

Eurostat's Approach to Quality

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1. Introduction

Quality has become a buzz word nowadays. Everybody speaks about quality, nobody is against quality. Official statistics have to cope with this general development. They get pressure from its "stakeholders" to follow successful paths from the private sector.

Based on the experience of National Statistical Institutes, Eurostat launched its quality approach more than seven years ago. The paper describes the current state of the approach, Eurostat's definition of quality, the vision underlying the approach, quality related instruments and derived improvement actions, a summary of successes, failures experienced and lessons learnt so far, and will give an outlook to the next years.

2. Definition of (statistical) quality

The starting point of Eurostat's current definition of quality of statistics is the ISO norm 8402, which defines quality as "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs". This very general definition puts the user and his needs at the centre of all considerations. Looking at the term "quality" from the point of view of a user of international statistics has led Eurostat to a definition of (statistical) quality that is composed of seven dimensions: relevance; accuracy; timeliness and punctuality; accessibility and clarity; comparability; coherence; completeness. It is worth noting that trade-offs exist between the different dimensions. The most obvious example is the trade-off between timeliness and accuracy.

3. Visions and basic concepts

Eurostat has to satisfy its users inside and outside the European Commission. The key factors to achieve this general goal are a qualified, motivated and satisfied work force, and the delivery of high quality data from the suppliers, i.e. national and regional institutions in the Member States such as statistical offices, but also ministries and other institutions.

These aspects are core elements of Eurostat's business plan, entitled its "Corporate Plan". This plan incorporates Eurostat's mission, aims, roles, values, objectives, strengths and weaknesses as well as threats and opportunities (Eurostat 2001). It further includes short-term and mid-term objectives of the office currently ranging until 2003 and 2005 respectively. In order to achieve the objectives of the Corporate Plan some horizontal activities spreading across the whole office are considered helpful. Eurostat has launched a horizontal initiative for this purpose summarised under the title "Qualistat" which stands for quality in statistics.

It is difficult to develop and follow-up such a comprehensive approach without a sound theoretical foundation. Eurostat has decided to follow the general considerations of the Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy. As these principles are still fairly general and not easily applicable to the day-to-day business, Eurostat saw the need for a more concrete theoretical model and decided to go for the EFQM model developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management.

4. The implementation tool: the Qualistat initiative

The problem of transforming these tools for the purpose of the daily work has been tackled in Eurostat in two different ways. Firstly, Eurostat has developed a set of instruments that have been made at the disposal of the staff. Secondly, concrete improvement actions have been launched based on the results of the application of these instruments or other sources.

Table 1 summaries the instruments currently available and their contents. It might be worth noting that all instruments have been developed in-house (in some cases with the help of external consultants). Another important point is the fact that none of the tools are nowadays compulsory. The general strategy is to offer instruments of high quality so that the staff feels motivated to use them.

Table 1 Qualistat instruments

Instrument	Description
Unit development plan	Corporate Plan at unit level
User satisfaction surveys	Measurement of needs and the level of satisfaction of internal and external users
Process management	Harmonised approach for the management of processes
Quality reports	Measurement of the quality of data and other products according to the different dimensions of quality
Staff opinion survey	Measurement of staff satisfaction and motivation
Training	Special training events on quality
CYBERNEWS	Intranet based internal communication facilities
Office-wide performance indicators	Set of indicators to measure Eurostat's progress with respect to achieving its objectives
Project management	Harmonised approach for the management of projects
Rolling Reviews	Evaluation of the statistical products
Current good practices	Establishment of a set of current good practices with respect to a variety of aspects of Eurostat's working life

The second way to make the office benefit from its quality approach is through specific "improvement actions". Concrete examples comprise a strategy for a better communication of decisions of the management board, improvements of the structure of meetings with the Member States or a training kit for managers.

The experience with improvement actions in Eurostat is up to now fairly positive though some pitfalls need to be avoided. General discussions about quality in Eurostat normally lead to the creation of sometimes excessive expectations. Eurostat had and still has the tendency to launch too many improvement actions at the same time, or in parallel, in an uncoordinated way. Another crucial aspect concerns their follow-up and implementation. Eurostat had to learn that it is not

enough to launch such actions. They also have to be followed-up, the progress needs to be measured and reported in time, and their implementation pursued.

5. Successes, failures and lessons learnt

Seven and a half years of action have led to quite a number of successes though they might not always be visible at first glance. The reason for the lack of visibility of some successful developments might be that the parties involved are already that familiar with them that they are no longer recognised as successes.

On the other hand, it is a long and stony path to quality, and Eurostat is still far away from the level of quality it wants to reach. The lessons Eurostat learnt in quality management in the last years, can be summarised as follows:

- The involvement of the top management is crucial;
- Resistance from at least part of the staff usually accompanies the introduction of a quality approach;
- Eurostat's current status with respect to quality management was not possible without the support of qualified external consultants;
- The most crucial elements in Eurostat's way to quality are communication, training, concrete (follow-up) actions and the involvement of all staff members who wish to do so;
- Decisions always have to be based on objective information;
- Theoretical concepts and developed instruments have to demonstrate their relevance for the day-to-day objectives;
- Improvement actions have to be governed by the principle not to launch too many actions at the same time;
- The use of a theoretical framework with TQM as the basic philosophy and the EFQM model as the underlying model for the daily work has been proven useful.

6. Next steps

There is still a long way to go. Eurostat's quality approach is now in its consolidation phase. It is crucial in this phase to keep the momentum. Eurostat has identified several areas for further activities in the next years, besides perfection of available instruments and improvement actions, that should help keep the momentum going:

- The level of integration of the quality approach into the daily life of the office;
- A lot is still to be done to create an office-wide quality culture;
- An overall inventory of Eurostat's strengths and weaknesses against the EFQM model;
- Eurostat may have to develop new tools to close existing data gaps;

- Quality thinking has to become a characteristic of the European Statistical System (ESS) comprising all institutions contributing to the production of EU statistics;
- Quality management should be on the agenda of statistical meetings around the world;
- Process thinking has to be improved in Eurostat.

REFERENCE

Eurostat (2001), Corporate Plan 2001, Luxembourg (internal document; forthcoming)

RESUME

It is some seven years ago that Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Communities, has launched its quality initiative. The paper describes its current status. Its starting point is Eurostat's definition of (statistical) quality and the visions and basic concepts used in the initiative. The core of the paper consists of the instruments developed and the follow-up improvement actions. At the end, successes, failures and lessons learnt are described, as are the next steps planned in the future.

Il y a environ sept ans qu'Eurostat, l'Office Statistique des Communautés Européennes a lancé l'initiative qualité. Le document décrit la situation actuelle. Le point de départ concerne la définition de la qualité (statistique) d'Eurostat ainsi que les idées et concepts de base utilisés dans cette initiative. Les instruments développés et les actions de suivi des améliorations constituent le corps du document. A la fin sont décrits les succès, les échecs et les leçons retenues, ainsi que les prochaines étapes planifiées.