What Makes a Community Action Data Practitioner?



COMPETENCIES OF A COMMUNITY ACTION DATA PRACTITIONER

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INTRODUCTION

In late 2020, Forbes proclaimed the advent of the Data Age, and argued that to thrive in this new era every organization needs a complete view of its data — real-time insight, with the ability to take real-time action. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated existing trends in technology forcing changes in every aspect of our lives and precipitating a sea change in the way organizations operate including their use of technology and data. Community Action Agencies (CAAs) across the country had to adapt rapidly; many began using technology to help them continue serving their communities. In this upheaval and in the present context of the Data Age, CAAs need to improve their agency's data capacity. Community Action Data Practitioners are the linchpin of that capacity.

What is a Community Action Data Practitioner?
Simply put, a Community Action Data Practitioner is a CAA staffperson(s) who has a significant role in data translation: they translate the significance of data across the organization and they help translate the data into actionable information. For these reasons, Data Practitioners operate in a unique intersection of CAA operations and also require a unique set of competencies. This document identifies three key areas in which Data Practitioners provide CAA leadership and three levels of data competencies (basic, intermediate and advanced) that are the key skills that Data Practitioners need to support data-informed Community Action operations in each of those areas. Furthermore, because different data skills need to reside with different staff roles and responsibilities, it is important to disentangle the actual data competencies for staff from the old concept that a single "data person" would simply be the holder of all these competencies. These competencies, roles and responsibilities are likely shared by multiple staff.

In this paper we propose a set of competencies that can be used to hire and develop a cadre of Community Action Data Practitioners.

According to the SHRM (Society of Human Resource Management), "A competency is a cluster of highly interrelated attributes, including knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that give rise to the behaviors needed to perform a given job effectively." "Abilities" is also sometimes replaced with the word Attitude. We'll use both Abilities and Attitude in talking about competences in this paper. Competencies are sometimes split into 2 primary categories: Knowledge Competencies, which are practical or theoretical understanding of subjects; and Ability Competencies, which are natural or learned capacities to perform the activities of the job.

AREAS OF COMMUNITY ACTION DATA PRACTITIONERS' COMPETENCY

Community Action Data Practitioners need to have some competencies in the following 3 Major Areas: Agency Knowledge, Data Analysis, and Leadership

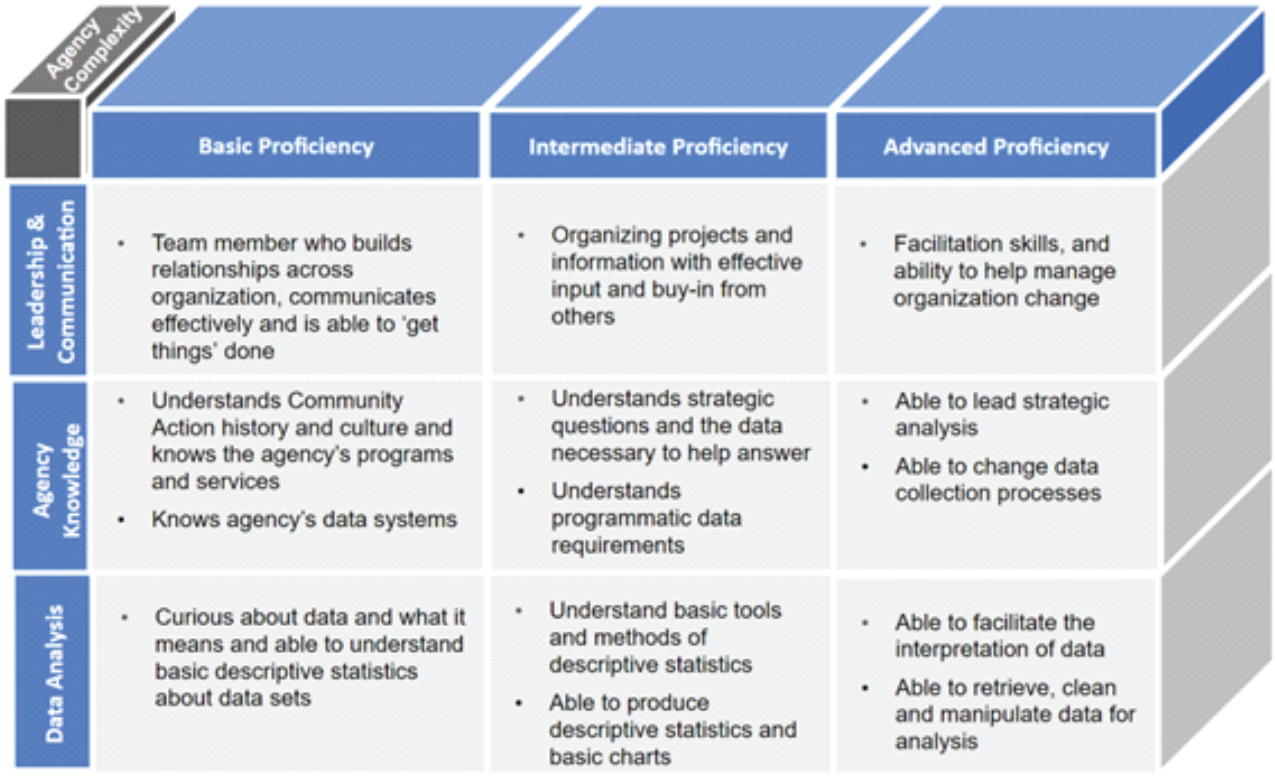
and Communication. Their work happens at the intersection of these areas.

