

The Data Learning Community

for small and start-up social enterprises

FINAL REPORT



The Data Conversation supports non-profits, social enterprises and community organisations with their data.

We're a social enterprise, and one of the long-term outcomes that we aim to contribute to is 'purpose-driven organisations use data effectively to achieve their goals'. We believe non-profits, social enterprises and other community organisations should have the right tools, support, data access and sustainable funding to enable data-driven design and delivery.

One of the problems that we're interested in is: 'how can small and start-up for-purpose organisations be supported to do data and impact measurement work in a way that is affordable and appropriate for their context?'.

The grant from Social Enterprise Australia to deliver a Social Enterprise Development Initiative Peer Learning and Support learning community enabled us to pilot the Data Learning Community for small and start-up social enterprises. The aim was to build knowledge and share learnings related to collecting, managing and using data.

The Data Learning Community ran monthly from January to May 2026.

This report answers the key questions below to provide an overview of our activities, reach, quality, outcomes and learning.



What did we do?

Who did we reach?

How well did we do it?

What difference did it make?

What did we learn? What's next?



What did
we do?

We started with an Expression of Interest form to find out what topics small and start-up social enterprises would be most interested in discussing at the Data Learning Community, and the preferred frequency, timing and format for the sessions.

We distributed the EOI via Understorey, LinkedIn and people in our network. We received 8 responses.

We found a strong preference for monthly meetings, but no clear preferred time of day. Participants were most interested in sharing challenges to get input and ideas and equally interested in hearing from subject matter experts and other social enterprises.



What is the biggest concern
or challenge for your
organisation when it comes
to data?

"Not having the right systems in place so missing data collection opportunities"

"Data management, clarity of intent in gathering and using data, privacy issues, security issues especially as we make decisions about digital platforms and systems"

"Limited capacity and resources to systematically capture, analyse, and communicate the depth of our social impact."

"Understanding it"

"Impact measurement"

"Using it to secure funding"

We convened five sessions of the Data Learning Community, on the following topics:

January Planning what to collect	A good plan is a great place to get started with data. We'll share some ideas for how to get clear about what you need, how to take your first steps towards an impact measurement framework, and tips for making sure what you collect will be useful. We'll have time to share your own challenges and successes with planning, and then time for any other data-related topics you're keen to discuss.
February Managing data safely and securely	Data breaches, cyberattacks and scams - oh my! Keeping data safe and secure is a worry for many small businesses, including social enterprises. We'll have a guest presentation from Cyber Wardens on how to protect your data, and where to find resources and support. We'll have time to share your own challenges and tips for security, and then time for any other data-related topics you're keen to discuss.
March Managing data on a budget	Many small and start-up social enterprises have tight budgets. So how do you collect and manage data without spending a fortune on subscriptions, platforms and consultants? We'll share some ideas for low-cost tools and approaches, and how to make the most of what you have. We'll have time to share your own challenges and tips for data on a budget, and then time for any other data-related topics you're keen to discuss.
April Collecting stories, managing stories, telling stories	Data isn't just numbers! We'll talk about collecting, managing and using stories as a form of data. We'll also share some tips for using data to tell the story of your social enterprise. We'll have time to share your own challenges and tips related to stories, and then time for any other data-related topics you're keen to discuss.
May Systems change & Seedkit	For the final session of the data learning community, we'll be looking at systems change and advocacy! They are tricky areas for measuring impact so we'll talk about how you can get started. We'll also be learning more about Seedkit - a free platform that supports for-purpose organisations to better understand, measure and communicate their impact.

Managing data safely and securely



What was a piece of gold from the webinar?



What is a win you've had when it comes to managing data safely and securely?



What is a worry or a question you have when it comes to managing data safely and securely?



Across the five sessions we experimented with dedicating different amounts of time for:

- guest speakers
- group discussions and peer advice
- content presentations from our team.

Managing data on a budget

Wins



Funder being surprisingly approachable!

