International Labour Organization

Highlights

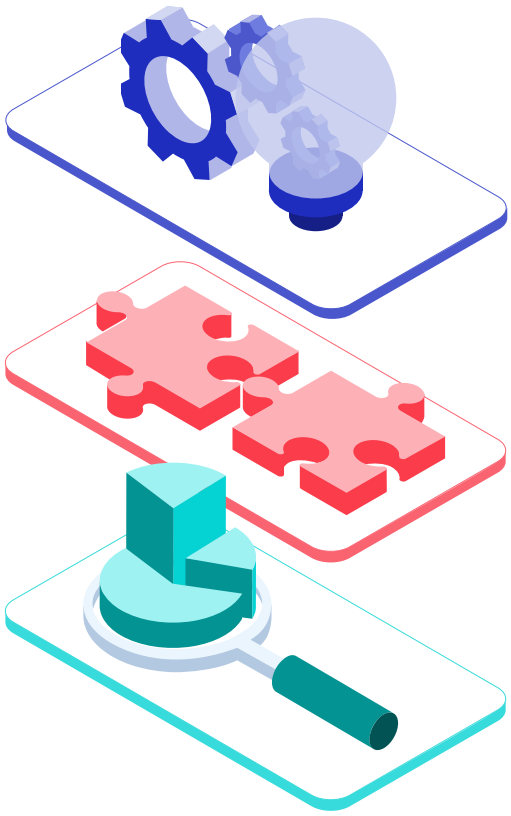
Towards data as a strategic asset: Data management practices, challenges, and opportunities for employer and business membership organizations

June 2021

Employer and business membership organizations (EBMOs) need to innovate and adapt their members' business models, including operating and governance practices, to operate effectively in digitally enabled, fast-changing environments. Like the businesses they represent and serve, EBMOs face continual competition from new actors, new pressures, and ongoing changes in the world of business. In the midst of such change, EBMOs must define and deliver a new value proposition to their members to ensure that they remain relevant, representative and influential.

Managing their data as a strategic asset can help EBMOs achieve these goals.[1]

The business case for using and managing data as a strategic asset



Data are perhaps the most powerful, yet the most underutilized and poorly managed organizational asset EBMOs have today.

For EBMOs, data are a source of knowledge and insights that can support effective decisions and actions at the strategic, organizational and operational levels. Data-informed choices can lead to a greater number of higher quality and more effectively tailored services for members; increased influence vis-à-vis other stakeholders; and thus competitive advantage with respect to other membership associations.

> For us to innovate, for us to push government, for us to grow our membership, we need data. We need a lot more data, we need to analyze the data to develop a better understanding of the issues we're dealing with.
>
> **EBMO Board Member**

[1] The infographic summary is based on the findings of the ILO report *Towards using data as a strategic asset: A study of current data management practices, challenges, and opportunities for employer and business membership organizations* (ILO-ACTEMP, 2021)

Data as a Strategic Asset (DaaSA)

Data-informed adaptation to change

Analytics is no longer only the domain of large global enterprises with deep pockets. Realistic solutions for the strategic management and use of data are within reach of EBMOs. By using data to support decision-making and improve organizational performance, EBMOs can adapt to or even anticipate change.

Data-driven strategic decision-making

Data can help EBMO leaders new discern advocacy and service opportunities; data can support timely and appropriate initiatives. Accurate and up-to-date data on business trends, member interests, and secretariat capabilities support senior leaders in evaluation of opportunities and their prioritization of strategic goals.

Data-enhanced organization design and management

Data can help EBMO managers monitor and manage EBMO human resources, work practices and internal operations to meet long-term EBMO goals. Accurate and accessible data about ongoing operations activities and performance can support managers in making decisions about resource allocation, changes to business processes, and staff recruiting, training and development.

Data-improved operations

Data help EBMO staff members make appropriate and effective choices quickly, and thus deliver value through each business department transaction. Timely, accurate and complete data support secretariat staff members in responding to such matters as member queries, registering participants for training, coordinating events, disseminating business-relevant news, initiating surveys, and analysing the responses. With access to internal operations data, individual staff can come to better understand how to directly monitor, evaluate and improve their own work processes.

