

CISCO RESPONSE TO MAKING OPEN DATA REAL: A PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Introduction

Cisco is a member of a number of associations (Intellect, Eurim, etc) that are due to submit a response to the Making Open Data Real: Public Consultation; and we support those submissions which reflect our views. However, as committed supporters of the Open Data initiative, we have decided to submit a brief, supplementary company response.

Cisco fully supports the government's programme on Open Data and is of the opinion that it could help create substantial social and economic value. The Consultation rightly highlights the fact that Open Data could offer increased accountability, more choice, better outcomes and more efficient services. However, we would encourage the government to take a pragmatic and realistic approach: the Government can create a huge amount of value by making public sector data available, but there will be some costs in doing so and it would be naive to think that simply by releasing a tsunami of data all sort of great things will spontaneously occur.

As the Government moves to making much more data available, it needs to consider the needs of the organisations it hopes will build businesses around this data. For example, what guarantees will the Government (or the public sector data provider) offer that a dataset at the heart of a new service will not suddenly cease to be collected or be radically changed? Similarly, it needs to think about how data consumers and application developers will utilise the data it makes available, and it should prioritise data sets that are likely to be of the greatest value to citizens. The Government also needs to consider ways to encourage public sector bodies themselves to make better use of data, not simply by using their own data better but recognising the potential value to their organisation of datasets released by others, for example, National Health Service organisations using local authority data and vice versa.

Our response focuses on the broad issue of ensuring the maximum benefit is gained from open data and therefore mainly relates to the later sections of the consultation.

Open by Default

Cisco welcomes the Government's commitment to Open Data and agrees that public sector organisations should become "open by default". The Government should seek to create a culture within the public sector where the assumption is that any data sets that are collected internally should be openly available unless there are compelling reasons (such as privacy) that prevent publication. In principle, public sector organisations should seek to release data as quickly as possible and in as raw a state as possible. Speed of release will often be crucial for the value of the data; and polishing of the data by the public sector organisation is not only likely to delay publication but is also likely to constrain use of the data, potentially ruling out the more innovative uses the Government is seeking to enable. Efforts should be made to predefine ratings relating to the quality and accuracy of data; this can be communicated to data users when they are considering the use of such data, so they are aware of any limitations in the quality of the data.

Changing the Culture

Public institutions should be seen as advocates, leading the use, dissemination and exchange of data within organisational boundaries, and across functions. To promote this culture, the Government should find ways to incentivise both data release and good practice in encouraging effective use of that data. There are a range of different techniques the Government could use from competitions (“Public Sector Data Liberator of the Year”) to kite-marking or performance rating systems or performance league tables for comparable organisations. In applying these techniques, the Government should not just look at raw number of datasets released, but it should also look at other important aspects such as the importance and the quality of the datasets and the public sector organisation’s responsiveness and willingness to interact with data users.

Engagement with Data Users

It is vital that public sector organisations are prepared to engage with the users of their data. This will have benefits for the public sector insofar as dialogue around the data sets it collects is likely to help improve data quality and promote suggestions on how the value of the data might be improved through changes in the way it is collected. By creating a strong Open Data Corporation there is an opportunity to provide a focal point for data access, queries and disputes. This would help ensure standards are uniformly adopted. Peer review, use of applications and data cleaning approaches will help a positive data feedback loop emerge.

It is particularly important that public sector organisations engage with users of their data who are building a business around it or creating a service that creates public value. These data users may well have legitimate demands that they want to make of the public sector data supplier. In some cases there may be a reasonable argument for charging if additional effort is required to deliver datasets. However, the Open Data Corporation should have a clear role in setting policy in this area and data users should have a right of appeal to the Open Data Corporation in cases where they think charging is unnecessary or inappropriate. If a data set is central to the mission of a department or agency, then the assumption should be that the data set is collected and made publically available as part of the normal business of the department or agency.