Building relationships and having conversation with funders

Tips for maximising Excel
- Use Forms
- Look at formulas

Wonderings



How do you know if it's meaningful and useful?

Free and low cost data tools

When to leave Excel?

Warnings



Don't collect too much!

Being cautious about accepting funding with high expectations

Use the right tool for the right job (mailchimp is not a CRM)

Check the limits of free systems

Review the number of seats you have for software!

Check integrations
Think about team skills

Version control

We made five tipsheets, available on our website:
www.thedataconversation.au

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Data Conversation website. The navigation bar includes links for Home, About The Data Conversation, How we can help, Resources, and a prominent orange button labeled 'Let's start a conversation'. Below the navigation bar, there are five tipsheet cards, each with a lightbulb icon and the text 'Tips for small and start-up social enterprises'. The cards are: 'Managing data safely and securely', 'Managing data on a budget', 'Planning', 'Sharing data', and 'Managing data safely and securely'. A red box highlights the content of the 'Managing data on a budget' tipsheet. The highlighted content includes a title 'Managing data on a budget', a paragraph about tight budgets, a 'Read More' button, and a detailed section titled 'Managing data on a budget' which includes a 'Budget for the whole data cycle' diagram and a 'Watch out for hidden costs!' section.

Managing data on a budget

Small and start-up social enterprises often have tight budgets. Here are some practical tips from the data learning community on how you can improve your data management, even if you don't have time or money for major changes.

Managing data on a budget

Before you invest in new tools, spend some time reflecting on what is really underpinning frustrations or challenges with data, and what small steps might help.

For example, you might be looking to invest in a new data management system because entering data directly into a spreadsheet (such as Excel or Google Sheets) can be fiddly and error prone. But if you have a spreadsheet program, you probably also have a form program (such as Microsoft Forms or Google Forms). Setting up a data entry form can make a big difference to both data quality and the data entry experience, at no extra cost. You may still need to upgrade eventually, but it will reduce frustration in the short term.

Watch out for hidden costs!

When considering a new tool, watch out for free deals that expire, limits on the number of records or users that you can have, or a pricing structure that will quickly become expensive if your social enterprise grows. Remember that cheap or free tools still come with costs. The license might be free, but you also need to think about costs associated with set-up, maintenance and training.

Budget for the whole data cycle

The data cycle is a way of understanding the journey that data takes through your social enterprise. You get the best value from your investment in data when you make it through the full cycle, when you have data to share with others and use for decision making.

Plan
Clarifying what's important and choosing what to measure

Use
Turning insights into actions, measures, and change

Collect
Gathering information to weigh that works for your team, your clients and your community

Manage
Keeping data safe, organized, and ready to use

Analyse
Understanding what the information is telling you

Share
Communicating your story using data visualizations

So when you're thinking about investing in data, zoom out and consider the full data cycle. For example, you might be excited about designing an impact measurement framework, but have you budgeted for how you'll implement that framework? You might be keen to start a survey, but have you thought about the time required to analyse and use that data?

You don't have to do it all at once, but you do want to make sure you're strategic in how you use your limited resources for the best results.

We also created a series of quick tips, which we shared on social media.

www.linkedin/company/thedataconversation



Make the most of what you have already!

DC
THE DATA CONVERSATION Tips for managing data on a budget



Have good conversations about the cost of data

DC
THE DATA CONVERSATION Tips for managing data on a budget



You don't have to start from scratch – use your business model canvas as a starting point



Watch out for the limits on free or cheap introduction deals

DC
THE DATA CONVERSATION Tips for managing data on a budget



Keep learning!

DC
THE DATA CONVERSATION Tips for managing data on a budget



Review your tools regularly!

DC
THE DATA CONVERSATION Tips for managing data on a budget

We also ran an Open Learning online event, presenting a webinar on good data practice.

understorey

Having Better Conversations about Data: Tips for Social Enterprises

Join this one hour webinar with The Data Conversation to explore what good data practice can look like and gain tips for how to improve your practice over time.