Data-enhanced services and products

Given their unique and trusted role, EBMOs can collect dedicated, hard-to-replicate data regarding member needs and concerns that can be used to enhance and expand such services and products as the following:

- Data-informed advocacy: accurate, complete and relevant data collected through EBMOs' proprietary relationships supports persuasive evidence-based advocacy efforts.
- Data-infused services: segment or industry-specific data can yield focused perspectives and refined insights to offer as supplementary layers to existing member educational services, and
- Data-based knowledge products: EBMO-proprietary data can yield novel insights and knowledge products to potentially scaffold new revenue streams.

Data centric practices

The digital economy favours organizations that are decisive, data-driven, innovative, open to learning, and customer-centric. By developing the data-centric practices that scaffold high performance in this environment, EBMOs can thrive and grow.

Data asset liability

The protection of data is vital to innovation and competitive advantage. Just like financial and human resources, data must be managed efficiently, ethically and effectively toward EBMO missions. High standards of data confidentiality, security and protection are critical to ensure the value of data is not eroded and to manage legal liabilities and compliance.

Data as a strategic asset

Positioning data as a strategic asset involves the following:

- recognizing the potential value of data;
- safeguarding that value through intentional collection, storage, retrieval and analysis of data;
- ensuring data becomes central to decision making and part of the EBMO's competitive advantage; and
- sharing that value through thoughtful dissemination of data-based insights.

Research sources

Survey

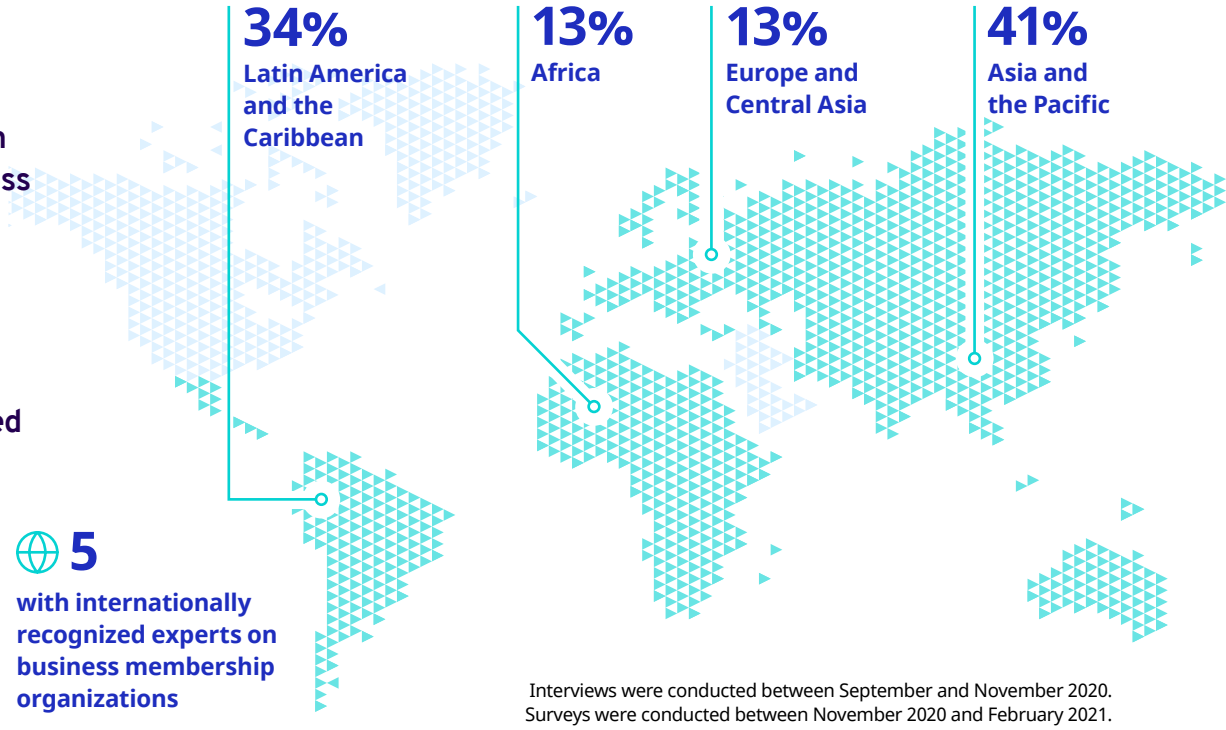
112 respondents from 66 EBMOs in 49 countries across four regions

