero-fault game. GSAs need to be willing to invest in innovation and to crossing new rivers and trying out new roads. And to fast-forward towards new directions and shift investments around at an until now unseen agile speed.

**10. Driving innovation in GSAs**

Making innovation a success in GSAs is a key task. Innovation does not happen in straight lines or come about as a result of rigorous plans. And change often invokes emotions and sometimes even ressistance.

Innovation needs to be enabled by inspirational and inclusive leadership on all levels and to be nurtured and rewarded by a supporting culture.

A way to jump start innovation in GSAs might be through four consecutive steps:

1. Define the innovation agenda  
   Recognize that there will be a lot of starting points to this journey. Develop a shared perception of where the organization is going. Do not underestimate the need for a constant flow of communication to everybody. And design operating models that the vast majority of the staff can subscribe to.
2. Set up the organization for innovation  
   GSAs are big organizations, They cannot be set up for innovation as a whole.  
   Processes and incentives should be in place to encourage new ideas and bring them to life. Set up small innovation hubs and projects. Experiment with innovation incubators just like start-ups do. Bring in external experts where needed. And ensure that good projects are deployed fast.
3. Support the embassadors of change  
   An education program should be installed so a growing number of colleagues are equipped to successfully drive innnovation projects. And make in clear and visible that the leadership is behind innovators.
4. Live and symbolize that innovation is the-never-ending-story  
   \* Practice what you preach  
   \* Put the innovation projects on the opening landing page of your Intranet  
   \* Make reporting on innovationprojects a part of your annual reports.  
   \* Celebrate your victories, - also the small ones.  
   \* Arrange a recurring innovation day.  
   \* Please proceeed.....

**11. This is (also) an executive game**

All of this will takes stamina and courage. And determination to take on the big boys already established in the data hood.

And it all starts by the top management. This change must come from visionary and bold top executives determined to bring GSAs back to the center of the information stage.

But it does not end there. Everybody must get on board. And most importantly by embracing and internalizing a new and much broader purpose.

One positive side-effect of this journey most ertainly will be that Generation X and Z to a larger degree will recognize GSAs as a great place to work. Recruiting some of the top performers might be much easier if the signal goes up that this is an organization with a purpose and a vision that very vividly and directly supports the greater good of society.

The GSAs have so much to offer to the democratic dialogue that is at the very essence of the Nordic welfare state model. Part of the societal contract in the Nordics is built on trust. And it start with agreeing about the facts.

It is far to important to leave the information jungle to the data giants, internet trolls or to forces that just behave badly by default. Please do throw yourself in there with the declared aim of being a stronghold for democracy and everything that goes with it.

We need you more than ever to take this stand.

We are looking forward to the debate with all of you.

*Game on* in August in Helsinki.