0:02 / 43:02

Having Better Conversations about Data: Tips for Social Enterprises

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We created a reflection tool to accompany the webinar.

Data cycle reflection tool

Plan	Use
What you're doing well	What you're doing well
What you want to work on	What you want to work on

Collect	Share
What you're doing well	What you're doing well
What you want to work on	What you want to work on

Manage	Analyse
What you're doing well	What you're doing well
What you want to work on	What you want to work on

THE DATA CONVERSATION
Nurturing the growth of data, and conversation, at a time

The webinar included some of our favourite tips.

Think of your data like a garden:

Think of it like planting a garden bed, not building a garden shed

THE DATA CONVERSATION
thedataconversation.au

Who did we reach?

Western Australia and ACT tied for the most participants.



Thirty people registered for the Data Learning Community.

Three people were from organisations providing services to social enterprises but were not small or start-up social enterprises themselves. We let these people know they weren't a good fit for the learning community but two of them accepted our invitation to have a virtual coffee and share lessons learned.

One person chose the 'mailing list only' option, which we offered to reach those who couldn't attend sessions but wanted to receive the tipsheets.

Of the remaining 26 people, 16 people attended at least one session, giving us an overall attendance rate of 62%.

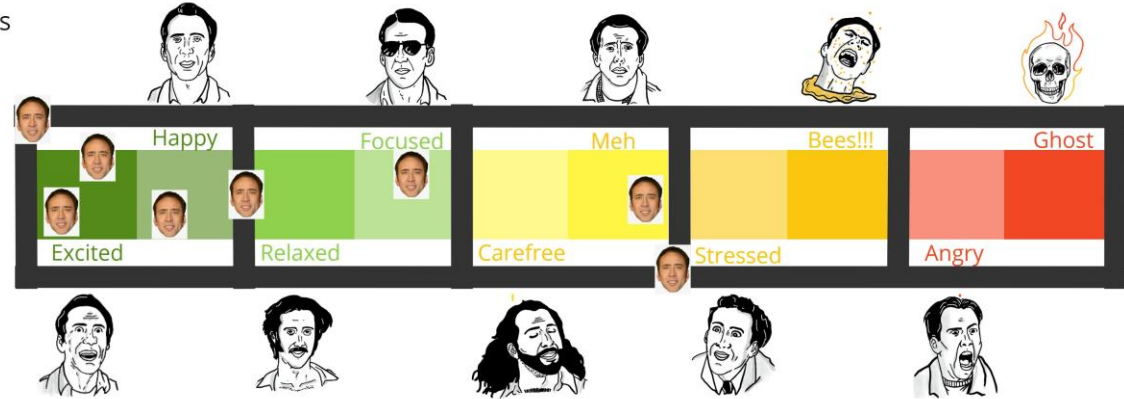
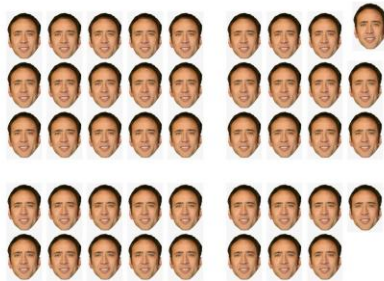
Webinars tend to get a 30-50% attendance rate compared to sign-ups, so we consider this a great conversation rate.

Each individual session had about 18 registrations and between 4-8 attendees.

Unsurprisingly, the social enterprises who attended were *mostly* excited and positive about data...

