

## So, you've been tasked with writing a data strategy. Where should you start?

In one form or another, I've had a number of conversations recently that all start with the same question. "I've been tasked with writing a data strategy, where do I start?"

My reaction is always the same. I start a discussion about the organisation in question and what they are trying to do in the first place, and what the day to day challenges are in trying to do that. Most of the organisations that I'm talking to are in the business of delivering some kind of service to citizens, customers or businesses and they are typically organised around service offerings or processes. As we explore these service offerings I get a picture of what kind of data they are working with and what the unique challenges are for them.

At an appropriate point, I ask tactfully why this person in particular has been asked to write the data strategy and whether they think that they have everything they need to write a good data strategy. It's a loaded question, because I don't think that a data strategy should be written by a single individual.

If it is, then there's a good chance that it will never be approved or, even if it is, it will end up sitting on a file server somewhere, referenced occasionally, but never actually implemented.

There is value in the act of creating a data strategy as a group exercise. If data is important enough to your organisation to merit having a data strategy then it is worth the leadership spending some time together actually formulating why it is important. Sometimes the questions that are easiest to ask are the toughest to answer. Why do you need a data strategy? Why is data important to you at all? What would better data look like? What possibilities would it unlock? What would actually happen if you carry on as you are today without a data strategy?

These conversations are really worth having, because in my experience, people have wildly different expectations, and it's through exposing these differences that you can have the meaningful conversations about what's really important, where data fits into that, and critically what data is important.

Once the leadership team has a common understanding of why they need a data strategy and roughly what they expect it to contain, and roughly what they expect it to contain, the details can be worked out. But again, I would recommend that this be done by a group, and not by an individual. A group will bring different perspectives, and while that can be challenging it means that the end product will be more robust. Ideally the group should be representative of different functions within the organisation, each with a different set of priorities and views. Maybe outside help is useful, but if you are going to bring in consultants, they should be facilitators who can keep the group focused; they should not be writing the data strategy for you.

So, when someone tells me that they've been tasked with writing a data strategy and asking me where they should start, I take a deep breath and start asking them about what their organisation does. My aim, right from the beginning, is to persuade them that they cannot do this alone. They should start by questioning whoever tasked them in the first place, and they should aim to form a group with a clear mandate about why they need a data strategy in the first place and who needs to contribute to it for it to be valuable. Writing a data strategy is a team game.

Mark Humphries is a Managing Consultant at Civica, where he specialises in data management. His clients include the Bank of England, the Houses of Parliament and UK Export Finance.

For more information about how Civica can help you improve your data management, Please contact Mark at [Mark.Humphries@civica.co.uk](mailto:Mark.Humphries@civica.co.uk) or 01225475024.

