

Data culture and data communities for and in the public administration¹

Laura Büttner-Quandt & André Renz

Focus on dialog!

In the context of increasing digitalization and datafication, the data landscape in public administration is complex and fragmented. There are a multitude of different data sources, formats, and systems that are often incompatible with one another. Additionally, there are always new challenges and requirements aimed at data compatibility, data quality, data classification, and ethical issues, among others. Approaches such as data governance frameworks can often only fully develop their intended meaning in combination with new approaches. Alternative or new approaches to dealing with the topic of data in public administration can help master the complexity, challenges, and requirements associated with data. They can promote innovation and agility and ultimately strengthen citizen participation.

This is where the Senate Chancellery of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg comes in and has dedicated another perspective to the topic of data since 2023: the Data Dialogue and Data Dialogue by Friends event series create participatory spaces for exchange with representatives from public administration and civil society. These series of events take place within the framework of OGP Local, a global network of cities and regions committed to promoting the principles of transparent and participatory governance and administration. Hamburg has been a partner in this network since mid-2022.

Data dialog

The Data Dialogue is a series of events that offers different spaces for different target groups to discuss the complex topic of data. The first Data Dialogue was held in the Senate Chancellery of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg in March 2023. The event focused on three data projects from Hamburg's specialist authorities, which were presented and discussed together with the participants. In the second Data Dialogue, held in November 2023, the question "How does the administration deal with the ever-new requirements in the data context? Is open data becoming the standard and where are the limits?" was examined and discussed with the participants. These dialogues are held at regular intervals within the administration and are to be continued beyond Hamburg's active participation in the OGP Local program.

Data Dialogue by Friends

Data Dialogue by Friends is another format curated as part of the Data Dialogue event series. This format specifically invites participation from outside the public administration to explore new ideas for leveraging data to benefit the city.

¹ This article was written as part of the OGP blog post [How Hamburg Builds a Data Culture in Public Administration](#).

The first Data Dialogue by Friends took place in October 2023 in cooperation with the AKTIVOLI Landesnetzwerk e.V. The Senate Chancellery of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg also sees this format as an opportunity to test alternative approaches to handling data. For example, participants were invited to a Warm Data Lab or participated in a simulation game that playfully explored the role of data in our lives today.

What are the objectives of the formats?

The Data Dialogue event series has several key goals:

- Promote knowledge sharing: The series fosters exchange among authorities, facilitating the sharing of practical experiences and keeping participants informed about new data developments and approaches.
- Optimize data use: By enhancing networking and collaboration among stakeholders, the series aims to leverage data expertise and resources more effectively for public administration.
- Drive innovation: The introduction of new formats encourages exploration of novel approaches to data exchange, ultimately fostering a cultural and mindset shift within the public administration.



Norbert Kuhn, you are the head of the ITD4 Urban Data Governance department in the Senate Chancellery of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. Together with your team and the civil society partner Körber-Stiftung, you developed the Data Dialogue concept. Why are formats such as the Data Dialogue and Data Dialogue by Friends so important for public administration?

Norbert Kuhn: The Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg has been dealing with the topic of data in various ways for a long time. The introduction of the transparency portal in 2012, for example, made it possible to gain public access to administrative data. However, opening data to citizens also entails completely new responsibilities for the public administration. Data should be used in a meaningful way and for the benefit of citizens. Such a complex task can be tackled with different approaches. With the Data Dialogue and Data Dialogue by Friends, we invite colleagues from public administration to share their experiences. The spaces we create enable all interested colleagues to actively participate, learn about different approaches and topics and discuss them together. The response to our previous events clearly shows that there is a real need for exchange and that the formats are perceived as very valuable. Employees are increasingly suggesting their own topics.

Beyond Theory: Building a Data-Driven Culture

The Data Dialogue and Data Dialogue by Friends event series go beyond theoretical discussions. These formats aim to provide targeted initiatives to embed a dynamic data culture, along with its associated data literacy and data communities, more deeply within the public administration. It's about more than just theoretical discussion.

The interplay between data culture, data communities and data literacy

Data culture, data communities, and data literacy are three closely interconnected concepts essential for effectively managing data in public institutions. Accordingly, establishing a robust data culture creates an environment conducive to fostering data communities and enhancing data literacy. Data communities, in turn, play a vital role in promoting the dissemination of data literacy throughout an organization. By aligning these three concepts, synergistic effects are achieved, benefiting public administration.

What do we mean by data culture?

