

Canada - a World Leader in Non-profit Data

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By *Michael Lenczner (Guest blogger)*

In 2010, I started Ajah to use data to help fundraisers identify likely sources of funding. Because I had been active in the Open Data movement since 2005, I knew that the information that they needed was out there. We worked hard for several years to build our service, Fundtracker.

Fundtracker required combining many data sets: government spending data at both federal and provincial

levels, charity financial information and granting records, corporate social responsibility information, and even charities' annual reports. We launched our most recent version of the service last fall and our clients have been responding enthusiastically.

By 2013 we were receiving recognition from outside of Canada for building a successful business using open data, and developing insights into the funding ecosystem that we offer our clients. At first we chalked up our success to our abilities as expert technologists with a deep understanding of the non-profit sector. As we continued to learn about non-profit sectors in other countries we realized none of them had anything approaching the amount of data available in Canada. That was the principal reason for our lead in this space.

“We’re number one!”

While we associate that phrase with our southern neighbours, what we discovered was that, in fact, our government is the best in the world because of a typically Canadian aspect of modern society: a highly capable civil service, which had been collecting and disseminating useful information about the non-profit sector.

All federal departments publish useful funding reports under the Proactive Disclosure policy. The Canada Revenue Agency’s Charities Directorate, in particular, collects extremely useful information about the charitable sector and has been a pioneer in making that information easily available both on- and off-line.

The information available on Canadian charities through the CRA is unique for several reasons. Unlike most other countries, they collect and publish detailed financial, HR, and some activity-level information about Canadian charities on an annual basis. Secondly, the information on these forms was typed in and made available upon request in machine-readable formats (Microsoft Excel and Access) rather than paper copies or as PDFs—as is done in the United States.

In addition, the CRA has recently made two other changes that have moved Canada even farther ahead:

1. Since this fall, every single grant made by foundations and charities has been typed in (whereas before a small portion of those was made available). It means for the first time, in any country, there is a complete set of all of the gifts made by charitable organizations in a given year.
2. This data has been made available as Open Data. This means that the machine-readable data is now available as a bulk download with a commercially friendly licence on the federal government’s Open Data Portal.

These developments have made Canada the clear leader in the quantity and quality of information available about its non-profit sector. Considering the size and importance of the non-profit sector, and growing recognition of the importance of using data to drive innovation questions, this is a tremendous accomplishment. It presents Canadians with substantial opportunities.

This data is used in a variety of ways by researchers, policy makers, funders, umbrella associations and individual non-profits on a daily basis. The benefits of having it available should not be understated. Funders such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Omydiar Network, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation have all emphasized the importance of this type of data, as have institutions like the World Bank.

As Canadians, we need to capitalize on the lead we have in this area. We should be developing our expertise in using data domestically to build a smarter social sector and we should export that expertise internationally—as policy-makers, as researchers, as civil society organizations, and as businesses.

Governments should continue to ensure that the information collected is the information most needed by the public and the non-profit sector. Researchers need to develop the quantitative skills necessary to use data to inform their policy recommendations, and bureaucrats need to learn how to use data to implement those policies in the most effective way possible. Civil societies and business need to use this information to develop innovative new solutions to problems, and funders need to seek out and support those innovations.

There are several indications that Canada will be furthering its leadership in this space. The already launched [Non-Profit Organization Risk Identification Project Report](#) should increase our knowledge about the significant number of non-profits that do not have charitable status. The recently announced [IT Modernization Charities](#) project contains several measures to improve the quality and availability of that data. Those initiatives, as well as civil initiatives such as the Community Knowledge Exchange, and Ajah’s own PoweredbyData, give Canadians the opportunity to become the model for the rest of the world.

Michael Lenczner is CEO of [Ajah](#), a Montréal-based web company that uses open data to offer SaaS (Software as a Service) to the non-profit sector. Ajah’s core service is a prospect research tool for fundraisers called [Fundtracker](#). They recently created [PoweredbyData](#), a non-profit arm that has the goal of increasing the supply of open data about the non-profit sector worldwide.

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Omer Chouinard - Jul 11, 2014

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Intéressant à savoir...mais leur utilisation est encore à démontrer

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