



Politics

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Privacy, quality of StatsCan information could be compromised: report

By Amy Minsky
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OTTAWA — A new agency the Conservatives created with the intention of strengthening the government's email and data systems could make it difficult for Statistics Canada to maintain the quality and confidentiality of the information it gathers, chief statistician Wayne Smith warns.

The caution, one of several that paint a grim picture of the agency's future, is included in its annual planning report tabled recently in the House of Commons.

In August 2011, the Conservatives announced a new entity called Shared Services Canada, which was tasked with streamlining the government's information technology systems that currently cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.

Approximately 8,000 employees from information technology-heavy departments were earmarked for transfer to the new department to help whittle down the more than 100 email systems currently running across government down to one, and the more than 300 data centres to less than 20.

But consolidating Statistics Canada's data system with those of other agencies could compromise the national statistical agency's ability to stay on top of its game, the report suggests.

"With the transfer of email, network and data centre functions from Statistics Canada to Shared Services Canada, the agency faces significant new challenges in delivering its program and protecting respondent confidentiality," the report reads.

The planning report also indicates there will be less money going toward gathering social and economic data, which range from market-movers like employment numbers, to weather and climate information, to graduation rates for college and university students.

Smith's sombre outlook for the internationally respected and often-praised office emerges in the report through mentions of budget and job cuts, being forced to send human and financial resources to Shared Services Canada and an anticipated loss in revenues that traditionally came in from other government departments now also grappling with cuts.

"The pressure of continuing cost-containment measure in Budget 2010, budgetary impacts of transfers to Shared Services Canada and a probable loss of up to \$20 million in cost-recoverable revenues will make 2012-13 a challenging year," the report reads.

Alice Nakamura, a professor of management science at the University of Alberta, is wary of the all the changes revealed in the report.

Statistics Canada has had special, secure data system arrangements wherein even its employees couldn't log in from outside, she explained.

"What I know is, there isn't any data system you can make with external parts that can't potentially be hacked," Nakamura said. "I've been a big supporter of the way Statistics Canada handled their data systems because the business of people willing to give their information — individuals and businesses — is definitely predicated on the confidence that the information will remain private."

An email from Statistics Canada sent Tuesday noted the two agencies are working together to ensure all safeguards that traditionally protected information will remain. Additionally, the agencies have negotiated a deal to guarantee that laws governing the handling of confidential information continue to be met, the email read.

Similarly, Shared Services Canada's senior assistant deputy minister assured the agencies are working so no "exposures" or compromises develop.

"We are very, very diligent right now, before any transformation occurs, that we do not put anything in jeopardy," said Maurice Chenier. "When we have a decision (for) the transformation plan, we will ensure it respects the policies ... for compliance for security and privacy."

'LESS RELIABLE, LESS TIMELY'

Statistics Canada will be tackling those challenges with less money and fewer bodies — a situation one professor said is very concerning.

"We're in a knowledge-based economy," said University of British Columbia economics professor Craig Riddell. "And the key to good knowledge is data that's timely, reliable and high quality. That's what Statistics Canada is good at producing."

But now, under the gun, the agency will eventually be producing data that's less timely and less reliable, Riddell said.

"And there will generally just be less of it."

Shortly after Finance Minister Jim Flaherty tabled his budget in March, revealing deep cuts to Statistics Canada, the data office started delivering layoff notices.

The planning report tabled last week indicates the agency will lose the equivalent of 422 full-time jobs between 2012-13 and 2014-15, and have about \$50.6 million — or 11 per cent — less in its annual budget over the same timeline.

Statistics Canada officials maintain they will be able to continue providing Canadians with relevant, high-quality information.

University of Alberta professor Nakamura, however, is less optimistic, saying the cuts are a major setback for the nearly 100-year-old agency which has already seen a number of surveys cut from its repertoire in recent years.

"Many sorts of data we've been used to having are being discontinued," she said, noting that at least some

of that data will be replaced with similar statistics collected for the United States.

While some data might translate between the two countries, she said, much won't — leaving voters helpless when they try to turn to evidence to find out whether political leaders have been running the country well or poorly.

“We have a government today that is making a lot of other cutbacks in public programs affecting areas from the environment to basic research to health funding, and voters now will have less of the data they count on for judging the impacts of the policies of their elected officials.”

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