

Digital Skills in Policing

Background

This brief is the result of a scoping exercise conducted by academics at the University of Exeter (in consultation with Sealey Associates).



Q-Step

The project impetus was to better understand how Q-Step could approach, engage and support public services organisations. Policing was chosen as the first area of inquiry.

In-depth interviews and a focus group was held with a total of 13 police officers and staff participants from a single English police force. A review of the grey literature and scoping conversations with seven individuals from other police forces, universities, volunteer organisations, and professional bodies (e.g. College of Policing) also informed the project findings.

Whilst the project focused on both free and open source software and digital skills, this briefing outlines findings on the latter only. A separate briefing on free and open source software is available. Individuals who had experience and could speak to the topics of data analytics, business change, information management, and information communication and technology (ICT) were sought to contribute.

Digital skills related to open-source research and digital forensics were not covered, as it surpassed the scope and timeline of the current project.



Policy recommendations for Policing

National-level recommendations:

A centralised authority needs to:

- establish minimum standards for digital skills by role (e.g., consider industry-wide professional standards for data science for data scientists); and
- ensure there is free and accessible training for those roles that require a higher standard of digital skills to achieve their work.

Organisational-level recommendations:

Individual police forces should:

- tailor and target training and education around technology to specific roles (i.e., strive to move beyond learning basic functionality of a system);
- improve ability to self-serve data systems (i.e., make more user-friendly thereby 'democratising access to the data');
- promote a culture where early technology adopters are supported;
- create digital communities of practice to identify duplications, gaps, blind spots, short cuts, build confidence and capacity for digital skills within a force (or across forces); and
- consider how new 'digital native' entrants to policing can contribute to, and be part of, this community of practice.

Individual-level recommendations:

- Individuals should take personal responsibility to achieve digital proficiency and digital confidence for the role they hold.

Context

'There is widespread recognition of the need to improve digital skills and knowledge across the whole police workforce (NPCC, 2021).¹ However,

many forces struggle to identify and understand their skills gaps relating to digital demand.²

The *Strategic Review of Policing in England and Wales* recommends strengthening career pathways for allied policing professions and a 'technology uplift' to match Operation Uplift, a Home Office commitment to fund 20,000 new police officers by 2023.

Policing can take a page from the private sector by using digital technologies to increase efficiency of operations and improve consumer (i.e., the public's) engagement with a focus on requirements, not devices; using data to generate insight; remembering the users (in many cases frontline officers); and focusing on victims and citizens is vital.³

None of us can foresee exactly how the next decade of policing will unfold. We can, however, assess how digital trends, behaviours around data, and new technologies will change the nature and volume of demand, and impact our ability to respond.⁴

Key findings

National-level barriers:

- Difficulty competing with private sector salaries to attract and retain skilled ICT and data analytic staff.

Organisational-level barriers:

- Lack of infrastructure to support data scientists and their work within policing.
- Gap between ICT providing the technology and technology training—nobody in the middle promoting the best use of the systems.
- Tendency to use digital and remote ways of working to try and replicate in-person ways of working.

- Historical ways of working are not updated frequently enough to take advantage of advancements in technology.

Individual-level barriers:

- Lacking 'digital confidence'.
- Difficulty maintaining digital skills competencies and strengths due to limited capacity and availability of software programmes.
- Gaps in training lead to people being taught new systems by co-workers, which can lead to bad habits and limited knowledge.
- Poor individual compliance with data inputting standards contributes to poor quality data.

Further information

¹https://www.policingreview.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/srpew_final_report.pdf

²https://reform.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/Reform_Bobbies_on_the_net.pdf

³<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/public-sector/deloitte-uk-ps-digital-police-force.pdf>

⁴<https://pds.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/National-Policing-Digital-Strategy-2020-2030.pdf>

About this project

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