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The Minister for Environment, Dick Roche has announced that a major effort will be made to clean up the inaccuracies in the Electoral Register in time for the next election. The Taoiseach has admitted this will involve a significant expense in terms of staff and cash resources, including hiring people to travel door to door.

In Information Quality terms this plan represents a perfect example of what is known as "Scrap and Rework". On its own, it will ensure that despite this cost and effort we will be back in the same unhappy position by the time of the election after that.

This might seem unintuitive- after all, how can fixing something that is broken be the wrong thing to do? Perhaps a simple analogy might help;

Who likes chocolate cake? Isn't it a pain when your face gets covered in chocolate from mashing handfuls of cake into your gob? But you can wipe your face (usually in your sleeve) and carry on. That's scrap and rework. A better solution is to wipe your face and take a smaller division of cake (a forkful). That is a change in the process based on an analysis of why you keep getting a chocolaty face, coupled with a scrap and rework task to set a baseline of cleanliness for your face that you will seek to maintain.

The Minister is right, insofar as scrap and rework looks like a good place to start, and when you say "Data Quality" to most people that's what they think, under the labels "data scrubbing", "data cleansing" or similar. However, it doesn't address the actual source of the poor information quality, much as wiping your face in your sleeve doesn't stop your face getting covered in chocolate.

Therefore, once you clean your database, you will very quickly find it filling up with duff data again. This eventually results in another round of scrap and rework to fix things again. This then leads people to say that Information Quality management doesn't work and costs lots of money. But scrap and rework isn't information quality management. It is a process step to improving the quality of your information but it is just one step in many that range from culture change (from apathy to active interest) to process change to training etc.

Databases are like lakes. No matter how many times you clean the lake, if you don't address the sources of 'pollution' (root causes, cake-eating processes) then you will never achieve good quality.

To put it in terms that legislators might find familiar, scrap and rework is like apologising and offering some compensation every time you punch a complete stranger in the face. A far better solution is to examine why it is you punch strangers in the face and stop doing it. Your apologies and offers of money to the injured fix the historical damage but do not prevent future occurrences.

Scrap and rework is costly. Scrap and rework on a repetitive institutionalised basis is futile, creating a sense of doing something about your Information quality without actually getting anywhere but burning a pile of cash to stand still. It is an important step in any information quality management programme. However, understanding your data capture processes and the root causes of your poor quality data and then acting to improve those processes to address those root causes are the components that contribute to a sustained improvement in quality.

Scrap and rework solves the problems of today at a short-term economic cost. However, it serves to bury the problems of tomorrow unless it takes place in tandem with process improvement to address root cause and the development of a 'Quality culture'.

To tie this back to the Electoral Register, to rely on scrap and rework would mean that we would get a clean register this time around at a point in time. However, over time the register would degrade in quality again, in the same way as your face gets dirty

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again if you don't change the way you eat your cake.

Now we have to put that chocolate cake down and get a fork!

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