

# Mind the skills gap: creating a data access and reuse competency framework for government departments and organisations



*Having access to the vital data collected by government departments can make a huge difference to the work of researchers in universities and charities. But for these researchers to actually access and be able to reuse this data is an often painstaking process that can take months or even longer.*

***Richard Welpton** suggests this process might be made quicker and more efficient with a renewed focus on improving data skills and career opportunities. The newly established Safe Data Access Professionals Competency Framework represents an excellent resource for all government departments and organisations looking to share their data safely, securely, efficiently, and effectively.*

Whether it's anonymised health records to help evaluate a new treatment for cancer patients, or information that could help us understand if people are getting access to cancer services in their area, accessing and reusing detailed, sensitive information that has been collected by government departments, especially health data, is essential to the work of the Cancer Intelligence team at Cancer Research UK. But we are not alone in wanting to make the most of this useful information for public good. Researchers in universities and charities across the UK would like to get better access to this data for a host of good reasons.

In the UK, we are definitely in a better position than we were ten years ago; it's certainly much easier than it was to apply to access data. But it's still far from easy and even with excellent services provided by the UK Data Service and the Administrative Data Service, helping researchers to pick their way through the process can all seem to be one big data access minefield.

## Working Group for Secure Data Access Professionals

So if the will is there, why isn't the way? This is a question the Working Group for Secure Data Access Professionals has been trying to get to grips with. After a fair bit of head-scratching and investigating by a team made up of university, charity, and public sector data access experts, we think we have found the answer: it's all related to skills and career progression.

Often when a government department decides it is happy to make data available to a researcher for their work, a small team is put in place who have little or no experience of managing or working with researchers. They don't know what the researchers need to know about the data, rarely are there proper processes in place to share it, or those processes and systems are ad hoc and opaque. They don't necessarily know how to make a clean dataset available, or document those datasets, or guarantee individuals' confidentiality and privacy. Researchers are left baffled and frustrated whilst their important research is put on hold and delayed by weeks or, in many cases, months or even years. This can cause uncertainty and mean opportunities lost – some research is really timely and months of delays can damage and reduce the quality of what was originally a great research idea that could have made a difference to people's lives.



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## Skills gap

There has been a tendency in some quarters to view this as obfuscation or as departments just being plain difficult, but we take a different view. What we have learned is that for those people in government departments trying to do their best to make data available it can be equally frustrating.

There is a clear lack of knowledge, understanding, and experience around data reuse for research and not enough has been invested in tackling this huge skills gap. Again it would be easy to point fingers, but the simple fact is that a career path in this field hasn't really existed before, and although some forward-thinking departments have set up data access teams, they simply don't have the requisite skills to help researchers do what they need to do.

To address this, our working group has developed the [Safe Data Access Professionals \(SDAP\) Competency Framework](#), which we hope will soon be embedded in every government department and organisation looking to share its data safely, securely, efficiently, and effectively. The framework sets out the skills someone who is going to be supporting researchers needs to have. Whether they are a new member of the team or have more experience, what are the career opportunities that this type of work can lead to? How they can develop their skills?

Many members of our working group are already using this framework. I recently used it to appoint a new member of my team and it helped me design the job specification, and think about the training that person will need. It's a very practical document that can be used directly to good effect in any workplace where data access is a key part of the work.

It's important to acknowledge that's what is needed in these roles is quite a niche and rare set of skills – e.g. data analysis, understanding data legislation and licensing, metadata and data documentation, data management, etc. – and therein lies the challenge. Even though Cancer Research UK is based in central London, close to Tech City, I only received around 10 applications for the advertised post, just two of whom were suitable. So the purpose of the framework is to help organisations develop their staff's skills and careers and ultimately provide the sort of service they want to give and that researchers really need. Ultimately it will help those departments operate more efficiently – when you look at how an organisation like the UK Data Service is able to support hundreds of researchers with small numbers of staff, it has to be because those staff are highly skilled. Government departments can and should emulate that.

The message is a simple one really. Government departments are signed up to the public benefits of making their data available to bona fide researchers. There's the will. Now, we hope, our framework can make the way a lot more straightforward. I hope to see it being used to good effect in every government department as soon as possible. I also hope it will contribute to this career path, which previously many of us have rather stumbled into, becoming one that people aspire to follow.

The full [Safe Data Access Professionals \(SDAP\) Competency Framework](#) is available on the working group's [pilot site](#). The author will be talking about the group and the new framework at the [ESRC Research Methods Festival in July](#).

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### **About the author**

**Richard Welpton** is the Data Liaison Manager at Cancer Research UK and also chairs the Working Group for Secure Data Access Professionals. He has supported access to sensitive data for 11 years, after joining the Office for National Statistics Virtual Microdata Laboratory in 2007, as well as working as Secure Lab Manager at the UK Data Service. He now provides support for data to the Cancer Intelligence team at Cancer Research UK. Richard has written and presented extensively on issues around managing access to sensitive data.