

Digital Secretary launches National Data Strategy at London Tech Week's Global Leaders Innovation Summit

Hello, and welcome to London Tech Week.

I'm delighted to be opening the Global Leaders Innovation Summit here from the Ocado warehouse in Erith.

I've chosen to give this speech here because it's home to a very special operation – and it's a great example of the way digital technology has transformed our lives in recent years, and especially in the last few months.

As I'm speaking, 4,000 robots are whizzing back and forth over a huge grid system behind me, communicating to one another through a bespoke network.

In a single day, collectively these bots travel four times around the world.

Their job is to dash to a crate of groceries, and carry it to a pick station, where either another robot or a human picks out the items to put a shopper's trolley together – using an algorithm to work out which order to pack the bags in, so that nothing gets squashed. Those bags are packed into a van and shipped to your door – and indeed mine!

This is a very modern business at work. And what drives this entire operation? Data.

From the moment a customer orders a delivery on the app, to the point at which grocery bags arrive on their doorstep – Ocado's system relies on reams of digital information being sent back and forth, between the customer and the packing robots and the warehouse and the drivers.

Forget oil. The fuel of our modern economy, the thing that greases the wheels of production – is data. Data is now one of the most valuable commodities in the world, and I want to make sure that the UK is in a position to enjoy all the opportunities it has to offer.

Data hasn't just provided an economic shot in the arm for thousands of businesses like Ocado. In an increasingly digital world, it powers our personal lives – from the apps we use for personal budgeting and managing our exercise regimes, to online banking.

And data can help us solve a range of societal problems, too.

Nothing has illustrated that better than the pandemic. Data has been one of our most powerful and versatile weapons against coronavirus.

And as the country hunkered down at home, data helped hospitals track the movement of vital medical equipment, and send ventilators where they were

most needed. Data kept our supermarket shelves stocked, and services like Ocado sent groceries to the doorsteps of those most vulnerable to the pandemic – allowing them to shield in safety.

As we gradually began reopening the country, public health experts have used data to predict and flag second spikes in the disease, and to monitor the traffic on our roads.

The pandemic has shown us just how much we can achieve when we can share high-quality data quickly and efficiently.

And I don't intend to let that lesson go to waste.

And now that data is the driving force behind the world's economies, I want to make sure that British businesses are in a position to make the most of that digital revolution.

So today I am publishing a new National Data Strategy – an ambitious, pro-growth declaration of intent for the use of data in the UK over the next few years.

One that seeks to maintain the high watermark set during coronavirus, where we were able to use data quickly, efficiently and ethically to combat an unprecedented global pandemic.

That strategy is a call to arms on a number of key fronts:

It aims to make data available across the economy, so that companies and civil society organisations large and small can use it to innovate, experiment and expand their operations. Crucially, it aims to do so in a way that continues to protect citizens' privacy and rights. Whenever we use data, we want to ensure we do so ethically and responsibly.

It calls for a regulatory regime that maintains high standards but doesn't place unnecessary burdens on the average business. Right now, a small business that wants to get online and make the most of data faces all sorts of rules and regulations – on data protection, on online communications, on cookie permissions. It can be baffling for the average business. Of course, it is important to have some rules in place to protect people's privacy. The trust of consumers is crucial for our digital economy. But those rules should be proportionate, and clear enough for businesses to be able to follow.

It means positioning the UK as a global champion of data use, and encouraging the international flow of data across borders.

And it calls for a radical transformation of the way the government uses and shares its own data, to improve a range of public services. This process will be driven from the centre and cut right across the entire government. It will strengthen the accountability of departments, put citizens at the heart of the government's digital and data transformation, and make sure government itself has the right digital expertise.

That drive for expertise in government starts right at No.10, who I'm pleased

to announce will be offering up to ten fellowships each year to attract world class tech talent into the heart of government.

The program is inspired by the U.S. Presidential Innovation Fellowship, which boasts the co-founder of the Earth Genome Project as just one of its many esteemed participants.

Those fellows will sit within the No 10, and the Government Digital Service and use their unique skills to contribute to the kind of fulfilling challenging projects that only the public sector can offer – ones that have a huge impact on society as a whole.

Let me just give you one real-life example of the things that can be achieved if we think big about data.

It involves something that is pretty fundamental to all of our lives: the way we bank. For years and years, the big banks were the ones who controlled the use of customers' personal data.

But then the government and businesses rolled out Open Banking, handing control of that personal data back to the customers themselves. They were able to share their data with third parties like start-ups, and shop around for a better deal.

Firms such as Tully are now able to analyse data quickly and accurately to help customers manage their debt. Another, Canopy, helps consumers track their rental payments to improve their credit score.

We want to take the same approach with energy, telecoms, pensions. To give customers the power to use their own data to find a better telephone tariff, and open the doors to disruptors in every part of the marketplace.

Data can make us a nation of Martin Lewises, running our own deal-seeking, money-saving operations from the comfort of our own living rooms.

Smart Data is just one part of the strategy, the full version of which has been published on GOV.UK today. And it's only the beginning of the conversation.

But it's time to shift the way we talk and think about data.

From a threat to be guarded against, to an opportunity to be embraced.

From something companies and governments can sometimes worry about using to something we have to justify not using.

Because data not only helps us get our groceries quicker and grow our economy, it improves and saves lives. And we all have an obligation to make the most of using it.