

DATA WITHOUT DECISIONS: WHY AUSTRALIA'S OPEN DATA RANKING IS TANKING—AND HOW FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS FIXING IT

RESEARCH INNOVATION COUNCIL ANZ BRIEF | VOL.14 | QUT EXECUTIVE EDUCATION CENTRE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The roundtable on advanced analytics in the public sector convened senior government officials, industry leaders, and academics to explore challenges and opportunities in data-driven decision-making. Key themes included overcoming silos between digital and data teams, enhancing data quality and governance, leveraging AI and machine learning for policy outcomes, and fostering cross-sector collaboration. The discussion underscored the APS's struggle with open data maturity, the need for stronger AI governance, and the tension between innovation and risk aversion. While some agencies lead in analytics adoption, broader structural and cultural barriers hinder progress. Recommendations focused on embedding analytics into decision-making, improving cross-agency collaboration, and incentivising responsible AI implementation.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

Scaling Cross-Agency Data Sharing: Despite improvements, legal and governance constraints still hinder data-sharing across agencies. Future work should explore federated data models, role-based access frameworks, and standardised agreements to accelerate secure, interoperable analytics.

AI as a Strategic Policy Tool: While AI can enhance decision-making, agencies struggle with adoption beyond pilots. Future discussions should focus on embedding AI into policy cycles, defining measurable AI-driven outcomes, and balancing automation with human oversight in high-impact areas.

Public Sector AI Capability and Talent: Data and AI talent shortages persist, slowing adoption. Future efforts should prioritise in-house AI upskilling programs, flexible hiring models, and AI-centred workforce planning to ensure expertise aligns with government needs.

Improving Open Data for Public Value: Australia's open data performance lags behind global peers. Future initiatives should target high-value dataset accessibility, automated data publishing pipelines, and incentives for agencies to contribute quality, usable data.

Public-Private AI Innovation Models: Post-COVID, industry collaboration on AI has declined. Future work should explore regulatory sandboxes, structured AI procurement models, and shared risk frameworks to enable controlled AI experimentation while safeguarding public trust.

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KEY THEMES AND INSIGHTS

SILOED DIGITAL AND DATA TEAMS

- Participants noted persistent divisions between IT, data, and policy teams, exacerbated by differing priorities, security concerns, and risk management frameworks.
- The discussion highlighted the need for shared data platforms and governance structures that align incentives across departments.
- A proposed solution involved a centralised "platform as a service" model, allowing agencies to leverage a common framework for analytics while maintaining sovereignty over sensitive data.

DATA GOVERNANCE AND QUALITY ISSUES

- Inconsistent data quality across agencies remains a challenge, impeding interoperability and evidence-based policymaking.
- Agencies struggle with defining "authoritative" data sources and ensuring metadata consistency across datasets.
- The discussion emphasised a shift toward a "trust level" model, grading data quality and reliability rather than imposing rigid standardisation.
- Several participants highlighted successful examples of integrating web-friendly services to improve data accessibility, such as the Geoscience Australia's Digital Atlas initiative.

AI ADOPTION AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

- Agencies are at different stages of AI maturity, with some leading in predictive analytics and others struggling to move beyond basic data analysis.
- A lack of AI-specific leadership roles (e.g., Chief AI Officers) results in AI governance often falling under CIO or CDO responsibilities, limiting its strategic impact.
- Risk aversion stemming from regulatory uncertainty, post-Robodebt scrutiny, and legislative barriers were identified as key obstacles.
- Participants called for clearer AI accountability structures and investment in AI literacy programs to empower decision-makers.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

- **Lack of Skilled AI and Data Talent:** Agencies face difficulties in hiring specialised AI and data professionals, limiting innovation.
- **Fragmented AI and Data Governance:** AI oversight structures remain inconsistent, with some agencies integrating AI into existing IT governance and others lacking clear oversight.
- **Security and Risk Aversion:** Overly stringent risk frameworks slow AI adoption, while fear of compliance failures discourages innovation.
- **Insufficient Open Data Infrastructure:** Australia ranks poorly on OECD open data metrics, largely due to limited accessibility and availability of high-value datasets.

