

# Develop and maintain quality competences : the role of networks in the French Official Statistical Service

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## Abstract

The Quality policy of the French Official Statistical Service (SSP) is: “integrating quality into processes, with the aim of securing and improving efficiency”. This cannot be achieved without disseminating a Quality culture among all staff, which is an important issue given the territorial and functional organisation of the SSP. In addition, quality is a cross-functional area for which maintaining skills is specific.

To face these challenges, the Quality unit has set up two networks of Quality experts (one in Regional Offices and the other in Ministerial Statistical Offices), who have two major missions.

On the one hand, they are responsible for promoting the Quality culture within their entity, through training or communication actions. To do this, they benefit from the training system designed and regularly updated by the Quality unit, and are provided with *ad hoc* support and materials that can be adapted to local situations and the target audience.

On the other hand, they lead the development of their entity's Quality strategy and support teams in implementing the resulting actions. The active participation of agents in concrete Quality initiatives helps to maintain their skills in this area. To this end, the Quality unit provides ongoing support for the networks, based on the sharing of experience.

The effectiveness of the Quality networks is enhanced by the strong coordination of the SSP by INSEE and by the policy of staff mobility, which encourages the exchange of practices and the dissemination of knowledge.

After outlining the challenges and specific features of disseminating a Quality culture, this article will present the organisation of Quality experts into networks, the cornerstone of developing and maintaining the quality skills of SSP staff.

**Keywords:** quality experts' networks, quality training.

## 1. Introduction

Quality pervades all the work carried out by statisticians. Implementing data monitoring procedures, communicating about revised results, conducting a user satisfaction survey: these are all examples where statisticians are unknowingly involved in quality. The contours of quality in statistics are difficult to define and it is a field that can suffer from many preconceptions. It can often be equated with control, and breaches of quality can be seen as questioning the work of individuals and teams. In order to dispel these possible misunderstandings and remove any possible reticence, it is essential to disseminate a

“Quality culture for all”, based in particular on developing and maintaining the quality competences of all the employees of the French Official Statistical Service (SSP).

If the initial training of each member of staff includes an awareness of quality, it is obvious that knowledge on this subject erodes if continuous training does not take over or if communication actions on quality are not organised. Throughout their career, statisticians attend training courses directly related to the position they hold, but not necessarily courses on cross-disciplinary subjects such as quality. Within the SSP, the decision was made to set up networks of Quality experts close to the operational teams. These networks are responsible in particular for promoting the appropriation of a Quality culture.

After presenting the genesis of the SSP's two Quality networks, the article will focus on the two levels set up to develop and maintain the quality competences of staff, the Quality experts being the cornerstone of the system. We will see how the animation set up by the Quality Unit allows the sharing of skills with the Quality experts of the networks and how they carry out their missions and thus disseminate the skills and good practices in Quality to as many people as possible.

## **2. Presentation of Quality experts' networks**

The French Official Statistical Service (SSP) is defined by French Act no 51-711 of 7 June 1951 on the Legal Obligation, Coordination and Confidentiality in Statistical Matters. It is made up of the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) and the Ministerial Statistical Offices (MSOs), which carry out statistical operations in their area of expertise. In application of the national and European regulatory framework, INSEE coordinates the production of public statistics of the MSOs. In addition to this functional organisation of the SSP, INSEE has a territorial dimension, as it comprises not only a Directorate-General (DG) but also 15 Regional Offices, some of which having several entities<sup>1</sup>.

Quality has always been part of the work of statisticians, whether they work for the Directorate-General, the Regional Offices or the MSOs. Although there are many Quality initiatives, they are not, at first, really identified as such nor harmonised with each other. With the adoption of the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP) in 2005, quality is gradually being structured within the SSP. In 2012, the creation of the Quality unit at the DG marked

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<sup>1</sup> The Territorial Reform (French Act no 2015-29 of 16 January 2015 on the delimitation of regions, regional and departmental elections and changing to the electoral calendar) established a new division of metropolitan France into 13 regions instead of 22. INSEE's Regional Offices have been reorganised: 13 have retained their status and 9 have been transformed into entities. There are also 2 Regional Offices in the overseas territories.

the will to develop an integrated approach to quality by moving towards greater systematisation, formalisation and consistency of practices. This will was reinforced by the 2014 Peer Review, one of whose recommendations was to develop a "systematic and integrated implementation strategy and framework for embedding quality management throughout the national statistical system".

