How to build a community of Data Champions: Six Steps to Success.

Inspired by the [University of Cambridge Data Champion programme](#), we have built a community of [Data Champions](#) to advocate research data management practice within all university faculties at TU Delft. Currently, we have 47 active members and the number is increasing. Here, we present a 'toolkit' to help you build a community of Data Champions within your academic institution.

Why build a community of Data Champions?

Many institutions have set up centralised research data management (RDM) services to support researchers but these services face many challenges. Typically, these services lack the resources and expertise required to provide targeted training for the diversity of disciplines present within contemporary research institutions. Their training sessions are often heavily subscribed and due to the lack of funding to employ staff to meet the growing demands for RDM support they're often unable to reach their wider research community. What's more, many researchers aren't aware of the RDM support services available to them.

At TU Delft, our main motivation to build a community of Data Champions was to better understand the needs of our researchers and to foster best RDM practice across all disciplines. We believe that creating a support network facilitates peer-to-peer learning which is an effective way to exchange knowledge and engender a culture change towards better RDM within an entire research institution.

Inspired by the [University of Cambridge Data Champion programme](#), we launched our [Data Champions](#) programme in September 2018 as a cost-effective solution to provide discipline-specific RDM support across all eight university faculties.

What is a 'Data Champion'?

Let's begin by getting to know what a 'Data Champion' is and what they can offer your research community.

We appreciate that our Data Champions offer their time, support and expertise out of goodwill. Since their role as a Data Champion isn't their full-time position and because time is in short supply, we don't enforce strict requirements on the role they must fulfil, rather we give them flexibility to make their individual contribution to the community of TU Delft as they wish. You can learn more about the role of a TU Delft Data Champion and other data (and code) roles [here](#).

The toolkit: Six Steps to Success

Getting Started

Step 1. Preparation
Prepare to launch your Data Champions programme by discussing ideas with your research community and institutional management.

Step 2. Coordination
Coordinate a bottom-up, community-led programme to build a sustainable support network.

Step 3. Promotion
Promote your programme and make the call for volunteer participation.

Maintaining momentum

Step 4. Introduction
Introduce new recruits to your programme by giving them a warm welcome.

Step 5. Communication
Encourage collaboration and networking amongst your community by organising regular events, meetings and use of communication tools.

Step 6. Recognition
Reward and recognise the efforts of your Data Champions by publicising their achievements.

Getting Started

Step 1. Prepare to launch your programme.

Establishing a community of volunteers can be a daunting prospect. It takes time, effort and resilience to build a strong community and you may have several burning questions about how you can get started. Here's a list of 'toolkit essentials' you'll need to consider before launching your Data Champions programme…

- *A clear vision*

When you imagine your future community-based model, what do you see? It's important to outline what you expect from your Data Champions and plan how you're going to support them in their new role. Having a clearly defined outcome will help you direct your aims and objectives as you prepare to kick-start your programme.

- *A realistic goal*

Be ambitious but set realistic expectations of what you and your Data Champions can offer the programme in terms of time and resources.

- *A positive attitude*

All volunteer programmes encounter challenges. Attracting Data Champions and maintaining motivation amongst the existing cohort can prove difficult. You'll need to be versatile; be prepared to adapt your expectations and mitigate challenges as your programme develops.

- *A willing community*

Start engaging with members of your local research community. Build relationships with individuals who show passion and willingness to help you realise your ambitions. Focus groups can be a useful way to meet new people, introduce your idea, stimulate discourse and gain valuable feedback on how to start creating your community of Data Champions.

Talking to Department and Faculty managers, or data support, can give you valuable insight into the current research culture and give you inspiration to start your programme. You may also need to approach institutional management to pitch your idea, and apply for funds and resources to organise events to kick-start your programme. For example, you may need to allocate time to a member of staff to coordinate your programme. In our experience, this can range from 0.05 (TU Delft) to 0.3 FTE (University of Cambridge).

- *A desire to learn*

Do your homework! Learn from institutions that have pioneered the development of community-based models. See our [executive summary of plans](#) to launch our Data Champions programme at TU Delft and learn about '[Establishing, Developing, and Sustaining a Community of Data Champions](#)' at the University of Cambridge.

You can also read informative case studies shared by institutions that have successfully established 'Networks of Data Champions' in '[Engaging researchers with research data management: The Cookbook](#)' (Chapter 5).

Step 2. Coordinate a bottom-up, community-led programme.

At TU Delft, our Data Champion programme is centrally coordinated by the [Community Manager](#) and is intrinsically linked to the [Data Stewardship](#) programme. Similarly, the [University of Cambridge](#) Data Champion programme is centrally coordinated by members of the [Research Data Management Team](#). Both programmes are community-led meaning that researchers direct the programme and cooperate to achieve locally owned visions and goals.

