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Skills shortage threatens UK growth in Intelligent Mobility sector, warns independent report

UK businesses and government authorities need to make open data more accessible and tackle an expected shortage of skilled technical talent, if the country is to play a leading role in the emerging Intelligent Mobility sector.

The warning comes as part of a series of recommendations in a report commissioned by the Transport Systems Catapult – the innovation centre set up by Innovate UK in 2012 to promote and drive the smarter and more efficient movement of people and goods.

Carried out by independent researchers at consultancy firm Integrated Transport Planning (ITP), the 96-page report points out that developments such as the Internet of Things are having an increasingly disruptive effective on traditional transport systems and that datasets are expected to become a "new form of oil" for the transport sector.

However, the study's authors identified 11 "obvious transport-related data gaps", including some data sets that do not exist at all in the UK (e.g. on-street parking bay availability), datasets which exist only in silos (e.g. Urban Traffic Management & Control traffic flow data) or data which is not open (e.g. historic passenger ticketing data).

In order to handle the vast amounts of data being generated, the report lists three key requirements, comprising technological investment, organisational capability and "skilled technical talent capable of handling and analysing very large datasets compiled from multiple sources". The study estimates that by 2017 as many as 3,000 additional data specialists will be needed to support the UK transport industry's drive to achieve data-driven efficiencies and optimisation, and warns that "[t]he widespread expectation is that demand for these skills will outstrip the available talent in the next five to ten years".

The report warns that public attitudes to personal data privacy and concentrations of market power are presenting long-term threats to crowd-sourcing business models, and also calls for a faster adoption of globally common data formats.

It concludes with a 20-point action plan, including the creation of an online transport data 'catalogue of catalogues' that becomes the 'Argos' or 'Amazon' for UK transport data, the establishment of an online marketplace to connect buyers and sellers of transport data, and the development of new Transport Data Science courses at UK universities to increase the number of skilled graduates required by the transport industry in the future.

"This report should act as a wake-up call to anyone in the transport industry who has not yet realised the scale of transformation that is facing the sector," Transport Systems Catapult CEO Steve Yianni said following the report's publication.

"To create the smart, efficient transport systems of the future, we are going to need access to data that is open, live and reliable. The Transport Systems Catapult will now be looking closely at the report's 20 recommendations, and we encourage all the major players in the Intelligent Mobility sector to do the same."

Copies of the full "Transport Data Revolution" report can be accessed from the news section of the Transport Systems Catapult website (www.ts.catapult.org.uk).

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The Transport Systems Catapult is the UK's technology and innovation centre for Intelligent Mobility, harnessing emerging technologies to improve the movement of people and goods around the world. It is one of an elite network of not-for-profit technology and innovation centres established and overseen by the UK's innovation agency, Innovate UK. For more information see www.ts.catapult.org.uk