

September 2026

Your Data Should Work for You: The Scalability of an Evidence-Based Approach

Ranya Ahmed, PhD
ACLU TECHNOLOGY



My journey

- I moved from academia ( RCJH!) to the nonprofit sector
- My technical background has placed me consistently in an analytics or research function – but I have worn many hats depending on organizational need, including grant writing and operational support
- Today, I lead a team of 30. We have Data Scientists, Data Analysts, Analytics Engineers, and subject matter experts on our team at the ACLU, a civil rights & civil liberties organization

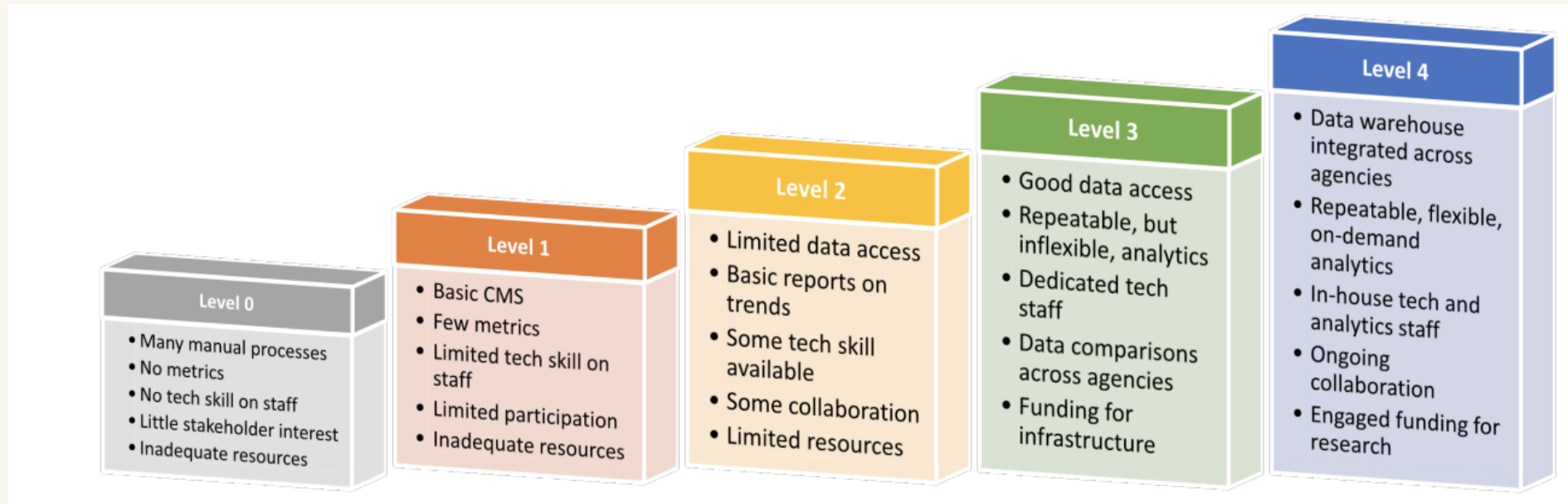
Today's Talk: Purposeful & Practical

- We are all at different stages in building or growing analytics programs, so this talk will speak to that diversity.
- We often face ambiguity and resource restrictions within our organizations. Accordingly, the sector has developed a resourceful culture and mindset that serves us in growing our analytics capacities. This is an incredible foundation.
- Meeting increasing analytics demand and need with limited resources is a challenge we all face. This talk will outline options to help build, scale, and maintain capacity in those resource-limited conditions.
- Today, I'll walk us through 5 practical tips to scale analytics functions, as well as how to usher in or foster evidence based practice at the organizational level.

What can help you build, scale, and maintain an analytics function?

1. Identify a north star

A long-term, flexible, comprehensive technology plan is the key to sustained success and a continuously improving, robust analytics function. This plan will function as a North Star and as a foundation for resource decision making. It will also empower you to invest when additional resources surface and ground your organization in a shared direction of travel.



Source of image: NLADA Analytics toolkit

2. Assess & adjust to unlock capacity

To create greater efficiencies and scale capacity internally, we can improve our approach to the work to free up capacity in the long-term.

- **Audit work practices:**

- Assess workload, project processes, decision-making approaches, and communication conventions
- Examine collaboration practices

- **Automate & routinize:**

- Are there manual processes ripe for automation?
- What practices could be distributed across the team to free up specialized competency?

- **Don't fall for the stagnation trap!**

3. Consider Self-Service Analytics Tools & Upskilling Staff

You can empower your non-technical colleagues to use drag & drop tools to inform their decision making. You can also invest in your existing staff and unlock new competencies.

- **Self-Service Analytics**
- **Upskilling staff**

 It is essential to create success criteria in both these instances, and they need to align with your north star plan. 

4. Power in partnership

Expertise and specialist skills are costly for many of us to maintain in-house, but our capacity can be extended with support via partnerships. Partnering within the nonprofit community, academia, or with industry has the potential to build and significantly scale work.

Consider these options:

- Partnerships with academic/subject matter experts to complete project work or to provide training
- Join civil society learning spaces (e.g., Data for Good monthly call organized by DonorsChoose)
- Take advantage of open office hours with experts (e.g., Human Rights Data Analysis Group office hours)

5. Identifying additional resources

There are external resources that you can use to support the analytics function at your organization, namely, **benchmark data**.

This data is available for purchase & **can empower you to understand the wider ecosystem and your performance within it.**

Where to participate or collect this data?

- Vendors include Candid, M+R Benchmarks & BDO
- Direct sources include 990 Forms and Annual Reports
- Industry reports like those produced by Harnham

 It is critical to note that organizations do have different definitions for metrics so we need to be mindful of 1:1 comparisons. 

Fostering or ushering in evidence based practice & culture: Lessons from change management

Specific obstacles with evidence-based culture shifts

Uplifted concerns:

- Roles have been managed and successful without these practices
- Variation in adoption willingness across teams
- There is no time or capacity to learn this new approach to work
- Fear of change given a perceived lack of control
- Fear of sole reliance on indicators to measure performance of individuals or programs
- A perceived loss of value of experience

Effective responses:

- Evidence-based practice is becoming the new baseline
- Adjusting & upskilling will take time, but it is a worthy investment
- Evidence based practice does not take away your agency, experience, or expertise

Closing thoughts

- A north star plan continuously serves as a referential blueprint
- There are opportunities to optimize ways of work & upskill existing staff to unlock capacity
- Partnerships with academia, subject matter experts, and civil society can supplement capacity
- External benchmark data can further enable organizational decision making
- Nonprofit resourceful culture provides an incredible capacity for adaptability and change
- Thoughtful change management remains a significant investment

Thank you

rahmed@aclu.org

ACLU