Foundational Teams Showcase

Systems Cataloguing Tool

Partner: Ready by 21 St. Louis (Internal)

Foundational Team: Data Analytics

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The Challenge	Ready by 21 takes a systems orientation in its work. Improving systems and their outcomes requires understanding systems in their current state. The Ready by 21 team previously did informal work to understand various systems, but we wanted support from the Data Analytics team to refine and formalize this process called systems cataloguing.
The Response	The data team worked with Ready by 21 to refine the idea of systems cataloguing and develop a tool to guide users through the cataloguing process. *Cataloguing* is a process for systematically collecting information on key actors and activities within a system, with special attention paid to connections and relationships. Its *output* is a dataset that offers a holistic picture of a system. Its *intermediate outcome* is better understanding of a system that can lead to strategic decision making, effort alignment, gap identification, system-wide baseline measures, and recommendations for system change, among other things. Its *ultimate outcome* is a better functioning system.
Transferable Lessons	Through the development of this tool, the team learned several important lessons. • Iteration is critical. The tool evolved significantly as it was put into practice and users offered feedback to the team. This refinement continues. • Systems overlap and shift boundaries. Defining a clear scope for a system can feel artificial, but it is critical to being able to complete the project. • When creating a tool, there is a tension between creating something flexible enough to be applicable in multiple contexts while also being defined enough to offer true support to the user. Again, iteration was critical in striking this balance.
Shareables	The systems cataloguing tool is designed to be used by any professional who is seeking to gain a better understanding of the systems context in which they work.
Additional Resources	The tool itself contains an "Additional Resources" tab that offers several useful resources for systems thinking and collecting, analyzing, and presenting data.
Future Direction	The Data Analytics team used the cataloguing process in 2018 to help Regional Youth Employment Coalition members better understand the youth employment landscape in St. Louis. Ready by 21 and the team continue to look for opportunities to improve outcomes through improved systems understanding.

In the spirit of continuous learning, transparency, and building regional capacity, Ready by 21 St. Louis is publishing white papers on projects completed by its Foundational Teams that could be useful for other organizations and coalitions that are working on important regional issues.