In response to the recommendations of the Peers, since 2014, the SSP's Quality policy consists in "integrating Quality into processes with the aim of securing processes and improving efficiency". To implement this policy and build the resulting strategy, the SSP has set up appropriate governance, with the creation in 2015 of the Strategic Quality Committee (Cosaq), a body made up of the directors of the DG, as well as representatives of regional directors and heads of MSOs. But beyond the awareness of the hierarchy, the Quality policy, which represents the target to be reached, cannot be approached without the mobilisation of all staff and the presence of relays close to the operational levels. Thus, the Quality unit has set up two "decentralised" networks of Quality experts: one in the MSOs and the other in the Regional Offices of INSEE.

### **2.1 The Quality experts' network in the MSOs**

INSEE coordinates the SSP at both strategic and operational levels. The Quality unit is the guarantor of the quality methods and tools implemented within the SSP. In 2017, it developed Quality guidelines that identify the points on which the Director General of INSEE must be provided with information to ensure the quality of the statistics produced within the MSOs. One of these guidelines concerns the appointment in each MSO of a Quality correspondent who has completed an appropriate training course. France has 16 MSOs, which vary greatly in terms of staff numbers, work, position in the Ministry's organisation chart, etc. The MSO's Quality expert may be the head of the MSO, his or her deputy, head of a Quality unit or in some cases be a non-INSEE employee. The network of Quality experts in MSOs therefore includes staff with different statuses and for whom the amount of time devoted to quality varies greatly.

### **2.2 The Quality experts' network in the Regional Offices**

Unlike the MSOs, whose work is complementary to that of INSEE, the Regional Offices are fully involved in the INSEE's statistical production activities. This makes it all the more important to have a coordinated network of regional experts.

Since the end of the 2000s, some regions have had a Quality correspondent. The creation of the Quality unit, the second Peer Review and then the Territorial Reform have encouraged

the search for efficiency gains and the formalisation, in 2017, of a regional Quality network, with one Quality expert per Regional Office. Some of these experts work full-time, but the majority work part-time, sometimes combining their role with that of head of department. As in MSOs, the situation varies greatly from one region to another, this can be explained by the history of the Regional Office and the local context.

Quality experts in MSOs and in Regional Offices constitute two distinct networks that the Quality unit trains and supports to move towards a common objective: disseminating, developing and maintaining the quality competences of the SSP's staff. To achieve this objective, the Quality experts have been assigned four main tasks: promoting the Quality culture, contributing to the development of a local Quality strategy (Quality actions plan in Regional Offices and Quality roadmap in MSOs), implementing, managing or supporting Quality actions, and finally, participating in the activities of their network.

### **3. The role of the Quality unit with Quality experts**

#### **3.1 Training**

The Quality unit has designed an *ad hoc* training programme for networks' experts. The first part of this programme is a one-day training course for trainers on raising awareness of quality in the SSP. The aim of this training is twofold. At first, to reinforce Quality experts' knowledge of quality in official statistics. The course provides a *minimum viable product* on quality: background, the European Statistics Code of Practice, governance, the SSP's quality policy and strategy, etc. This *minimum viable product* represents the basic knowledge that Quality experts will have to pass on in turn during a quality awareness training session. In addition, the training includes a pedagogical component which consists of providing Quality experts with the keys to implementing the quality awareness training in their entity (MSO, Regional Office). The Quality unit provides training materials including notes for the course (key points to emphasise, questions to ask, etc.) which Quality experts can use when they become trainers themselves. In addition, volunteer Quality experts can take advantage of this training day for trainers to practise and present the local application of the SSP's Quality strategy.