INNOVATIVE IDEAS AND CASE STUDIES

1. STRATEGIC USE OF DATA FOR POLICY IMPACT

- A federal department shared insights on leveraging a data-driven lifetime social services interaction model to improve long-term policy and funding decisions. This highlighted the potential for predictive analytics in government service planning.

2. INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION IN DATA INTEGRATION

- Participants discussed examples of collaborative efforts between multiple government entities to enhance national policy decision-making through integrated data infrastructure.

3. SECURE AI DEPLOYMENT MODELS

- Agencies explored various approaches to AI deployment, including air-gapped solutions, to balance security needs with scalability in government analytics.

STRATEGIC OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- Strengthen Chief AI Officer roles within agencies, separating AI governance from traditional IT functions.
- Standardise metadata practices to improve cross-agency data interoperability.
- Develop agency-specific AI ethics and governance frameworks aligned with national AI guidelines.

MEDIUM-TERM GOALS

- Establish a whole-of-government analytics platform to streamline AI and data-sharing initiatives.
- Expand AI and data literacy programs for senior executives to enable informed decision-making.
- Enhance incentives for cross-agency data collaboration, reducing bureaucratic friction.

LONG-TERM VISION

- Transition from siloed data storage to a federated data-sharing model with embedded governance.
- Position Australia as a global leader in AI-powered public sector transformation by adopting best practices from high-ranking OECD nations.
- Establish a "National AI and Data Capability" strategy, integrating AI into government operations with a focus on transparency and accountability.

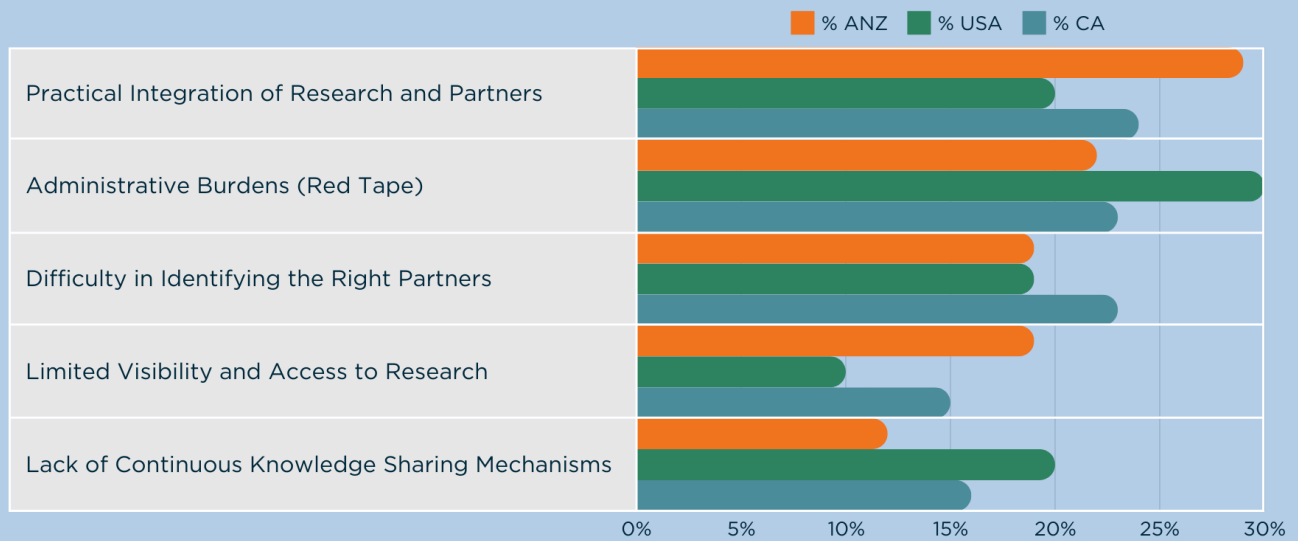
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PSN's growing community spans across federal, state, and local government departments, healthcare, and education, allowing members to share information, access the latest in government innovation, and engage with other like-minded individuals on a secure and closed-door network.

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