**theguardian Public Leaders Network**

**Leading questions: Heather Savory, Open Data User Group**

The chair of the Open Data User Group on citizen engagement, private sector skills and a love of feather pillows



Heather Savory is chair of the Open Data User Group (ODUG) Photograph: KEITH CHALONER KEITH CHALONER/KEITH CHALONER

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Heather Savory

**What will the open data user group be doing?**

In order for the government to release the right data we, as a community, need to act with a single voice and clearly set out the argument that certain open datasets have the potential to deliver broad benefits. The government doesn't always find it easy to understand what open data users want and need, and which datasets would have the biggest impact if released for free, so we're acting as the bridge between the open data community and government.

**What do you want to achieve in the role?**

I'd like ODUG to be recognised for success in representing open data users at the heart of government, by targeting public sector data that has a clear benefit in being released for free, and by working with the government to make that happen.

I would also like to help more public sector bodies discover that releasing open data can result in great benefits for their own organisations. In many cases, opening up data publicly drives the improved use of data and management information internally – which can lead to a better understanding of your own organisation and help drive innovation and higher performance.

**What are the challenges facing the open data agenda?**

One of the key obstacles we need to overcome is to convince public sector data owners or custodians to release their data without restrictions, either through licensing or costs. There is also a longer term challenge of stimulating a culture change across the whole of the public sector to embed a presumption to publish, and making this part of day-to-day business. A number of organisations make a tidy profit charging for data but we don't see this as being the best way for the UK to get the full benefit from the underlying costs of producing these datasets. Convincing people isn't always easy, especially when departments are operating under spending constraints.

**Do citizens need to be better engaged to get the most from open data?**

Some citizens are already actively involved. Open data opens up the door for technology-based start-ups to get into business or to drive new business. But this is only possible when individuals and organisations have the skills and understanding to analyse and produce insights from the data. ODUG is working closely with the [Open Data Institute](http://www.theodi.org/) to help foster a new ecosystem of individuals and organisations so that we all realise the value of open data. However, many citizens still need to be informed about the potential of open data and what this can mean to them as individuals. The average person is getting on with their life and will only interact with the government driven by an immediate need for a public service. One of the challenges is to demonstrate that it can lead to benefits on all sides; for citizens, organisations and for government itself.

**What's your background and how will it inform your role?**

My first degree is in electronic and electrical engineering, and I have previously worked with and for organisations of all sizes, from start-ups to global corporates. I also have five years experience working in central government. So, I have a strong private sector background, coupled with hands-on experience of policy design and delivery. I understand the challenges on both sides of the fence.

**Is there enough consistency in approach between departments?**

Whitehall culture can seem strange, especially when you first arrive from the private sector. The common theme I have noticed across central government is that there can be a reticence to try something new, for fear of failure. In my opinion, a culture which allows people to try and fail increases levels of aspiration. The first law of innovation and improvement is that appropriate levels of risk need to be taken, and failure needs to be tolerated and viewed as an opportunity to learn and improve.

**What has been your biggest achievement?**

Being part of a UK start-up which went public on Nasdaq in 1996; personally turning around two technology companies – both of which were successfully acquired within a year of my involvement – and completing my MBA at London Business School whilst working full-time.

**Who, or what, has taught you the most about leadership?**

My worst personal experiences of different leaders have taught me more than the positive ones. For certain individuals who lead entirely from the front it's all fine whilst everything goes well. When it doesn't they can falter – either to protect themselves or because they simply don't know what to do next. I have learnt two things from this – the importance of maintaining strong leadership whilst working as a team, and the importance of asking for help when you need it – wherever you are in your career, or whatever your job.

**What's your leadership style?**

My underlying leadership skills were developed in start-up environments where job title and hierarchy count for less than raw intellect, actual delivery and individual and group achievements. I'm fairly informal in my approach but I like to cut to the chase quickly when I get down to business. I try to relate to everyone on an individual basis and pull teams together in a way which plays to each person's strengths.

I always aspire to lead a 'no-surprises', 'no-blame' culture where problems can be surfaced earlier rather than later. To achieve this, your team needs to have faith in your full support for them at all times, and to know that you will take personal responsibility – whatever happens.

**If you could take three things to a desert island what would they be?**

My iPad (even without an internet connection), a supply of decent red wine, and a feather pillow.

*The ODUG have just released a form on* [*data.gov.uk*](http://www.data.gov.uk/odug) *for businesses and individuals to highlight those datasets which would be the best to release for free*