Encouraging Communities of Data Collectors and Data Users

Promoting dialogue around data sets is also important in order to allow benchmarking, the development of time series analysis and the intermeshing of related datasets. The Government should look to create communities around different types of datasets. This is particularly important in two areas. Within the public sector the Government needs to find ways to bring together the public sector workers involved in the generation and collection of data (e.g. people in different local authorities, different National Health Service Trusts or different departments). Discussion between these people will ensure more consistency in the data collection process, leading to more comparable and more useable data. There are already some active communities that bring together those interested in using public sector data and leverage each other’s efforts. The Government should respect these existing structures and communities and not seek to duplicate or replicate where a private sector or voluntary organisation exists to fulfil the same function.

Right to Request New Datasets

The Government should release as wide a range of datasets as possible. This is part of encouraging the new open data culture, but it will also help potential data users gain a clear understanding of what other datasets might be easily made available. However, this will only be useful if the

Government gives individuals and organisations the right to request that additional data sets be made available and the right to request modifications in the way that already published datasets are published (or indeed collected). Clearly, there would be no obligation on public sector organisations to agree to every request, but organisations should be required to have a process for dealing with requests and that process should include a right to appeal to an independent party if the requestor believes that the public sector organisation's response is unreasonable.

Big Data and the Internet of Things

The Open Data agenda should not be limited to datasets that public sector organisations have already collected for managerial or statutory reasons. On the contrary, a key part of this agenda is driving awareness among the public and within the private sector of the hugely greater scope for data collection and data use in a connected world. Initially, this is likely to bring to the fore all sorts of datasets that public sector organisations do not currently collect systematically but which they could easily collect and would be of significant value. The ever-increasing ability to analyse so-called 'Big Data' means that datasets of previously perceived low value will become well worth collecting and publishing.

This point is particularly important as we move towards the Internet of Things. Public sector organisations should be encouraged to ensure that all devices are connected and then to see these devices as potential sources of useful data. As part of promoting a new culture, it would be worth the Government highlighting the potential of sensor-generated data sets – for example, this might be a special category in any annual Open Data awards process.

The Government should also consider the opportunities that triangulation of data sourcing from official, crowd-sourced, and other organisations data can provide to an enriched, peer reviewed approach to data sharing, business model development, social and commercial uses. By establishing an Open Data Corporation funded on the principles of transparency by default across government, a lighthouse best practice is being given to wider industry on the role of Open Data. While commercial sensitivity and data protection and privacy must be respected, there is scope for a wider dialogue on Open Data in the nation in general in which industry and private sector have a role to play.

Better Data Use within the Public Sector

One area where Open Data can create huge public value is if public sector organisations themselves get much better at using data. This is likely to happen gradually over time, but there is considerable scope for the Government to prime the pump by highlighting this as an issue within the public sector and having some internal competition for best public sector use of open data.

The scope for data collection and data analysis have been transformed in the last twenty years, but few public sector organisations have recognised this transformation and built it into their culture and their processes. Managers, planners and policymakers typically underestimate the datasets that could be available to them. Furthermore, where data is collected this is often seen as a preserve of experts and researchers. The simple data applications and powerful visualisations that result from publishing data should change this culture and encourage public sector decision-makers to make better use of their own datasets. This effect should then be amplified by the fact that datasets from other public sector organisations will also be more freely available to them.

Promoting an Eco-system

The Government wants the shift to Open Data to unleash a wave of innovation in the UK and ultimately the success of this effort will come down to the ingenuity of individuals, be they working on their own, in an SME or in a large company. However, the Government needs to create the climate in which innovation can prosper and it also needs to ensure that the right eco-system of data users and application developers is created.

Getting value from Open Data will require a thriving eco-system of apps creators, but this eco-system does not currently exist (or is under-developed). In the near term if the Government wants to see lots of innovative applications, then it may have to draw people into this new marketplace either by providing a certain level of funding for citizen-benefiting apps or by ensuring that public sector organisations are spending money in this market.