

# SESSION T105: SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATING THE DATA ACT — PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

## Overview

The session focused on implementation of the DATA Act to date and featured **Christina Ho**, Deputy Fiscal Assistant Secretary for Accounting Policy and Financial Transparency at the Bureau of the Fiscal Service; **Tim Gribben, CPA**, Deputy Chief Financial Officer for the Small Business Administration (SBA); **Melinda Morgan**, Director of Finance for the Department of Justice (DOJ) and **Timothy Randle**, Senior Advisor with H.J. Steininger PLLC. **Bryce Pippert**, Principal from Booz Allen Hamilton, moderated the panel.

## Speaker Perspectives

Ho started the discussion with a description of government-wide activities for DATA Act implementation and highlighted progress since last year. According to Ho, the key to success with the DATA Act is meeting the requirement to link award identification and financial information. It is this link that will improve transparency and help stakeholders better use data in decision-making.

Implementing the DATA Act requires an agency-centric approach. Treasury collects the data from across government, which is a huge challenge, but the agencies actually own the data. Treasury owns the challenge to work with the agencies and come up with solutions to make data accessible and valuable to agencies and the public.

This is a data-centric approach that needs an understandable structure so data can be extracted and used by real people who can understand the information they are receiving — not just data scientists. Standards will provide labeling of data with the vision of making the data portable, “setting it free” from systems, and using it to create value.

Activities over the past year include pilots working with real data using an agile approach and continuing to get feedback from across the community. More and more agencies are starting to partner with Treasury and test the prototype.

Gribben of SBA agreed that the key to success is linking system and financial system data. This is an area on which SBA had not previously focused other than on a periodic basis to validate accuracy in [USAspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov).

When SBA entered into the project with Treasury, their developers were unfamiliar with the agile approach and were not used to an open-ended project, where the end result might be unknown. But they are now “believers” and have gained a comfort level.

Matching contract, loan, and other types of data has been very powerful for SBA, and the agency is creating a data mart that can help answer the questions asked both within and outside of the agency. There have been a lot of benefits to being part of the Treasury pilot.

SBA has had important lessons-learned during the pilot — particularly, understanding the level of complexity. The data is complex, no matter how much you try to make it simple and accessible.

At the start of the pilot, 57 data elements were mapped. The SBA is now rewriting contracts to include more data elements. They also provided grants data to Treasury, which then provided visualization back to SBA.

Having the right data makes it easier to answer questions from stakeholders. SBA can now see where microloans have or have not been awarded to look for areas in need of help. This capability helped show exactly how communities were being assisted. The next step is a “data mart” designed to drive more efficiencies for DATA Act compliance.

Gribben started off as a skeptic, unsure of how implementation would actually help agencies, but participation in the pilot changed that view.

Morgan discussed her experience at the DOJ. DOJ had three different financial systems and budget constraints, but they looked at DATA Act implementation — and the Treasury pilot — as an opportunity to get a better understanding of their data and how it is linked. She made the effort to get involved with the pilot from the beginning and treat it as more than just a compliance exercise. In fact, she said, “This is an opportunity to better share our resources with the public.”

DOJ is also participating in the Section 5 grants pilot with HHS. They looked to see who did contracts well within the department and chose the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) as a model to test. The idea was to work with what was in place and build on it.

DOJ worked with contracting officers and the acquisition community to make sure legacy data and new data elements were accurate — a process that increased scrutiny on specific data.

“The hardest nut we’ve had to crack for our legacy systems is certifying that the data is accurate,” Morgan said.

In anticipation of mandatory submissions, they have examined the governance structure for vetting and certifying data.

Morgan said they have seen a number of benefits from the pilot, including increased scrutiny of the data that led to questions about whether the department is reporting the right data and putting the right resources on the ground. Participating in the pilot also forced DOJ to take an enterprise-wide view of storage processing capabilities (e.g., data warehouses, data lakes). DOJ has worked very closely with its financial system development team to create solutions for pulling data out of the system and understanding critical interfaces.

The department also has an understanding of what kind of policy decisions need to be made. Lastly, DOJ involved its Office

of Inspector General (OIG) early in the process. “Work with your IG office,” she said. “Because they are the ones who will be auditing your data.”

Randle discussed his efforts to develop and manage the DATA Act schema. At the end of December, his team released the most recent version. They have defined some of the most important elements but need to step back to make sure the initiative is working to meet a number of objectives. The schema is part of a larger umbrella to service multiple objectives.

He stressed that it is not just how agencies send information, but understanding what it all means and how it relates to other labels that people know and are familiar with.

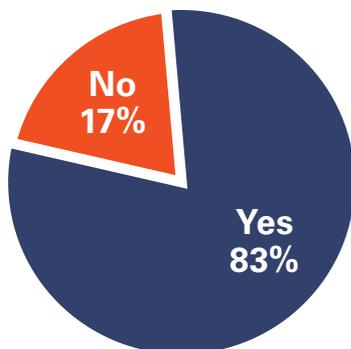
“We want it to be useful for as many people interacting with the data as possible; to do this we need to understand the entire landscape of the information,” he said.

If you are an agency and need to submit data in your preferred method, there needs to be a clear understanding of the information.

Reporting standardization has been outlined, and there is now a framework in place to report information — the DATA Act information model schema (DAIMS) available at: <https://fedspendingtransparency.github.io/data-exchange-standard/>

The overall model of the new schema expanded the elements from the initial 57 to 116 elements, including some that would support the link to USAspending.gov, fields for validation and reconciliation, and beginning general ledger balances, for example. The elements are also provided as a user-readable version. They have also included metadata elements, new ID elements and flexibility for optional elements to capture different types of data. The team is helping agencies move forward immediately in identifying what information is most useful and how to get the value from it for people who look at data through different lenses.

**Do you believe your agency will be more accurately reported to USAspending.gov when the DATA Act is implemented?**



## Polling Questions and Panelist Answers

**Q** Is your agency on schedule with its DATA Act implementation plan?

**A** **Yes — 50 percent | No — 50 percent**

**Gribben:** Timelines are being re-thought based on complicated reporting.

**Morgan:** Our implementation plan is very agile

**Q** Does your agency plan to use DATA Act data to improve agency management capabilities?

**A** **Yes — 75 percent | No — 25 percent**

**Morgan:** I think it is asking “how similar is our data”. Also, we want to ask what information are we not providing. What information could we provide that is already there? We are following consistent guidance for general ledger accounts. What data is already there that may be advantageous?

**Ho:** Financial data is highly complex. The combination of the financial data with geospatial data is powerful.

**Q** Do you believe your agency will be more accurately reported to USAspending.gov when the DATA Act is implemented?

**A** **Yes — 83 percent | No — 17 percent**

**Q** What is the biggest DATA Act implementation challenge?

**A** **Lack of funding — 50 percent | Limited guidance — 33 percent | Short deadlines — 20 percent**

**Morgan:** We are establishing a group to understand what we have to do and when. What is doable and what is reasonable? The thing DOJ is most concerned about is reconciliation. How are we going to answer the American public’s questions on their terms? How do we handle the added potential public relations problem?

**Q** Who is leading DATA Act implementation at your agency?

**A** **CFO — 55 percent | Other — 43 percent | Budget/procurement — 7 percent**