34% Latin America and the Caribbean

13% Africa

13% Europe and Central Asia

41% Asia and the Pacific



Interviews

25 semi-structured interviews

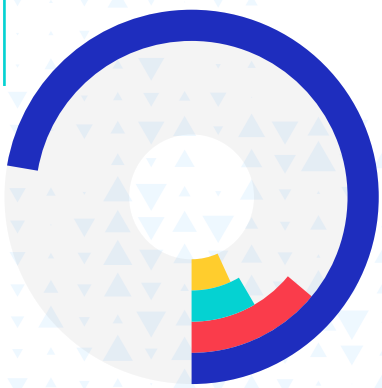
20 with staff and board members of four EBMOs in Asia and the Pacific

5 with internationally recognized experts on business membership organizations

Interviews were conducted between September and November 2020.
Surveys were conducted between November 2020 and February 2021.

Types

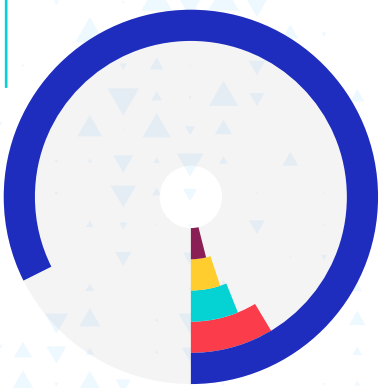
Different types of employer and business member organizations took part in the survey.



- **71%** Employers' organization
- **16%** Chamber of commerce
- **7%** Amalgamated
- **6%** Business coalition / alliance

Regional representation

Respondents represented national, regional and sectoral organizations.



- **81%** National organization
- **7%** Local/provincial organization
- **5%** Sectoral organization
- **4%** Foreign chamber or business council
- **3%** Global organization

Sizes

Small EBMOs with ten staff or fewer; medium EBMOs with 11–20 staff; large EBMOs with more than 21 staff.

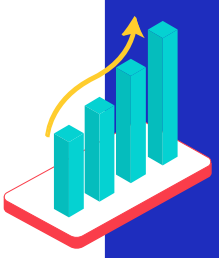
- **42%** Large
- **37%** Small
- **21%** Medium

Roles

The survey targeted respondents in different EBMO roles, including board members, CEOs, department managers, and other staff.

> Data is perhaps the most powerful, yet underutilized and poorly managed organizational asset EBMOs have today

32%	28%	25%	6%	5%	4%
Department manager	Staff member	CEO	Support/admin/ finance staff	Member of the board or executive committee	Other



Defining Data

Data can comprise raw facts and values recorded in a structured fashion, such as in databases or spreadsheets, but can also include all unstructured informational resources used or created by EBMOs, such as written or spoken correspondence, documents, reports, or other sources of content, whether in physical or digital forms and whether created intentionally or as the by-product of another activity.

Current EBMO data use and management

Data strengths

Data quantity

EBMOs generate and use significant and increasing quantities of digital data in their domains of operation.

Range of data

EBMOs have access to a wide range of data on different topics to make decisions. Most widely available to EBMOs are data on government policies and regulations, followed by operational data, data about member views, and perspectives on the regulatory environment and policies.

Personal experience as data resource

EBMO strategic decision-making drew on the personal experiences of board members who viewed their historical work experiences as strengths in their respective roles. Most CEOs and board members reported consulting other board members (66 per cent) or relying on their own experience (53 per cent) to make decisions.

Agile EBMO responses to member needs

EBMOs used their positions to assess member needs and responded quickly with topical offerings. They played an especially key role during the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, organizing webinars on the need for digital transformation, ON how to move a business online, or on employee health and safety obligations.