Choosing to coordinate your programme, be it through central or distributed coordination, will aid its sustainability. Programmes that are entirely community-led can be less sustainable particularly if the initiative is largely driven by a handful of committed researchers. What happens if they leave your institution or can no longer commit to your programme? Centrally coordinating your programme helps to mitigate this problem since dedicated personnel are at hand to provide your Data Champions with the support and guidance they need to fulfil their role, even if it's assisting with administrative tasks, such as booking venues and arranging catering for events. Centrally coordinate your Data Champions and help them to…

- *Build and sustain a strong support network*

Well-connected with the research community and central RDM support infrastructure, Data Champions are the glue holding the research community together, helping to create a cohesive web of support to benefit all involved. As researchers volunteering within their local community, Data Champions serve as a 'community voice', representing the various perspectives of researchers and providing feedback to improve central RDM services.

- *Reach a wider audience*

As volunteers who share their expertise and advocate proper RDM practice across a heterogeneity of research disciplines, Data Champions have the capacity to drive a culture change towards Open Science[1] across an entire research institution. By delivering widespread support they help to reduce the workload of the central RDM support team and raise awareness of the Data Champion programme amongst the wider research community. This proves particularly useful to recruit new Data Champions and reduce the problem of frequent volunteer turnover.

- *Capitalise on their assets*

Your programme must support Data Champions so that they can support their research community. For the programme to be sustainable, it must be community-led. This gives Data Champions the flexibility to capitalise on their strengths, effectively engage with researchers and deliver RDM support in ways they feel most comfortable. Taking a bottom-up approach to community building, Data Champions can feel motivated to make their individual contribution to the programme and the field of Open Science.

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[1] 'Open Science' refers to the movement of making research transparent and accessible in all research disciplines.

Step 3. Promote your programme.

Once you're ready to advertise your programme you must decide how you want to recruit your best candidates. Here's some advice for how to promote your programme and make the call for participation…

- *Be explicit*

When you draft your recruitment message specify the details of your programme. Make it clear who can become a Data Champion, what the role entails and the level of commitment involved. Create a short and simple advert that communicates the need for volunteers to join your community. Don't forget to include details on how to apply (e.g. via an online application form) or where to seek further information (provide contact details!)

- *Be enthusiastic!*

Use compelling language that elicits enthusiasm in your reader. Remember to advertise the benefits of becoming a Data Champion. You're asking researchers to dedicate their valuable time and skills to your programme so make them aware of the benefits to incentivise them to participate. Take a look at the University of Cambridge's recent call for inspiration.

- *Tailor your advert*

Think about your audience. Who do you want to recruit? Take a parallel approach using broad and targeted recruitment as it can be difficult to appeal to all research disciplines using a single advert. To engage individuals with a specific expertise, share your advert across the entire institution but tailor the language to target the discipline you wish to recruit. For example, you will need a different advert for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) vs Arts, humanities and social sciences. Be prepared to make regular calls to target specific groups to achieve equal recruitment of Data Champions from all research disciplines. This not only helps to achieve inclusion and diversity but can help to maintain healthy numbers of Data Champions.

- *Make the call*

Distribute your message using flyers, posters, mailing lists, social media and via contacts within research departments. It's also a good idea to have a section on your website to promote your programme. The TU Delft library website features a selection of web pages that advertise the role, requirements and rewards of a Data Champion, as well as how to apply to join the programme.

Maintaining momentum

Once you begin recruiting Data Champions, you'll need strategies in place to help you grow and maintain your network over the long-term. Explore ways to introduce new recruits, and encourage networking and collaboration to develop a vibrant and dynamic support network.

Step 4. Introduce your Data Champions

Data Champions are your most valuable resource so it's important to give them a sense of belonging. As you introduce new Data Champions to your team, give them…

- *A warm welcome*

Respond to new recruits quickly by sending a friendly and enthusiastic welcome email. Your first contact should thank them for signing up to participate in your programme and provide essential information about the programme to acquaint them with their new role. You may choose to provide new Data Champions with a welcome pack containing the information and resources they need to get started. A welcome pack can include details of the programme's aims and objectives; training options and communication tools; plus, a list of useful online resources and key contacts. Providing an RDM glossary can also help your Data Champions improve their own data management knowledge as they take on their new role.

