

UPGRADING HMT DDaT CAPABILITY

HMT struggles in the space of digital, data and modern analytics. This might be because it has stronger, more empowered policy officials than other departments which creates a different culture around analysis. However, this creates a weakness when we move to ways of working which require specialist knowledge, in particular software skills.

This weakness also represents the biggest single risk in the wider tech transformation program. Until HMT is a respected partner in this transformation program, I worry DDaT projects will be viewed through a cost centre lens alongside other Whitehall programs, rather than strategic investments to deliver better services, more cheaply.

HMT is developing a data science capability, but it is important to recognise that the skills of data science are not the same as DDaT. Data Scientists collate and analyse data, whereas DDaT focus on developing applications, features, and functionality for end-users. Therefore, developing a DDaT capability will improve the speed and impact of the DS work allowing HMT to gain ground on the rest of Whitehall, and become a leader rather than laggard.

Here, I put forward a plan to quickly build the DDaT capability in HMT using the same framework I have used to transform organisations, including FTSE 100/200 companies, start-ups and most recently Number 10 with 10ds.

The framework is simple. Chose a small group of people who have oversized leverage and impact, work closely with them, to learn and help solve their problems. Build out a programmatic solution that are valuable to them, and then use this as a case study to push out into the wider organisation.

For 10ds, we worked with the private office. Through projects such as HS2 & Covid, we showed the value of close analytical support. We then built out a policy dashboard to support the private office, and in doing so built out the infrastructure necessary to ingest data from departments. This allowed us to be seen as a credible partner across Whitehall, and therefore shape discussions rather than simply sign off.

The upcoming CSR provides a perfect opportunity for HMT to build a small DDaT team to support the decision-making spending team in the lead up. This team working with the CDDO office would help HMT in an area it has historically found it difficult, and in the process build out relationships and understand how HMT functions.

This would allow the team to then build out a product that is designed to support the spending teams over the CSR period. This product would likely programmatically ingest the data from departments, and produce the required metrics, and also allow HMT to explore the data so to understand why metrics have changed for better and worse.

As shown by the Covid dashboard, this will change discussions with departments from what is the trend in the data, to why do we see the trend in the data. To deliver this dashboard, we would need to establish the modern data infrastructure within HMT and ingest data from departments, additionally allowing the data science team and others to accelerate their own plan. This would also mean HMT would build relationships with other data teams in government, which will help gain access to data, but also demonstrate that HMT is an intelligent customer on DDaT.

This product could ultimately be expanded in a number of different directions. For example, it could be expanded to ensure that HMT statisticians and economists to easily access the data they need, or to build out further functionality to support other areas of policy making.

That this is valuable will be valuable is seen through the ONS work on levelling up, and the 10ds support in the SR spending review. My worry is without an HMT to hand off to, once these teams move on to other projects, HMT is left without the learning or ability to support this work and therefore it will have low impact.

While building out this product, the team also be working as internal advisors on DDaT issues within the HMT. Whether this is helping to ensure due diligence in the TAP process around large projects such as single log-on or IDP, or simply ensuring that a departments plan on automation are both viable and ambitious enough.

The advantage of the dual product/advisor approach is that it helps ensures that HMT is a participant in large-scale data projects allowing them to see what is actually occurring and scales the impact of the team across HMT, while also ensuring that the team is able to support ministers and senior officials when needed.

The cost of this project is likely to be that of the 10ds budget, circa. 2 million. Therefore, for this project to pay for itself, it needs to help remove £2 million. A rounding error on the Governments DDaT spend.