Available data and ease of use

Data should be available, easy to use and applicable to task. EBMO staff at all levels agreed that the data they did have was understandable and relevant for what they needed to do.

Surveyed EBMO CEOs, board members and managers reported the availability of different types of information to make decisions in their roles.

Availability of information to make decisions, global results:

- **74%** Operational data
- **68%** Members' feedback on organizational services
- **73%** Members' advocacy and service needs
- **68%** Members' expectations of organization
- **83%** Government polices and regulation
- **73%** Membership details
- **58%** Labour market indicators

Data limitations

Data deficiencies were reported in the following areas:

Data access at all levels

EBMO decision-makers at all levels noted their access to quantitative data was insufficient. Only 12 per cent of EBMO leaders say they have "a lot" of quantitative data to make strategic decisions.

Confidence in data accuracy

Nearly half (47 per cent) CEOS and board members lacked confidence in the accuracy of the data that they did have for strategic decision-making.

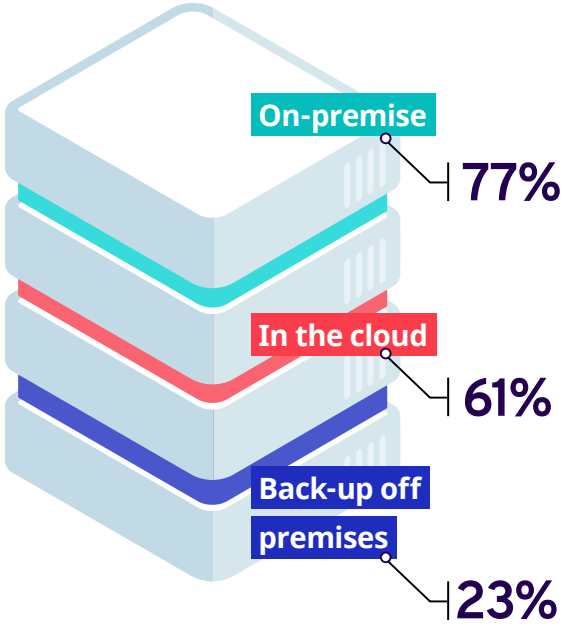
Data quantities and detail

Data completeness – having data sufficiently broad and detailed for purpose – was a concern at all EBMO levels. Of the various respondents asked about data for strategic, organizational or operational decision-making, only 34 per cent, 53 per cent and 57 per cent, respectively, indicated the available data was sufficiently complete to support that purpose.

Range of supportive data

Only a quarter of CEOs and board members reported using economic trends or indicators, and consulting with government, regular and affiliate members, or staff to support their decision-making.

Data storage locations, global results:



Availability of quantitative data to support decision making at different organization levels, global results:

12% say they have "a lot" of quantitative data to make strategic decisions

24% say they have "a lot" of quantitative data to make organizational decisions

30% say they have "a lot" of quantitative data to make operational decisions

Advocacy data

EBMOs collected and analysed data on member positions on issues, but they didn't track data regarding their advocacy efforts. More systematic records of EBMO actions and communications over the course of advocacy work and in providing support for individual members would support EBMOs in learning from their prior efforts and in publicizing their contributions.

Internal data collection

EBMOs did not yet systematically collect data about the internal operations and performance of secretariat departments.

Internal data analysis

EBMOs rarely analysed data about their own internal operations, which could yield new information for working more efficiently or effectively.

Internal data sharing

In most EBMOs, data was fragmented across business functions, and data sharing between departments was inconsistent.

Data backup

Many EBMOs took on data storage responsibilities with limited backup support. Most survey respondents (77 per cent) reported that their EBMOs stored data on their premises and in the cloud (61 per cent). Additionally, only 23 per cent of respondents reported that their EBMOs had data back-up facilities at a separate location.

> If we have data, let's look at data. If all we have are opinions, let's go with mine
>
> **Jim Barksdale,** former Netscape CEO

Metadata about EBMO research efforts

This was often recorded largely in the heads of employees. Losing this knowledge (for example, when research was done, regarding which subject and with whom) from an EBMO's organizational memory prevents reuse of research results and limits comparative and longitudinal research opportunities in the future.

