Why Data Matters: How Your Assistive Technology Data Can Work for You

By Daria Domin and Diane Golden

WHY SHOULD I COLLECT DATA?

Section 4 of the Assistive Technology Act requires that state Assistive Technology (AT) programs collect and report data. As a grantee, you must report data about the services you provide through state-level and leadership activities. All 56 grantees submit this data in the Annual State Grant for Assistive Technology Progress Report (APR). We have been collecting APR data since fiscal year 2008 and have collected 13 fiscal years of data to date. These data provide critical information about AT activities.

WHERE CAN I FIND MY DATA?

The APR collects a lot of data. It can be difficult and time-consuming for AT program staff to make use of all the data, so the Center for Assistive Technology Act Data Assistance (CATADA) makes sense of the data for you! CATADA selects the most relevant data points and displays the data on their website. You can find 13 years of data on the CATADA website: **www.catada.info**
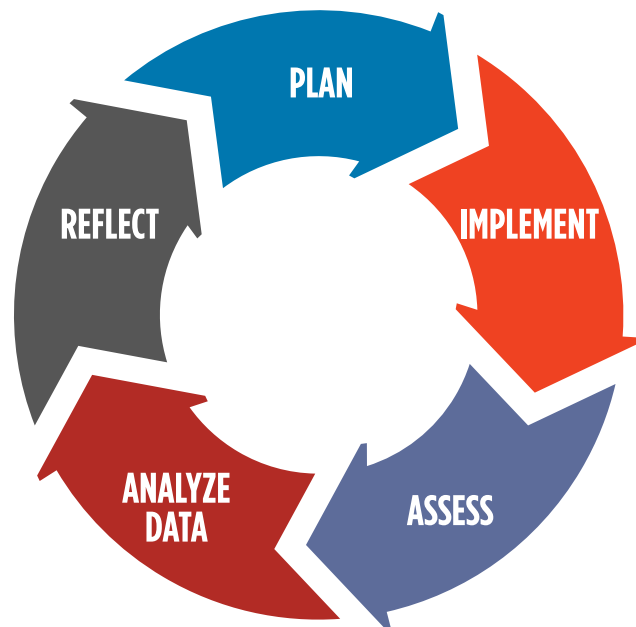
Users can build customized charts and tables, run trend analyses, and compare individual AT programs to other programs or the national aggregate. Users can also download raw data files to manipulate the data on their own. All APR data are still available to users on the website in accessible html format. CATADA also shares APR data with AT programs during training and technical assistance calls, in annual reports, and at conferences.

WHY IS MY DATA IMPORTANT?

Reviewing your data periodically is import for many reasons. Accurate and reliable data can:

» Help show your program's strengths and areas for improvement
» Reveal patterns that help you think about your program's future
» Inform programmatic decisions
» Compare your program activities and practices to programs around the country (with caution)
» Provide appropriate technical assistance
» Build data-driven partnerships and collaborations
» Demonstrate accomplishments to potential funding sources

You can use data to brag about your accomplishments!

CATADA

THE CENTER FOR ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY ACT DATA ASSISTANCE

DATA → KNOWLEDGE → ACTION

REVIEW YOUR DATA THOUGHTFULLY.

It is important to analyze your data with a critical eye before drawing conclusions. Avoid making subjective value judgements. Comparing your program's data to the national aggregate data or to other AT programs can be informative, but use caution as you draw conclusions. Many variables influence each program, such as:
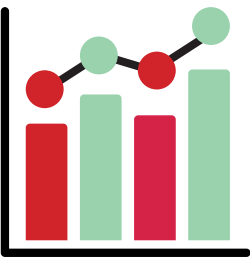
- » different levels of AT Act funding
- » program structure
- » state geographical size
- » state population
- » leveraged funding
- » program leadership efforts
- » area of emphasis over time
- » expertise and capacity of staff
- » partnerships, collaborations, and other state resources

THERE IS ALWAYS A STORY BEHIND YOUR DATA.

When you view your program's data trends, ask yourself if the changes in your data are intentional or accidental. Is this a data "hiccup" or trend? There are many good explanations for data hiccups, such as ending a contract with an underperforming entity, changing program structure (bringing a program "in-house" that was contracted out), or the end of a short-term activity. Larger numbers are not necessarily "better." If you have data that is trending much higher or much lower, ask yourself why that happened, and confirm that the trend is valid (and not just due to lack of data fidelity). Finally, assess whether an intervention is needed.

YOU HAVE REVIEWED YOUR DATA. NOW WHAT?

You should review data systematically, but also summarize and share this data regularly with state AT program staff, advisory council members, contractors, lead agency staff, partner agencies, policymakers, decision-makers, and all other critical stakeholders. Many AT programs produce an annual report to inform stakeholders about the state AT program's accomplishments. These annual reports are also used to support efforts to secure additional program resources.

HERE ARE SOME REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF HOW TO USE YOUR DATA MEANINGFULLY WITH CATADA:

What do you want to know?

1

You want to determine if your program needs to target a particular group of stakeholders (e.g., consumers, family members, representatives of employment) to increase their participation in your reuse, short-term loan, or demonstration programs.

What can you do?

Generate a chart or table examining trend data over the last 5 years to get information about the percentage of stakeholders by group that uses each program. Nationally, individuals with disabilities and their families and advocates are the largest user group for state-level activities.

Ask yourself:

» Is this true for your program? If not, do you understand why your program is different?

» For short-term loans, educators are the most frequent agency borrower type. Is this true for your program? If not, is there a logical explanation for the difference (e.g., your state has a separate program that provides device loans for schools), or would it be helpful to outreach to educators?

What do you want to know?

2

You received a grant to purchase AT for your demo/loan inventory. How do you determine what to purchase?

What can you do?

Generate a chart or table that provides recent trend data on AT types for demonstration and short-term loan. Then, compare that to national data.

Ask yourself:

» Which types of AT are currently borrowed or demonstrated most frequently in your program? How does that compare with national trend data? What factors account for that?

» Which types of AT might you want to increase based on this data? Is that a good use of the additional funding? Do you have staff expertise to support this?

What do you want to know?

3

You want to do a focused evaluation of your training efforts to ensure you are adequately training employment providers.

What can you do?

Run a custom table on training participants for your state for up to a 13-year period and evaluate the participant percentages.

Ask yourself:

» If there is a year with an adequate employment percentage, what was done differently that year?

» If no years have adequate employment percentages, what outreach and collaboration initiative could you implement to change future training plans?

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QUESTIONS?

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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