CAA Data Practitioners can operate at different levels of proficiency in the above areas. In the following section, we identify possible competencies at the following three levels:

- Basic
- Intermediate
- Advanced

Depending on the level of the position, the approach to fulfilling these needs and the complexity of the agency, varying levels of proficiency in the key areas may be necessary for one or more positions in the agency.

Staff can also supplement their own proficiency in these key areas with other people's abilities; in other words, the agency can have members of a team that work together to cover all of these competencies. However, CAA Data Practitioners need a basic awareness of the different areas AND some skill in facilitation and communication. CAA Data Practitioners at any level of proficiency will *act as a "translator" between program concerns and data points; collection methods and data/technology; and back to program operations.* It is also worth noting that based on interviews with successful data practitioners in CAAs, many Data Practitioners with higher level competencies had previous work experience in the fields of education, training and/or consulting.



Leadership, Teamwork, and Communication

Basic	Intermediate	Advanced
Has an open, engaging, and collaborative leadership style	Listens attentively to people's ideas and concerns	Skilled in bringing groups together and facilitating problem solving and creating thinking processes that lead to new approaches, systems, structures and methods
Is trusted and has friendly relationships with people across the agency despite sometimes having to highlight opportunities for improvement	Able to break large goals into component pieces and then support the implementation of pieces	Works cooperatively with others to produce innovative solutions
Predisposition to '*get it done*' and learn along the way	Develops and implements plans to collect data across agency	Basic knowledge of strategies for change management
Demonstrates openness to new ideas including new structure, processes and technologies	Can communicate data issues and solutions to front line data entry staff	Basic knowledge of principles of CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement)
Ensures that others involved in a project or effort are kept informed about developments and plans including recording meeting outcomes and action items	Exerts exceptional effort over time to achieve a goal	Proposes new approaches, methods, or technologies
Maintains a sense of optimism under difficult circumstances	Has a strong sense of urgency about solving problems and getting work done	Can effectively communicate data issues, needs and meaning to leadership
Does what they commit to doing	Organizes information or materials for others	Effective in influencing agency leadership regarding data needs
	Develops clear goals for meetings and projects	Able (and inclined) to create graphic diagrams showing a systems view of a situation.