- *A formal induction*

In some cases, a formal induction to the programme is preferable to introduce new Data Champions to the existing network. It provides them with an opportunity to meet one another, start networking and hear first-hand accounts from established Data Champions. Recently, the University of Cambridge have introduced a pilot mentoring project as part of their induction process whereby established Data Champions volunteer to support new Data Champions. You can read more about this pilot and other exciting news.

- *A personal profile*

We create a personal profile for each new Data Champion and publish it to 'Our Data Champions' page. Their profile details their area of expertise, motivations for becoming a Data Champion, contact details and photo ID which allows the wider research community to identify their local advocate for good data management and 'put a face to a name'.

Step 5. Encourage communication.

Communication is the key to creating a collaborative open research community. As part of an interactive network, Data Champions can feel empowered to recognise salient issues, find common ground for action and cooperate to implement their ideas and decisions. Here are some tips, tricks and tools to encourage communication amongst your network…

- *Organise regular meetings*

Bring your Data Champions together for regular meetings to keep your community up-to-date with the latest Open Science movements. TU Delft's meeting agendas typically consist of talks delivered by Data Champions and invited guest speakers to exchange RDM knowledge and move the programme forward.

Allow sufficient time for discussions in between talks and organise an informal networking session over refreshments to conclude your event. This always goes down a treat!

Be inclusive! Consider making your Data Champion meetings open to anyone interested in the work of your Data Champions. This can help to spread the word of proper RDM practice and drive a culture change within your institution.

- *Engage the wider community*

Create blog posts to summarise your event; share photos and video content to inform and inspire your research community. TU Delft regularly posts news updates on various Data Champion and RDM events on our [Open Working blog](). Check out the summary of TU Delft's [Data Champions kick-off meeting]().

- *Host an annual event*

Celebrate the success of your Data Champions each year during a one-day event to reflect on their highlights and propose new programme agendas.

- *Use communication tools*

Facilitate networking and collaboration over dedicated email lists or online communication platforms, such as [Slack](), a software for connected teams. Give your Data Champions access to a shared environment, such as [Google Drive](), so that they can use and contribute to your selection of programme materials, such as meeting minutes and presentations.

Step 6. Reward and recognise your Data Champions

Recognition is critical for volunteer retention. If your Data Champions feel valued and appreciated, they'll feel better connected to the program and incentivised to participate. Make it a principal objective to commend your Data Champions on their inspiring work and express your gratitude to those that 'go the extra mile'.

- *Publicise their achievements*

There are various ways to recognise the efforts of your Data Champions and they don't have to be resource-intensive.. For some, simply joining the community of Data Champions and having their personal profile published on the community website is reward enough.

When a Data Champion joins your programme it may also be a good idea to notify their Head of Department or Faculty Dean. This can help to raise awareness of your programme more generally and introduce your Data Champion as a new source of local RDM support.

You may also choose to reward the efforts of your Data Champions by giving them more visibility which can raise their professional profile. A current project at TU Delft publicises the achievements of our Data Champions by interviewing them to learn more about their research projects; how they effectively engage with researchers; their motivations for becoming Data Champions; and, their future goals and aspirations. Following each interview, each Data Champion case study is written and published as an article on TU Delft's Open Working blog under a dedicated tab on the Homepage titled '[Data Champions](#)'. The articles are promoted on social media to put Data Champions in the spotlight and increase impact beyond their immediate circle.

Regular one-to-one engagement with Data Champions also allows you to gain their personal perspective on the programme and measure the impact of your programme on driving a culture change towards Open Science.

- *Provide travel opportunities*

If funds are available, give your Data Champions an opportunity to apply for travel grants to attend international conferences. TU Delft Data Champions are eligible to apply to a dedicated 'Data Champions Travel and Training Fund' to attend workshops and conferences related to data stewardship. During the first year of our programme we have [funded two Data Champions](#) to attend international workshops with the total cost below €1,500.

Aside sharing their RDM expertise at these events, Data Champions can engage with representatives of similar programmes, learn new skills and expertise, and disseminate knowledge gained back to your Data Champions programme.

- *Nominate exemplary candidates for awards*

Recognise excellence and acknowledge those that go above and beyond for their research community by nominating them for internal or external awards, such as the [WDS Data Stewardship Award](#).

Encourage their participation in other international initiatives, for example, the [SPARC Europe's Open Data Champions](#), and support their applications by writing professional references and letters of support. These extracurricular activities promise to boost their CV!

Based on the premise that recognition is a vital aspect of sustaining a community of Data Champions, we continue to explore novel ways to reward our Data Champions. A challenge is understanding how to reward Data Champions at different career levels. As you establish

your own volunteer community, we welcome any suggestions you might have to inspire and help us along the way! We wish you success in your future endeavour.