How to put data at the heart of Digital Transformation: Reflecting on conversations at LocalGovCamp 2017

I attended the recent Local Government Camp event in Bristol as part of the Zaizi team. As well as conducting two workshops, one of the things we were keen to gauge from the local government attendees was, to what extent data exploitation is at the heart of business and service transformation.

Having spent much of 2017 working with organisations like Nesta and tracking exemplars in local government across the country. We've been aware of progress being made in using data to drive innovative service development. Our hope was to get a sense of real momentum from delegates highly focused on digital service delivery and best practice to re-shape how councils engage with their citizens and service delivery partners.

As part of our workshop we asked the two groups the same three questions:

• What services do you think could most benefit from high-quality data management?
• Is there sufficient expertise in your organisation in managing data?
• Do service and business leaders understand the potential of high quality and accessible data?

What services do you think could most benefit from high-quality data management?

In our workgroups, we spent the most time on this question and not surprising the answers varied per group based on experiences and types of organisation. However, across the workgroups, we covered most of the services from adult and child social care through to highways and Revs & Bens. The discussions rapidly became broader and deeper, leading into how data could be used to drive workforce development and manage staff retention better.

It was also clear that there is an opportunity to get better council performance data sets and really start to measure and improve service delivery. We also touched on the big issue of GDPR and compliance. All our attendees were aware of it and everyone had activities in place to manage the risk, at least in part and indeed several people mentioned that existing FOI and compliance requirements meant that some of the processes and systems were already in place. However, there wasn't a feeling of overall confidence that it was being handled well. A point I'll come back to.

Is there sufficient expertise in your organisation in managing data?

Having discussed the opportunity and state of play, we visited the perceived expertise in organisations around data management. The overall picture is not great. Yes, there are organisations with dedicated data teams and in some places data architects embedded within the service teams. But, overall the views were consistent, lack of funding, lack of knowledge, team silos and a lack of commitment from the top. In short, there's a lack of expertise in the sector and it feels a long way towards getting there.

Do service and business leaders understand the potential of high quality and accessible data?

The default response was no. Data and its real proactive use and management to drive improvement do not seem high up the council's agenda. On discussion, we concluded that the awareness is growing, that some of the case studies are helping, but there needs to be a push to really make the top table team understand that data, currently owned or gathered, has the power to radically change the scope and speed of service evolution.

To be clear though, awareness only has value if it leads to a firm funded commitment to build expertise, lead from the top and drive a cross-council approach to data. The people we talked with, felt that summit was a long way from reach right now.

So where do we go from here?

The conference was great, lots of enthusiasm around driving service change, new ways of delivering services, collaboration and using digital approaches. There were lots of examples of digital in action and new ways of doing things. However, it still feels like we are missing the big and real examples of a transformed council and there could be a real issue that we go around the same circles, gradually increasing the reach of transformation without ever really seizing the biggest opportunity, real-time data accessibility.

Perhaps at a fundamental level data is just not easy. At the abstract level, we all get it. It's easy to grasp and it's reasonably easy to start enthusing about the possibilities. However, once we get into the details it's a different story. Working with data crosses all the boundaries in a council, such as service towers, IT and digital, security and compliance and also thumps firmly into issues of trust, politics and plain old self-interest. It's hard.

So, what should we do about it? Well, it feels like it's a long way to the top if we're gonna rock 'n roll with our data. But I think we can all sense **it's a journey worth taking**. One conversation really stood out for me, when we talked in a group about shared access to social care and other data about troubled families. We quickly started talking about ways that data could be shared in a way that is sensitive to all the blockers, meaning that the answer is not one big data store, but a thought through data architecture that realises the goal shared data offers, but which tackles all the perceived clockers. These are the discussions we need more of.

So, here's how to put data at the heart of digital transformation:

1) Position an organisational approach to good data management. See accessibility as the goal and view GDPR and other compliance as a subset of that. Get it on the top table. There are a plenty of data events, go to them and get your leadership team to go.
2) Start thinking "Data First". Think about what you have, what you need and how it could be used real time to shape services.

3) Get on top of your IT. The tools and systems exist to get your data flowing in the council, with high-quality control and accessibility. "Legacy IT" is no excuse and rewards of success are vast.

4) Start small. Pick a particular area and start to architect your transformation around the data and prototype and refine at speed

5) Work with suppliers who know data. It does not need to be a huge cost, but time spent now will reap significant rewards

6) Finally, invest in skills across the business, ensure understanding data is a core competency.

At Zaizi we hope to carry on these discussions. We love to speak to councils about how they can optimise their data and if you want to try and get a quick win under your belts come and talk to us about our Digital Transformation in Day concept.

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