

Five zero-budget ways to boost your data quality culture

We need data that is fit for purpose to support our services, policies and decisions. A single dataset can be used in many different ways across the public, private and third sectors. The assessment of the quality of that data will vary depending on how it is being used.

It is not easy to know the quality of data, or to make sure the data is fit for purpose. There are no short cuts to having good quality data and making improvements can take time. But making those changes is easier when people have the right attitude and approach to data quality. As a senior leader, you can have a huge impact on the culture around quality within your organisation and drive positive change.

Here are some easy steps you can take that will help put your organisation on a path to better data quality.

1. Be curious about quality

If you receive a report or some other information – perhaps to make a decision – ask about the quality of the data that went into it. Sometimes we have to use data that has quality problems because it is still the best source that we have, but if we know about those problems, we can take them into account.

Unknown quality is a bigger risk than known poor quality. If data quality is poor, but known, we can communicate and be transparent about its limitations. By considering the uses of the data, we can adjust our approach accordingly, whilst also being aware of the consequences when making decisions based on data.

2. Find out who is responsible for quality

Everyone involved with data has a responsibility to maintain the quality but there should be people specifically responsible or accountable for quality. Different organisations do this differently, but someone should always be responsible for assessing and managing the quality of data.

If your organisation has not defined who should be responsible and accountable for quality, then there is a risk that no one is properly managing quality. You should be able to find a named person responsible for the quality of your data. If you are unable to, it may be a simple question of coordinating responsibilities across teams, which can reduce duplication and fill gaps in processes. Identifying this person and talking to them about their role helps to promote good management of data quality from a senior level.

While one or several individuals might be responsible for data quality overall, it is important to understand that everyone plays a role in maintaining and improving data quality. As a senior leader, you should engage with them to understand any challenges they face and the impact that might have on your business objectives.

3. Understand how data gets to you

Where does your data come from? How did it get into your organisation? What has been done to check it is fit for purpose? Understanding how data flows through its lifecycle is one of the most powerful steps in understanding the quality of that data.

Every time data is changed or moved, there is a chance for the quality to change. It might be improved, or it might get worse. By understanding the flow of data, you can help others to recognise how important the quality of that data is to everyone who uses it.

4. Challenge quality

If you encounter data that may not be fit for purpose, speak with the data owner. They might not be aware the problem exists, or they may need more evidence in order to make changes to their data. Often data owners don't know how their data is used across different teams and organisations so making these links can have benefits beyond improvements to quality. Data creators, managers and users need to work closely together if data is to reach its full potential.

By asking about the quality of data, you can help others understand that it is important, and that there is no need to hide quality problems. This is a crucial step to building a good culture of data quality.

5. Champion data quality in your organisation

Everyone handles data in some shape or form. This might be time recording, budget information and expenses; or it may be high profile operational data that supports frontline services. Whatever the data is, it should be fit for purpose if we are going to use it in our work.

Set an example by starting a conversation about the quality of your data. Check the quality of data you handle and talk to others about why this is important. As a senior leader, you should be able to understand, challenge and promote data quality within your organisation, and encourage others to do the same. The Government Data Quality Hub has published the [Government Data Quality Framework](#), which can help promote a shared understanding of data quality.

These steps are just the start, but they help to promote the importance of data quality in your organisation. We can all set an example of asking for, and maintaining, good quality data.

The Government Data Quality Hub (DQHub) is developing tools, guidance, and training to help you with your data quality initiatives. Please visit [our website](#) for articles, tools and case studies.

We also offer tailored advice and support across government. Contact us by emailing DQHub@ons.gov.uk.