Integration of multiple datasets for comparative or trend and predictive analyses

Most EBMOs relied on spreadsheets for their analytic capabilities. The vast majority of survey respondents (88 per cent) reported using Excel to analyse survey results. Spreadsheets were sufficient for conducting basic descriptive analyses of individual datasets (for example the responses from a single survey). However, spreadsheets did not easily facilitate integration of multiple datasets for comparative or trend analyses, nor did they easily accommodate more predictive analyses. Spreadsheets were also inadequate for EBMO goals of storing data securely and transparently for the longer term and thus supporting the development of an institutional knowledge base.

Policies recognizing data as an asset

Few EBMOs had explicit policies recognizing data as an asset. Many lacked adequate systems and procedures to ensure appropriate stewardship of their data. But more effective use of data can lead to better business intelligence, analysis-based decision-making, and real-time information about operations, enabling EBMOs to improve their operations and expand future opportunities.

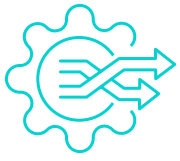
Procedures for long-term data management

Many EBMOs lacked explicit procedures on how to address data over the long term. About half the survey respondents from medium and large EBMOs reported having data management guidelines, compared to only one third of respondents from small EBMOs.

About 1/2

of survey respondents from medium and large EBMOs reported having data management guidelines, compared to only one third of respondents from small EBMOs.

Data challenges



Beyond technology change, a need for cultural change

EBMOs need to use both tools and culture together to change behaviour regarding the appreciation and use of data. An EBMO customer relationship management system (CRM) will not yield the expected benefits of efficiency and insight if individuals or departments resist sharing their data. EBMOs adopting new tools should therefore also be ready to adjust their business processes and work practices.

Reliance on experience and intuition

EBMO leaders (CEOs and boards) still rely heavily on experience and intuition. The challenge, in a rapidly evolving environment, is that emerging situations come to have less and less in common with the past, so reliance on historical pattern-matching to guide decisions becomes less and less effective over time.

Recognizing operations activities as sources of "data"

EBMOs overlook data from their own operations. Because operations are not yet viewed as sources of data, EBMOs miss opportunities to learn from the data about their own practices and performance.