The Cage Gauge

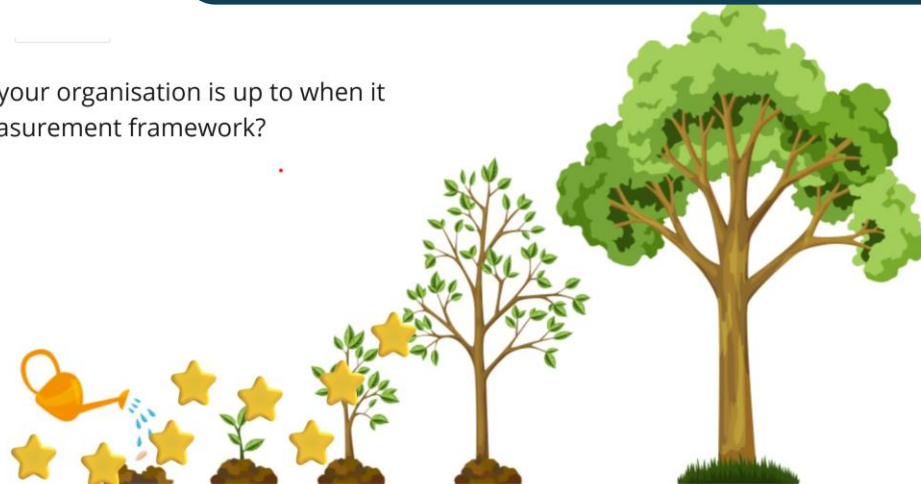
Which Nicholas Cage best represents how you feel about your social enterprise's data practices?



...but were at the early stages of implementing impact measurement and working with data.

Seed to tree

On a scale from seed to tree, where would you say your organisation is up to when it comes to creating and implementing an impact measurement framework?

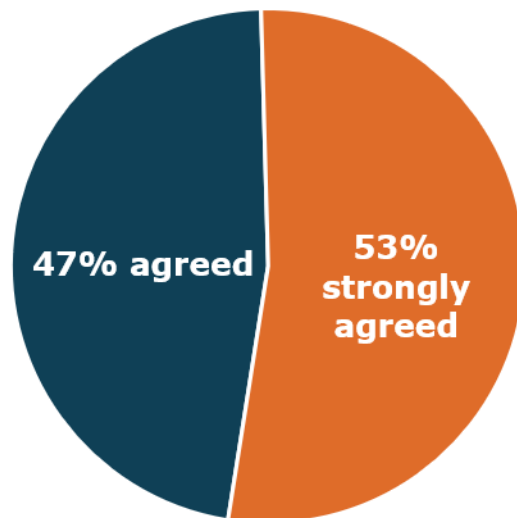


How well did
we do it?

It was lovely to receive positive feedback from participants, and our post-session surveys consistently showed that people felt that the Data Learning Community was a good use of their time.

For us, an important indicator of whether the sessions were of good quality was whether busy social entrepreneurs thought it was worthwhile to come back. Over half of the participants attended more than one session. Some organisations sent different people to different sessions, with 64% of organisations attending more than one session.

Across the five sessions, all participants **agreed** or **strongly agreed** that the session was a good use of their time



Thanks so much
for organising this
series; it has been
very helpful!

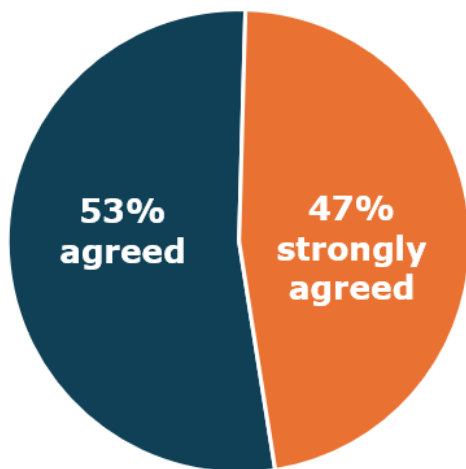
Fabulous
sessions, thank
you very much

What difference did it make?

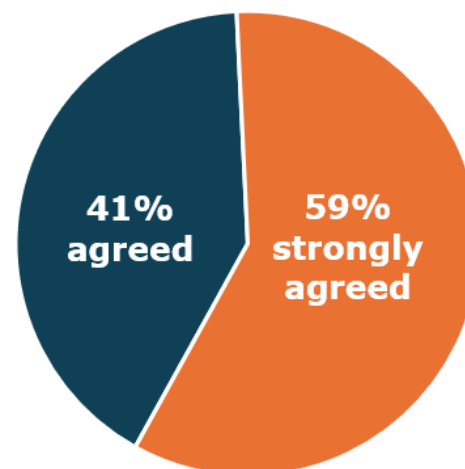
We can demonstrate positive short-term outcomes from the sessions: our end-of-session surveys consistently showed that the participants had learned something new (either from The Data Conversation team or from another participant) and that they thought they would implement something from the session in their organisation.