The training programme also includes an advanced cycle devoted to quality tools developed by the Quality unit. The advanced cycle comprises 12 hours of training divided into four sequences based on the method for implementing a Quality approach: description, risk analysis, Quality actions plan and process review. The training is made operational through the presentation of local examples, practical case studies and the exchange of good

practices: what comitology should be put in place during a Quality approach? how should a process review be organised? etc. The aim of the advanced cycle is to make the networks' Quality experts as independent as possible in responding to requests for support. Moreover, a "feedback" day (Retex) is proposed a few months after the initial sessions. The aim of this Retex is to discuss the Quality work carried out by the training participants, the methods used and, more generally, the usefulness of the training. The Retex is also an opportunity to share questions and improvements to be incorporated into the four sequences.

Finally, the Quality unit has designed an e-learning programme that is accessible to all staff. The "Qualiquiz" is a fun and educational way for everyone to test their knowledge of the CoP and how the SSP responds to it. The questions in this regularly updated quiz complement the training provided by Quality experts.

Thanks to this training programme, the networks' Quality experts are equipped to become not only technicians but also quality ambassadors. They have a sound basis knowledge to carry out their specific tasks as Quality experts. However, training is not the only way to develop and, above all, maintain the quality competences of Quality experts. To complement this, the Quality unit offers an ongoing support to the networks.

### **3.2 Supporting**

Each of the two networks is run by a Quality expert from the DG, who has been appointed network's facilitator, in connection with INSEE's role in coordinating the SSP.

The aim of supporting the networks is to share ideas on subjects of common interest, with a view to clarifying and standardising some procedures. In practical terms, working groups are set up with volunteer experts. For example, the network of Quality experts of MSOs has worked on preparing the Peer Review, drawing up a catalogue of administrative data used by the SSP, and formalising a general revisions policy. In addition to monitoring Quality actions common to all the MSOs, the facilitator of the MSO's Quality experts' network offers support on request for some specific needs. This support has, for example, taken the form of a reference documentation for the re-engineering of a production line or the overhaul of an agreement circuit. As with any network, the Quality experts' networks depend on the involvement of their members and are fed on the sharing of information and good practices. The facilitator of the Regional Offices' Quality experts' network organises monthly remote meetings where Quality process approaches and various Quality projects are presented, whether they have been carried out at the Directorate-General or at the Regional Offices. At these meetings, the regional Quality experts also receive all the information they need to draw up the Regional Offices' annual Quality action plans. Regional Quality experts also

have access to a community on the INSEE's intranet. As well as being a shared space for storing documents, the community offers a forum where members can ask questions, discuss their practices and put forward new ideas. As the majority of network support is provided remotely, networks' facilitators have introduced one or two in-person seminars a year. These seminars develop team spirit and mutual support.

The exchanges that take place in each network are an opportunity to maintain the competences acquired during training and to share good practices. By shedding critical light on the advantages and limitations of the methods and tools developed by the Quality unit, they can be a source of improvement.

Thanks to this combination of training and specific support, networks' Quality experts play a decisive role in developing the competences of local teams. Close to their colleagues and their concerns, they are able to provide relevant and appropriate information, making it easier for them to appropriate a "Quality culture". The competences passed on to as many people as possible are then maintained through the development of the local Quality strategy and the implementation of concrete actions arising from this strategy.

## **4. The role of Quality experts with all staff**

### **4.1 Promoting "Quality culture for all"**

As Quality ambassadors, networks' Quality experts help to maintain and develop the quality competences of all the staff in their entity. This mission can be carried out in different ways, depending on the ambitions of managers and the target audience.

With a view to raising awareness of quality among all employees, the Quality expert deploys the quality awareness training he had followed before as an apprentice trainer. He keeps a close watch to illustrate what he says with practical examples that speak to the staff and make it easier to grasp the concepts. He can also organise specific sessions at the request of some employees, for example as part of preparation for internal competitive exams.

