CHAPTER 3 - Case Study: Special Olympics International

With over 200 million people around the world with Intellectual Disabilities (ID), Special Olympics International (SOI) has a huge task. It uses the influence of sports to empower its athletes, working to change social perceptions and help to improve the lives of those with ID by creating healthy environments. SOI also works to increase involvement for people with ID in communities, using its valuable data not only to improve the services it provides but help inform health initiatives to work with those with ID.

SOI spans the globe with 220 programmes worldwide and runs over 100,000 events yearly, providing athletes the opportunity to compete in a variety of sports from alpine skiing to figure skating, football to basketball and everything in between. SOI has been collecting data on athletes for over 16 years, keeping track of the number of athletes, volunteers and family members participating in its programmes around the world. The wealth of information SOI can provide through what it calls its 'census data' is second to none for both the people who work and participate in the organisation, but also in the form of valuable health data on its participants that can be used to monitor and maintain the health of athletes with ID.

While SOI has been collecting this anonymised athlete participation data for a long time, the use of that data at an individual level as opposed to an aggregated one has been overlooked. To progress this, SOI is implementing a new process for collecting participation data. This new, bespoke system will enhance the depth of the database, enabling SOI to better track its progress in various business areas, engage directly with the SOI global community and provide all its stakeholders with valuable information that will support data-driven decision-making.

SOI and the Changing use of Data

As with any new initiative, there were hurdles when SOI first started to seriously collect census data. With a global network, it was challenging to communicate to everyone the how, why and what involved in data collection. It takes time to implement training programmes and really get to grips with facilitating change within the business when people are so used to doing things a certain way. I interviewed Mary Davis, SOI's Chief Executive Officer via email on December 19, 2017, and she shared some valuable insights.

"At the time, back in 2002, there was an understanding that capturing this information would be essential for the movement but how important and to what extent it could and couldn't be used has evolved, along with the evolution of technology and our use of data generally."

The initial data collected was relatively basic. The 2002 Census included information on participants such as sport played, gender, age group and whether they took part in the Athlete Leadership Program, which enables young athletes to become mentors to encourage their peers, training them to become leaders both within the organisation and within their community.

Over time, the requests for data grew to encompass more of SOI's individual programmes. On the Athletes Participation Summary (APS), it included data for programmes such as Young Athletes (a sports initiative for children both with and without ID), Athletes in Training, Coaching programmes for six- and seven-year-olds and the Certified Coaches programme. The census also included information for SOI's Unified Sports initiative that works to join people with or without ID to build inclusive sporting communities. For this, it needed data on both the athletes and the partners (the SOI term for athletes without ID who participate in Unified Sports), data on the three Unified Sports models (Recreational, Player Development and Competitive), as well as the number of coaches participating in the initiative.

By laying this foundation over the course of the past 15 years, SOI now finds itself able to align their resources with their observed and forecasted participation levels. It can look at the efficacy of new sports and programmes that have been added on a local level and compare that with how they perform both regionally and globally. With a centralised census implemented, the resulting data is more reliable, giving a better understanding of SOI's footprint in individual sports by gender and age group as well as by region. This information is vital in safeguarding the future growth of SOI as it helps with receiving grants for individual programmes as well as creating sponsorship and campaign opportunities.

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The Importance of CONNECT

Building on the success of its Census data, SOI is looking to implement something entirely new, replacing the current system that produces its data with bespoke CRM software that has been built and designed to suit SOI's needs. It's called CONNECT and will be used to register athletes, volunteers, family members, staff and other stakeholders engaged with the management of its sports, programmes and events.

"We call it a game and volunteer management system. It's basically a database that holds information about participants: who they are, where they live, what sport they participate in, what events they've attended, their results, personal details such as height, weight, disability, etc. It's web-enabled, and all our stakeholders can access it, from an athlete and parent to an event director. They can use it to input and update information and find data relating to performances and events."

CONNECT will give SOI the opportunity to gather more data than ever before, not only of the sports that athletes participate in but the events they attend in each sport. This would be of enormous benefit for the World Games quotas. On a single level, CONNECT will give SOI the ability to track an athlete's growth within the organisation's programmes. It can show what sports and events an athlete started with and how they've progressed over their lifetime within the organisation. It can show how sports relate to the overall health of participating athletes, give data on coaches, athlete's families and volunteers, and ultimately help SOI to better understand its impact and opportunities worldwide.

"When CONNECT is fully developed, we will have a tool that can provide us with accurate numbers for all the information we gather. We could drill down to the tiniest detail, like our athlete's different medical conditions and how that relates to their sport and event participation. We'd also be able to see a full demographic profile of each individual program. We could see how many family members are coaches, serve on the board, or as volunteers. This would be true for volunteers as well. What is the volunteering doing for the program and community? We will have a much better way of tracking of the reach of Healthy Athletes screenings and see the impact that this has locally and worldwide."

Healthy Athletes is a programme that is of huge importance in SOI. It offers healthcare and services to athletes in need all over the world including free health screenings.

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To date, 1.7 million free health examinations have been conducted in more than 130 countries, making SOI the most significant global public health organisation dedicated to serving people with intellectual disabilities (Special Olympics International, 2017). These screenings encompass everything from free dentist check-ups, podiatry and opticians, just to name a few.