Unfortunately, we don't know if the sessions had longer term outcomes because we didn't receive any responses to an additional follow-up survey asking whether participants implemented something in the months following the sessions, and whether it made a difference to their organisation. It was a busy time of year!

Across the five sessions, all participants **agreed** or **strongly agreed** that they learned something new from the session



Across the five sessions, all participants **agreed** or **strongly agreed** that they thought they would implement something from the session





What did we learn?

What did we learn about delivering a data learning community?

- We always expected to make a significant in-kind contribution to delivering the Data Learning Community, particularly because we wanted two staff members to attend the sessions and learn from the experience. However, the project required more time than anticipated. We learned from this pilot that continuing the learning community as a fee-for-service offering would not be viable, particularly if it continued to include content presentations and post-session resources such as tipsheets.
- We were surprised that arranging guest speakers didn't save much time compared to delivering the content ourselves; it simply shifted the workload from content creation to logistics. Reaching out to guest speakers did help build our connection with other organisations, and connected the learning community participants to other services and resources.
- We delivered the project while operating as a small, start-up social enterprise ourselves. In addition to our projects, we were also developing our branding and website at this time, which delayed our delivery of the tipsheets. We learned a lot about our capacity, and the amount of in-kind work that is realistic for us to deliver at our current stage of growth.
- We learned how lovely the social enterprise community is, and how appreciative they are for support on this topic. The participants made it all worthwhile!

What did we learn about reach?

- We found reach harder than expected. We had many enthusiastic responses when we suggested the idea to people in our network, and we know data is an important topic for social enterprises. We thought we might have to manage for over-subscription, but instead we only just met our target of six organisations per session. As a new organisation, the current state of social media makes broad reach to new connections very difficult. Our most effective strategy was asking for support and promotion from other learning community convenors. The high number of participants from the ACT reflects the support we received from our state peak (SECNA) and social enterprise incubator (Millhouse). We're not sure why we had such a great response from WA! For future initiatives we would need to build our networks and direct connections.
- Part of the challenge was communicating who we would include as a social enterprise, particularly when trying to reach start-ups, many of which are not yet accredited.

What did we learn about the needs and challenges for the sector?

- We heard that small social enterprises can be stuck in a 'Catch-22 situation' – they need data on their impact to get funding and support, but they don't have the funding or support to collect data on their impact. Smaller organisations don't have the scale needed to make significant investment in impact measurement feasible, but it's hard to scale without this data. Social enterprises often have additional costs associated with their mission, and the expectation of impact measurement adds a further burden.
 - It's a tricky space! Our message for participants was to start small, grow over time, and make the most of what they have.
-



- The Data Conversation will take some time to reflect on and explore ways to support small social enterprises with their data. In the immediate term, continuing the Data Learning Community isn't viable in our current budget for pro bono impact work, or as a participant-funded program.
- When we have budget, or if we can find funding, we're interested in trialling alternative models such as 1:1 coaching calls and cohort-based training.
- We'll continue to contribute to our local social enterprise communities, and other sector-wide initiatives to support for-purpose data maturity.

Apart from a learning community, what kind of support do you think would be most useful for YOU and your organisation in improving your data cycle? Eg training, toolkits, coaching, grants etc.

- "Grants are always helpful because of the staff time required to actually do good data collection and analysis, and also the cost of the systems and platforms which can be prohibitive and mean we end up reverting to the free tools"
- "Training"
- "All of these!"
- "Community at this point is a very helpful thing!"
- "These kinds of topics and networking"