

The numbers are starting to add up in statistics job field

BY EMILY JACKSON, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 3, 2010



Munir Sheikh, the former head of Statistics Canada, speaks at the statistics conference in Vancouver on Monday.

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

Statistics ain't what it used to be, it seems.

Indeed, it's now a sexy, exciting career opportunity. Demand for number crunchers is rising faster than ever, said Sastry Pantula, president of the American Statistical Association.

"The climate for statisticians is hot and getting hotter," said Pantula, who is in Vancouver for the largest statistics conference in North America, with nearly 5,600 statisticians attending the Joint Statistical Meetings at the Vancouver Convention Centre from Saturday through Thursday.

But statistics isn't only a hot topic for math geeks these days -- Canadians are now involved in an emotional debate about the importance of collecting and calculating information.

Debate is raging across the country about the federal government's decision to make the long form of the census voluntary. The decision culminated in the resignation of the head of Statistics Canada, Munir Sheikh, who addressed the conference Monday.

Answering questions at a panel discussion, Sheikh was guarded in expressing opinions, saying only that "some" argue the voluntary census will be "less reliable" and "won't provide the quality of information needed."

He stressed the importance of statistics for decision making, but would not discuss what advice he gave the government on the change in the census.

Federal Industry Minister Tony Clement has maintained that requiring people to fill out the long form encroaches on Canadians' privacy rights.

Pantula said he disagrees with a voluntary census because fewer, and only certain types of people, will respond.

"If you want to make public policy, whether it is on how you allocate money to different regions, or for health, or for transportation, you need data," Pantula said. "But not just any data -- good data."

Technology has made data so easy to collect that the role of statistician now revolves around sifting through the noise to find important nuggets of information, Pantula said. He calls this influx of information the "data tsunami." By finding ways to combine, connect and communicate between different data sets, Pantula said statisticians can "convert that tsunami into a nice surfing wave."

Whether it is health, climate, financial or security information, Pantula said statisticians play a key role in finding information for "everything that society needs."

And don't be fooled into thinking statistics is mundane.

"Sometimes there's this feeling that statistics is boring or something, but that's not the case," Pantula said.

Tyler McCormick, 27, is a student who finds statistics "exciting and challenging." He switched to a career in statistics because he wanted to dig for information to answer tough questions. He stopped studying sociology and now is getting his PhD in statistics at Columbia University in New York.

While it can be tough to sift through all the available data in today's information age, he said, it's still important.

"Everyone uses quantitative data to make decisions, whether they realize it or not."

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