RESULTS WASHINGTON CASE STUDY: Open Data

Doubling the amount of open state data in a year. **In less than a year, Washington has more than doubled the amount of downloadable, searchable state data available to the public.**

In doing business, state government collects and processes a vast amount of information, including traffic and engineering information, scientific and environmental data, health statistics, geospatial information, and financial and employment data.
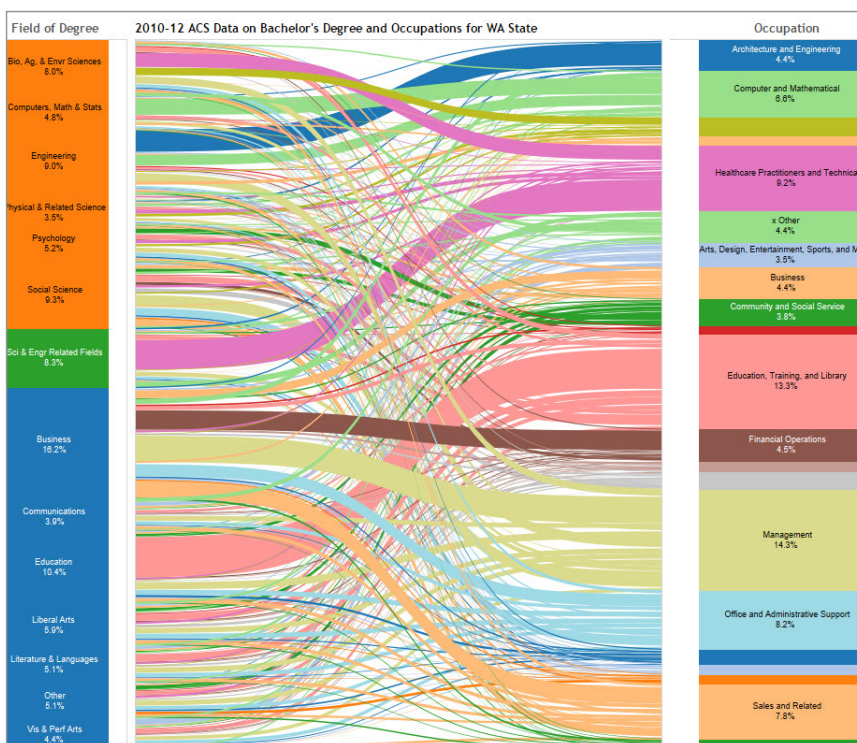
Much of that information can be useful to the public, companies and other government entities if it can be downloaded and processed by them.

"Government has hundreds of years of information. We want to get it out to the public and let them solve real-world problems with it." Michael Cockrill

In 2014, state officials set a goal of increasing the number of searchable, downloadable "rows" of state data from 79 million to 87 million. (Think of a row as a line on a spreadsheet, with multiple pieces of related information. A permit or license, for example, with the date, purpose and related information.)

Improvements: Cockrill's team worked to strengthen communities of "data stewards" within state government. It convened an Open Data Advisory Group to work on strategy for ways to release more state data. Agencies worked to make databases more available through the state's open-data portal, data.wa.gov. In April 2015, Governor Jay Inslee hired the state's first-ever chief privacy officer, Alex Alben, to work as an in-house consultant to state agencies with privacy questions.

"One of the things that we've seen as a trend is that agencies are more comfortable posting large data sets," said Will Saunders, a senior program manager for open data at Washington Technology Solutions, a state agency.

Data image was created by data visualization interns working with state agencies and private-sector mentors in the summer of 2015.

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Outcome: And what about the goal of having 87 million rows of data available by mid-2015?

"We blew through that target back in February 2015 and we've continued to grow from there," said Saunders. By June, 158 million rows were online, searchable and downloadable. The amount of searchable, downloadable state data had doubled in one year.

"And this is just the tip of the iceberg, in terms of the data that we could conceivably expose," said Cockrill.

In addition to being used by local governments, stakeholder groups and members of the public, open data can be a powerful springboard for young companies, helping them pivot, develop and grow.

One example is Kirkland-based Inrix, the largest transportation network information company in the world. It launched successfully in 2004 partly because the then-tiny company figured out how to process and use available state data about traffic on freeways.

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Having access to open data allowed the company to quickly develop a marketable product, which it has built on. Consumer and commercial applications that show traffic information, such as its popular navigation app, use the company's information. Inrix data is widely used by commercial fleets and trucking companies, and is now starting to be built into the navigation systems of new cars. Today, the company has 350 employees.

Next steps include finding ways to make the vast amount of data more useable. The state is partnering with several universities and corporations on data visualization internships, with students helping pioneer ways to display data in interesting, easy to use ways.

Will Saunders, at left

The other key next step is measuring the impact of the open data so the state can prioritize release of the most useful information.

"The open data market is kind of backwards: supply creates the demand," said Cockrill. "One of our challenges is to get enough data out there so that we start to find out what data people really want and use. That way we can focus our efforts on getting the right stuff out there."

"Government collects an unbelievable amount of data," he said. "The key is making that transparent."

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