

Distribute: Strategic Assessment Summary Report

This case study describes the results of a project undertaken by ISDS to assess the state of the Distribute project and to develop a strategic plan for its future in light of ISDS strategic objectives and the evolving surveillance landscape.

Introduction

Distribute, the Distributed Surveillance Taskforce for Real-time Influenza Burden Tracking and Evaluation project, began in 2006 as a pilot effort by the International Society for Disease Surveillance (ISDS) to demonstrate a new model for sharing surveillance information among jurisdictions. The goal was to harness local public health systems and expertise and to work collaboratively to improve surveillance practice and population health. Over its four-year period, Distribute has achieved many successes and demonstrated some new best practices with regard to syndromic surveillance. To assess the state of Distribute and develop a strategic plan for its future, ISDS contracted with a consultant to perform in-depth interviews with some of Distribute's key stakeholders.

Methods

A total of 18 interviews were conducted: nine with the ISDS Board members, five with members from the Distribute Community of Practice (CoP), two with ISDS staff, and two with ISDS Funders (CDC and PHII). Interview questions assessed:

- Perceptions of Distribute and its various components;
- Distribute's successes and areas for growth and improvement;
- How Distribute's activities fit into the current direction of surveillance and with the CDC's BioSense redesign project in particular; and
- Whether the ISDS should continue to manage Distribute given the Society's mission.

Stakeholders were also asked to comment on Distribute's five main business processes (Data Management; Data Display and Real-Time Analysis; Community of Practice; System Evaluation and Development; and Surveillance Policy Analysis).

Perceptions of Distribute

"Distribute is a grassroots distributed surveillance system with the idea of providing a comprehensive picture of flu activity nationwide."

Among Board members and staff, the overarching theme in the responses was that Distribute was a **community effort** to share data and information. Funders also stressed the primary importance of the CoP.

While the CoP members interviewed saw Distribute as a combination of a **community** of people doing influenza surveillance on separate but connected populations, as well as a **system**, they stressed its value as a tool that allows their community to share data across jurisdictions.

Distribute Successes

"The success is the fact that you have health departments getting together and collaborating together. It's the people that sit behind this network."

When asked to comment on Distribute's successes, the main themes that emerged among all interviewees include the project's success at:

- Facilitating data sharing among health departments from jurisdictions around the country to illustrate trends in influenza-like illness (ILI).
- Illustrating a new and better way of conducting syndromic surveillance. It has also influenced the CDC's strategy with regard to the BioSense redesign.
- Developing an active Community of Practice
- Spurring new efforts in the field of syndromic surveillance.

Future Growth and Development

"The business challenge for ISDS is to create more clarity around what is being offered by Distribute and put a name to that. What's the central value proposition?"

On the areas of Distribute that need further work or development, the following themes and recommendations emerged:

- Distribute should focus on strengthening and fostering its core asset, the CoP. There was some sentiment expressed that much more could be done to engage community participants. As ISDS builds its capacity, it will be better positioned to support and serve the CoP.
- ISDS needs to network/collaborate with CDC and other important partners. While ISDS has a strong membership of academic and public health practice members, it needs to parlay that strength by working with and aligning priorities with others involved in surveillance (e.g., CDC, CSTE, ASTHO, NACCHO).
- Distribute should focus on evaluation and continued innovation. There was a request for ISDS to facilitate small projects among the CoP with the aim of furthering the understanding of surveillance system data and information. Plans for an ISDS Pilot Study Program are underway.
- Distribute needs to tie into the Meaningful Use initiative, especially for day-to-day situational awareness and notifiable disease reporting, with reduced emphasis on early outbreak detection.

Distribute in the Current Surveillance Landscape

“The BioSense redesign still has a lot of unanswered questions, making it hard to know how Distribute will fit in. History has shown that it is useful to continue to do what we are doing and adapt as the BioSense redesign comes into focus.”

When asked how Distribute fits into the current surveillance landscape and in particular the BioSense redesign, the comments were in general agreement that while the data part of Distribute may eventually migrate to a new platform, such as a “cloud environment”, the CoP participants stressed that Distribute has a unique niche and that they are hesitant to, “give up Distribute so quickly for BioSense” until it is proven to be a system that meets their needs.

ISDS is working with the BioSense redesign team to provide guidance to assist the creation of a new system

that features what CoP members have expressed as high priority, notably one that is agile, community driven, innovative, and focused on questions of importance to public health practice.

Moving Forward

In January 2010, ISDS embarked on a long-range strategic planning process to establish a multi-year plan to lead the ISDS into the future. The process resulted in the development of a three-year strategic plan, including the identification of issues facing the organization and the development of goals, objectives, and priority projects to address those issues.

When asked if it makes sense for the ISDS to continue to manage Distribute given its mission, the CoP members felt similarly to the Board members and Staff in that Distribute does fit in with the ISDS mission. Questions were raised about how to manage Distribute, especially at the expense of other endeavors, in light of limited resources and expertise. The overall sentiment was that ISDS should focus on cultivating the CoP and continue to manage the Distribute system at least until it is evident that it makes sense to make changes.

Conclusions

Managing the Distribute project in some capacity is in line with the ISDS mission and overall goal to advance the science and practice of surveillance. The strategic assessment of the Distribute project resulted in a number of key recommendations for ISDS:

- Strengthen and foster the CoP.
- Build relationships with key partners.
- Evaluate existing surveillance systems and practice and continue to innovate.
- Enhance the system and continue with projects, such as the ILI standardization project.

In order to operationalize the recommendations of the stakeholders interviewed for this assessment, ISDS will incorporate new objectives and activities into the ISDS Strategic Plan and the workplan for 2011-2012, with approval from the ISDS Board of Directors.

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ISDS Mission

ISDS works to improve population health by advancing the science and practice of surveillance to support timely and effective prevention and response. We facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration, and promote and conduct research, education, and advocacy.