Training for managers may be extended to include quality methods and tools. The aim is for managers to be able to propose and carry out Quality projects with greater autonomy, and ultimately to integrate Quality into their day-to-day work. The competences of Quality experts can be passed on to managers in workshops, which make the lessons learned more concrete. Training sessions detail generic models for describing processes, and tools for monitoring and steering quality. They also act as a sounding board for certain information shared within networks of Quality experts.

In addition to training courses, the Quality expert can organise one-off events, such as internal communication actions dedicated to a particular theme. The information received from the network of experts can be communicated to staff members: presentation of the Peer Review, the national Quality strategy, national projects, etc. Highlighting the Quality work carried out locally makes a major contribution to spreading the Quality culture.

Acculturation to quality cannot be long-lasting unless knowledge is put into practice. While managers are at the forefront of building their entity's Quality strategy, all staff are more involved in carrying out Quality actions aimed at improving their processes. By supporting the implementation of these initiatives, the networks' Quality experts maintain their competences and play a central role in maintaining the competences of their colleagues.

#### **4.2 Supporting the construction of a local Quality strategy**

With trained managers and aware teams, the local Quality strategy can be built effectively. Armed with the appropriate methods, managers are able to establish a clear diagnosis of their service's situation. Moreover, thanks to the knowledge they have acquired, they are able to propose Quality actions that strengthen the compliance of their work with the CoP and are in line with the national Quality strategy. The more the teams have acquired the fundamentals of Quality awareness training, the more relevant the local Quality strategy will be to the needs of the different services.

Quality experts assist managers and their teams in drawing up the local Quality strategy, as the reference person for quality matters. It is the Quality expert's responsibility to coordinate all the proposed Quality actions, ensuring that the strategy defined is internally consistent, and to seek out any synergies. This last point is particularly important if the entity is made up of several geographically distant entities, as in the case of multi-site Regional Offices. The Quality expert is also responsible for checking that consistency with the national Quality strategy is guaranteed. In some cases, Quality experts must be more proactive in defining the local strategy. If so, they must provide dynamics or even gather information on needs in order to propose actions themselves. They can also take the lead on very cross-functional issues involving several services.

#### **4.3 Participating in Quality actions**

Once the Quality strategy has been defined, the actions that make it up must be implemented. This implementation is mainly the responsibility of the teams and represents a concrete application of what has been learned. It will be all the more acceptable if the teams have been involved in drawing up the corresponding action. It is particularly interesting for a

manager to discuss Quality work during annual professional interviews and to include its implementation in the objectives of the staff concerned. Once they have been made aware of quality, the staff in charge of carrying out an action will experience it more as an integral part of their work than as a constraint imposed by their superiors. Documenting one's work, writing a procedure sheet or producing a tool that meets an identified need are examples of Quality actions that give concrete expression to the Quality culture and demonstrate its usefulness. Depending on their availability, managers can take charge of actions that require particular expertise in terms of methodology and tools.

The Quality expert can provide support for larger-scale initiatives. For example, according to their competences and position, Quality experts can provide valuable assistance during a risk analysis: they can usefully lead a brainstorming session to identify the risks weighing on the process. Generally speaking, and depending on whether or not they have a full-time position, Quality experts may be called upon to take charge of major actions, cross-functional actions or actions relating to sensitive situations, for which their neutrality and know-how will be assets.

## **5. Conclusion**

Thanks to the networks of Quality experts, quality is disseminated within the SSP. As in many areas, a better understanding of the subject helps to overcome preconceptions. The training courses, of which Quality experts are the keystone, are gradually achieving their objective of spreading a "Quality culture for all". Quality experts are also having a knock-on effect within their entities, helping teams to develop and implement a local Quality strategy. Indeed, maintaining quality competences requires a practical application of theoretical knowledge.

Networking has proved its worth, but in a context of shrinking human resources, the tensions that can arise in teams compromise the maintaining of cross-functional activities such as Quality. Communication efforts must therefore be stepped up to demonstrate the help that Quality approaches can provide in tense situations. It is also necessary to make the methods used more flexible, so that Quality work is less time-consuming and better adapted to the needs of the teams.

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