Data culture refers to a shared willingness within an institution or society to engage with digital data. It is often associated with positive attitudes towards the value and utilization of digital data. However, beyond this theoretical perspective, data culture also encompasses tangible actions aimed at nurturing data usage. This implies that within institutions, a data culture is intricately linked to the practical skills required for employees to effectively utilize digital data and ensure its long-term usability. In this context, data literacy, which entails the planned handling of data at both individual and institutional levels, serves as a crucial foundation for fostering data cultures. Ultimately, questions arise regarding who oversees the corresponding change processes within an institution and whether all stakeholders possess the necessary skills to comprehensively understand, implement, and subsequently maintain and utilize data-processing procedures.

Understanding data culture and data literacy as dynamic constructs

Both data culture and data literacy are dynamic constructs. They can evolve in their respective forms and are mutually interdependent. Attitudes and values that were deemed suitable yesterday may require reassessment today. This could impact internal competencies in data usage, but conversely, these competencies can also influence attitudes and values. For instance, the acquisition of new skills through new appointments or further training can expand an institution's existing values.

Sharing and shaping together

The concept of data communities is closely intertwined with the notion of institutionalized data cultures. It provides employees with the opportunity to share skills, values, and approaches, as well as to inspire one another. Such exchange and mutual support can make a crucial difference in establishing a lasting data culture and making data topics more prominent, accessible, and tangible for a wide range of employees.

The data dialogue also embraces these concepts: Data topics should be made understandable and accessible to various groups. Dialogue plays a pivotal role in advancing open government initiatives. By challenging existing perspectives and seeking new viewpoints, we can disrupt paradigms and foster an inclusive approach to decision-making. Dialogue acts as a catalyst for positive change, enabling stakeholders to address challenges collaboratively.

Data Community

Data communities are groups of people who work together with data. Communities can form within or across institutions, e.g. from members of a department, within a public administration, academia, civil society, or actors from business. People can be members of the communities either for individual formats or over a longer period, which remain dynamic in line with the concepts of data culture and data literacy.

Data communities can focus on various topics, e.g. the development of new data services, the improvement of data quality or the ethically responsible handling of data, to name just a few. Data communities can also come together temporarily, for example to work on a specific project, or organize themselves on a long-term basis.

Impulses for a data-oriented attitude

Anyone learning something new will inevitably encounter problems. Data communities can turn such problems into opportunities, as they offer newcomers the chance to try their hand at data - with the support of experts who help. Data communities offer members the

opportunity to share their experiences as equals and to learn from and with each other. A trusting community can change perceptions and help to make non-obvious mental connections. Employees can be motivated to use data and see it as a strategic source of added value because they want to, rather than just having to.

The kick-off event of the data dialog at the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg has already shown how great the interest in exchange and networking is. Participants also put forward their own suggestions for topics, which will be integrated into future events.



Norbert Kuhn, what data topics are currently on the minds of your colleagues? And which colleagues within the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg do you particularly address with the format?

Norbert Kuhn: The scope of topics is vast. On the one hand, we try to take current developments and debates into account when choosing topics for an event; for example, the new requirements of the EU Data Act or the implementation regulation for High Value Data Sets. Such legal topics are highly interesting for our colleagues, as these aspects have a direct impact on their own area of work.

On the other hand, the colleagues also use our formats to present their own data projects and to get ideas for further work. These can be meta-topics, such as the conception of data maps, or very specific topics, such as a specialized procedure for data reporting in a public authority.

In principle, we do not address an exclusive group of colleagues from the Senate Chancellery. Our formats are open to all colleagues and benefit from the heterogeneity of the participants.

Most problems that can be solved with data are not limited to a single team or a specific area. Data communities break down encrusted structures, inspire fresh ideas and promote cross-functional collaboration. These aspects are essential for successful administrative digitization. Data communities are an important building block for the digitalization of public administration. They can help to make administrative work more efficient, effective and citizen oriented.

The data dialog of the Senate Chancellery of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg is a valuable step towards an open and innovative data culture in public administration. By promoting data communities and data literacy, the administration can make better use of the potential of data and tackle the challenges of digitalization, which always go hand in hand with datafication, more effectively.

Sources

Büttner, L. & Renz, A. (2023). From Transparency to Engagement: Hamburg's Path to Open Government. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/from-transparency-to-engagement-hamburgs-path-to-open-government/>.

Renz, A. & Etsiwah, B. (2020). Datenkultur und KI-Kompetenz an Hochschulen. In: de Witt, C., Rampelt, F., Pinkwart, N. (Hrsg.). Künstliche Intelligenz in der Hochschulbildung. Whitepaper. Berlin: KI-Campus. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4063722.

Ritter, C. S. (2019). Shifting needs for expertise: Digitized taskscapes in the Norwegian oil and gas industry. The Extractive Industries and Society 6, 454–462. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2019.03.006>.