CONNECT will allow SOI not only to capture the results of these screenings but also follow up with the athletes personally, as well as their family members, to monitor improvement and pinpoint areas that may need additional follow-up. Healthy Athletes already has the world's most extensive database of health data for people with ID, and by partnering this data with the power of CONNECT, SOI will be able to impact the way that its services can improve and benefit the community. But how will CONNECT achieve this?

"Collecting data in this manner serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it enables us to understand our numbers. We will know how many athletes are participating in what programs. This allows for better planning and management. But when you have this much data collected over such a long time, it also enables you to predict growth. This also supports better planning and management. For example, if we know how many athletes there are in Australia, we'll know how many volunteers we'll need to provide support at events. If you see how the number of athletes has grown over the last ten years in Poland, you can analyse and predict how that growth might continue over the next ten years."

What Davis is referencing is time-series analysis. This type of analysis can be used to extract meaningful statistics from current data, as well as forecasting future trends. But regression analysis can also be used to improve the accuracy of this projection. Essentially, regression analysis boils down to adding observed factors to modelled scenarios such as the impact of economic crises, civil unrest in countries in which SOI has chapters, change in management or structure of SOI in different countries and so forth, however we will discuss regression analysis in more detail in chapter 4.

CONNECT doesn't just offer big-picture opportunities. It allows SOI to connect with its athletes on an individual level. The current system that hosts the census data doesn't include personal details on individual athletes, volunteers or family members. CONNECT will allow for the collection and storage of distinct contact data, enabling SOI to engage with its participants, their families and volunteers directly; something that will prove valuable in reaching a broader audience, engaging the community and liaising with potential sponsors and donors.

But if we've learned anything so far, it's that simply collecting the data is not enough. It's only as good as the way it's going to be used, and as such, the management of it can be a major challenge and dictates attention and focus. While there may be a department responsible for gathering the data, it's important to make sure that information is shared and implemented across the entire organisation. The people who collect the data are likely not the ones who will feel the most impact of what that data may be telling them, so it's important to have everyone on board. Reports need to be developed and shared with other departments, not only within SOI's headquarters but also at a regional level.

To overcome natural cultural barriers that appear within an organisation, SOI has started to present their data visually to more easily identify opportunities and challenges. By displaying the data in this way, it ensures that all departments are not only able to access it but understand and act on it.

"Over the last few years, I think we've gotten better at collecting our data. However, there's still is a lot that needs to be done. Areas for improvement are that we can look at resources better to see where we need to allocate our limited resources. We can really consider our program quality by looking at athlete-to-coach ratios as well as seeing how many coaches involved are certified head coaches. However this type of information is only as good as the way we use it, so by presenting the data – not in Excel charts but in colourful graphs – we're able to quickly identify both the challenge and the opportunity.
Collecting and storing our data has been an ongoing process of development – knowing how to use software to present that data in a way that generates discussion across our business has been immediate. We know we've only scratched the surface of our use of data so it's exciting to think about our future and how it will be positively impacted as we make progress in this area."

Far-Reaching Benefits

SOI isn't the only organisation responsible for growing and developing their sport. So many organisations are just now starting to tackle the daunting task of counting their participants and learning more about them on an individual level. Davis has the following advice:

"Make sure you're providing the right tool to ensure accuracy in all that you do. The numbers have to be precise and easy to collect. These tools aren't just software or databases, but making sure that you've got the right staff to support these programs and that everyone is on board with clear guidelines on how each data point needs to be collected."

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By ensuring the accuracy of data and its accessibility, SOI has managed to develop and extend a number of its health screening programmes. They are in a unique position to collect data that will impact the health of their participants, which makes the accuracy of even greater importance to them. Their primary health programmes are:

- Fit Feet – a programme that offers podiatric screenings to evaluate ankles, feet, lower extremity biomechanics, and proper shoe and sock gear to participating athletes.
- FUNFitness – offering physical therapy to Special Olympics athletes to address their ongoing health needs.
- Health Promotion – focusing on healthy living, lifestyle choices, health screenings and education programs.
- Healthy Hearing – offering comprehensive hearing analysis and recommendations.
- Opening Eyes – providing free eye assessments, prescription glasses and sports eyewear to people with ID.
- Special Smiles – offering comprehensive oral health care information and free dental screenings to increase dental health and awareness (Special Olympics International, 2017).

The data collected so far has been invaluable to these initiatives, helping build partnerships with corporations who have CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) programmes. For instance, Essilor donate lenses, and Safilo give frames to provide SOI athletes with free eyewear through the Opening Eyes initiative. Other sponsors and donors include Bank of America, IKEA, who support the Young Athletes Program, ESPN, who are the global presenting partner for Unified Sports and Microsoft, the official Technology Partner who have helped make CONNECT possible.

"Moving forward, the use of CONNECT will help them build on their already rich database of information and enable SOI to engage directly with the athletes, family members, and volunteers, telling them about these partnerships, so they understand the benefits they bring."

SOI's broader CRM plan aims to have CONNECT integrate with their health screening data allowing follow-ups once their athletes have participated in programmes. This will let them see if, and how, their recommendations are being followed by athletes and ultimately see how health has improved as a result. With this integration it won't just be a general overview, SOI will be able to pinpoint individual athletes and engage with them directly. By working in conjunction with partners without having to share this data directly, SOI will be able to carry any partner's messages on their behalf.

Source: (Davis, 2017, December 19).

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