Agency Knowledge

Basic	Intermediate	Advanced
Basic understanding of the history of CAAs	Understand agency-wide perspective and agency strategic questions and needs	Able to apply strategic analysis and strategic planning principles
Foundational understanding of outcomes, measurement and accountability systems such as ROMA	Understand process barriers to improving data quality and use	Understand the organizational structure and the key stakeholders in the agency which are necessary to make significant changes in organization processes
Knowledge of agency, its history, programs and operations	Able to connect agency strategic questions to data collection processes	Knowledge of how to influence data collection processes in various departments in agency
Knowledge of agency's primary services and outcomes	Knowledge of the client data collection processes used throughout the organization	Ability to work with others to implement changes to support agency wide data goals
High level understanding of how programs within the agency operate	Understanding of programmatic client data requirements across agency	Understand what the constraints and options are for data entry in various client data systems in use by the agency
Know which data systems are used to store client data in the agency and why they are in use	Ability to extract data from various client data systems	
Be able to locate specific data points in variety of agency used client data systems	Able to propose applicable data points contained in various data systems that could be used in analysis	
	Understand high level data models used by various agency client data systems	

Data Analysis		
Basic	**Intermediate**	**Advanced**
	Basic understanding of different types of data (see descriptive statistics)	Able to guide others in the accurate interpretation of data
Be intrinsically motivated to investigate reasons why the data results are what they are	Basic understanding of how to create metrics	Able to retrieve data, create relevant data sets and perform simple descriptive statistics
Value the importance of data-driven decision making	Understanding of measures of central tendencies and how to use them to understand sets of data	Able to write basic SQL queries, or data queries in general
Able to accurately describe the data in bar charts, line graphs, comparison charts and other visual presentations of client data	Able to use basic data analysis to identify outliers in key data points in data sets	Able to use statistical techniques to handle outliers
Able to identify missing data from client data ystems	Able to accurately interpret data	Able to use statistical techniques to weight data points and/or create composite metrics
	Able to use Microsoft Excel (or other software) to create appropriate charts and graphs	Understand difference between descriptive statistics, inferential statistics and predictive statistics

SAMPLE DATA MANAGER JOB PROFILE

Agencies will need to determine their approach to fulfilling their data capacity needs based on their complexity, size, and strategic direction. Below we offer an example of taking the competencies from the Basic and Intermediate Level to craft a Job Profile. This is just a sample to demonstrate how to use the competencies above.

Responsibilities

- Lead agency's data analysis efforts including retrieving data from various data systems and producing charts and graphs to summarize data
- Develop clear consistent data collection plans in collaboration with program directors
- Document data collection processes including identifying key data points used in agency data analysis and 'where' those data points are collected and stored
- Work with departments to identify both external reporting needs and internal strategic questions to push agency's data driven decision making goals forward
- Meet with departments to review data and 'make meaning' of that data
- Identify opportunities for improvement in data collection, data quality, data processing and use.
- Complete the Annual CAP Plan and CSBG Annual Report

Competencies

Outlook

- Be intrinsically motivated to investigate reasons for data found in analysis
- Value the importance of data-driven decision making
- Is trusted and has friendly relationships with people across the agency despite sometimes having to highlight opportunities for improvement
- Predisposition to '*get it done*' and learn along the way
- Demonstrates openness to new ideas including new structure, processes and technologies
- Maintains a sense of optimism under difficult circumstances
- Does what they commit to doing

Skills

- Able to accurately describe data in bar charts, line graphs, comparison charts and other visual presentations of client data using excel or other software
- Able to connect agency strategic questions to data collected by agency and the processes within the agency that collect that data
- Has an open, engaging, and collaborative leadership style
- Able to communicate with others involved in a project or effort and to ensure that team members are kept informed about developments and plans
- Able and inclined to recording meeting outcomes and action items
- Listens attentively to people's ideas and concerns

- Able to break large goals into component pieces and then support the implementation of pieces
- Organizes information or materials for others

Knowledge

- Basic understanding of different types of data (see descriptive statistics) including understanding of measures of central tendencies and how to use them to understand sets of data
- Understand data models and schemas
- Understand why particular data systems are in use by the agency and how to access information from those systems
- Knowledge of agency's primary services and outcomes
- High level understanding of how programs within the agency operate
- Basic understanding of the history of CAAs
- Foundational understanding of outcomes, measurement and accountability systems such as ROMA

Experience / Education

1. Project Management
2. Teaching and/or facilitation experience
3. Extensive work experience with spreadsheets and/or business intelligence software
4. Experience in human services field

Preferred: Course work in statistics, data analysis or policy analysis

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The Promise of Community Action

Community Action changes people's lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities, and makes America a better place to live. We care about the entire community, and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.