Recognizing the value of automatically generated data

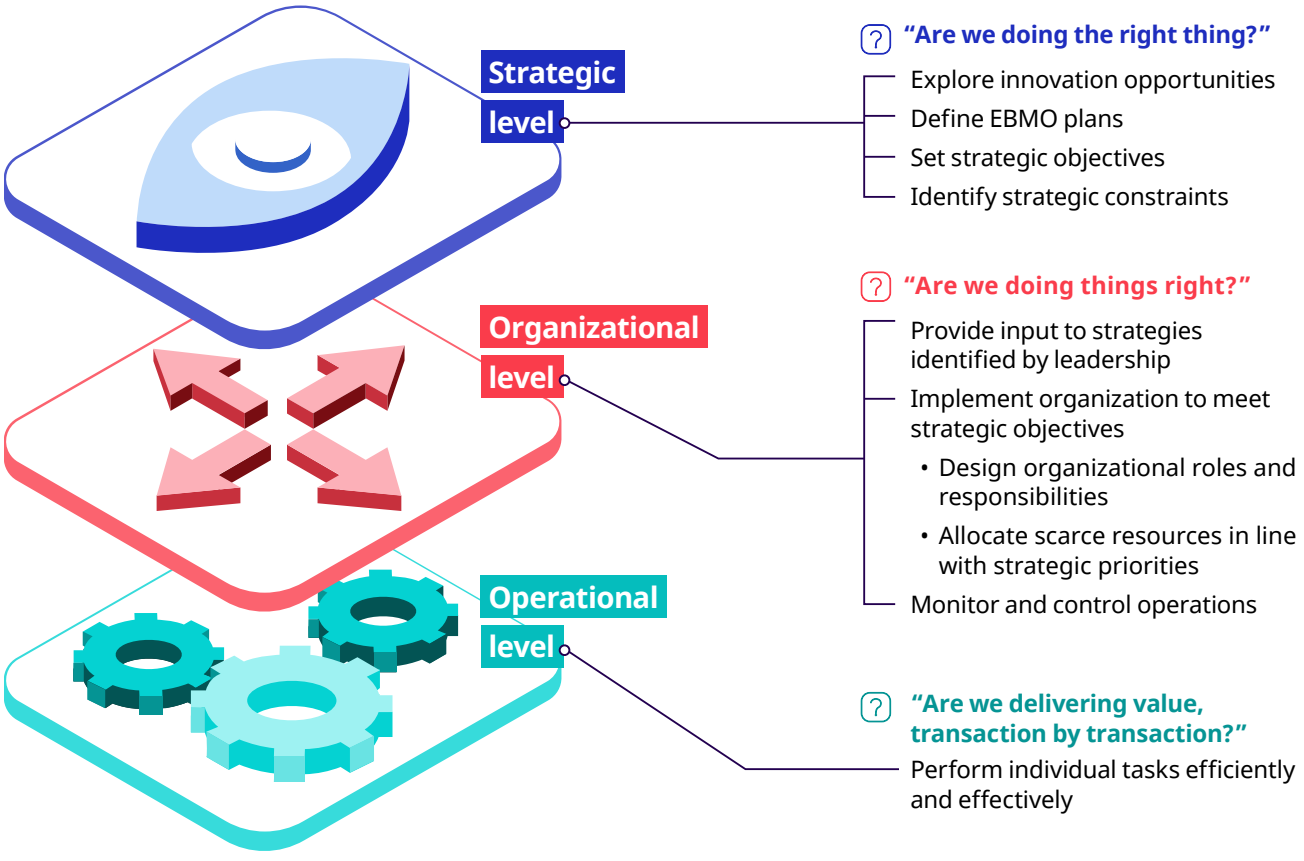
EBMOs undervalue potentially valuable sources of data such as social-media activity logs and member interactions. Because automatically generated data are not yet perceived as being as valuable as intentionally collected data, EBMOs miss opportunities for new inputs to their decision-making.

Data sharing for insights and multi-skilling

EBMOs share data across departments inconsistently, so insights from combinations of data are limited. In addition, informal opportunities for upskilling and multi-skilling staff are missed. Examples include training offerings matched to segment-level member needs; training schemes developed from research and advocacy insights; and membership outreach informed by training participation patterns.

Managing research data and metadata

Because digital data can be so readily reused, or easily combined with other data for additional purposes, it is important to track and manage its metadata well (for example when collected, from whom, and for what original purpose). However, the importance of tracking the origins of a set of data is not yet explicitly recognized by many EBMOs.



Internal services	
Operational data	Financial information
Trainings, offerings, & schedules	Member needs & interests
Member details	Social media data
Research programs & results	

External services	
Labour market indicators	Information from affiliates
Government policies & regulations	3rd party research, publications, data, & analysis
Government statistics	

EBMO decision-making

- **Reputation development**
- **Knowledge products**
- **Human resource management**
- **Membership strategy**
- **Services and assistance**
- **Partnerships & collaboration**
- **Commercial strategy**
- **Policy positions**
- **Crisis management**

Data storage and security

Individual negligence, intentional misconduct or security breaches resulting from poor data security could damage trust or confidence in the EBMO or result in negative repercussions for individual staff or members.

Opportunities

More effective use of data can lead to better business intelligence, analysis-based decision-making, and real-time information about operations, enabling EBMOs to improve their strategic and tactical decisions, provide meaningful insights and intelligence to members, and ultimately to have more influence over policy outcomes.

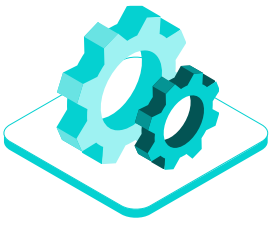
People focused

Match culture to talent pipeline. By developing new management models and strategies that play to the strengths of a diverse workforce that is experienced, open-minded and increasingly more technologically adept, EBMOs can benefit from broader and more effective use of data-generating technology and communication methods:

- Cultivate a culture that is more open, faster-moving, more collaborative and more growth oriented.
- Appeal to staff who bring with them diverse experience, new perspectives and technological savvy.
- Use their skills, interests and tech competencies to spark attention and focus action around data-driven strategies.

Communicate clearly. EBMO leaders (CEO and board members) need to clearly communicate to their secretariats how being more data-driven supports and strengthens their EBMO mission and goals.

Model data-driven behaviour. The CEO and board members should also model data-driven behaviour by using data more systematically to decide on strategic initiatives, identify suitable strategic goals, and monitor organizational progress towards those goals.



Process focused

Data management policies. EBMO leaders should guide their organizations in developing effective data management policies to ensure the optimal and ethical use of their distinctive and unique member data.

Management and use of data. Managers should define, direct and monitor the management and use of data to support overall strategy as defined by the CEO and board.

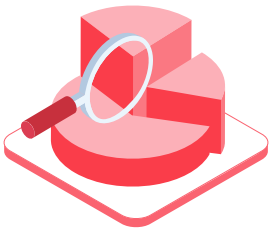
Systematic use of data. Managers should also use data more systematically to identify and develop the skills, roles, resources and work routines needed to implement the chosen strategy. Data on current staff capacity and gaps can inform more efficient investments in recruiting and training.

Information sharing. Managers should promote and monitor information sharing across departments to support the identification of additional member needs and service opportunities. Greater internal sharing of information improves EBMO operational efficiency and enhances overall EBMO performance.

Data collection. Staff should follow more systematic and intentional data collection practices and apply evidence-based approaches in every member-facing interaction.

Technology solutions. Managers and staff should explore technology solutions that facilitate more automated data collection and storage, and which enable more integrative analysis and insights.

Performance baselines, benchmarks and goals. Managers and staff should identify baselines, benchmarks and performance goals, and use data to monitor their ongoing progress towards their goals.



Technology focused

Powerful and user-friendly analytic tools. Many powerful but simple tools supporting data collection, analysis and/or visualization are now available on the market and accessible to EBMOs. Cloud-based software tools also typically handle important data storage requirements such as data warehousing, which could help EBMOs that lack the skills to configure and analyse more complex datasets effectively.

Cloud-based data storage. EBMOs should recognize that cloud-based storage has become increasingly accessible, affordable and secure in recent years, and presents an option for simplifying EBMO data management responsibilities. More generally, cloud-based systems also facilitate virtual or remote work, which may become a more routine part of EBMO operations even after COVID-19 pandemic constraints are lifted.

Data as a strategic asset: Action opportunities

Data-oriented opportunities for EBMOs

to use data to guide attention and activities:

- Cultivate a digitally savvy leadership team.
- Commit to data-driven decision-making.
- Use data to identify new opportunities.
- Define metrics to monitor strategic progress.
- Use data to manage limited resources.
- Lead development (or refinement) of data management policies.
- Expand influence and develop a reputation as a data-driven organization.

to define, direct, and monitor the management and use of data to support overall strategy:

- Cultivate a habit of analyzing and tracking quantifiable aspects of activity.
- Use data to monitor trends and developments on key issues.
- Commit to breaking down information silos in the organization.
- Implement systematic sharing of data.
- Expand data analysis to monitor, evaluate, and adjust operations and staff performance.
- Use data to detect and understand problems.
- Use data to find and share strengths.
- Identify and measure key performance indicators (KPIs).

to collect data for subsequent analysis, decision-making, and sharing of information:

- Frame data collection as a routine operations task.
- Develop systematic approaches to data collection.
- Use technology to enrich member-centred data collection.
- Automate data collection where possible.
- Establish baselines, benchmarks, and goals to keep moving forward.

Contact details

ILO Bureau for Employers' Activities (ACT/EMP)
4, route des Morillons
Geneva 22, Switzerland, CH-1211

www.ilo.org/actemp
actemp@ilo.org