

## **Civic Technology Consultancy and App Developers Using Open Data for Governments Building Tools that Help Citizens Understand What is Going On in Their City**



**Derek Eder**  
*Founder & Partner*  
**DataMade, LLC**

**CEOCFO: *Mr. Eder, what is the idea behind DataMade?***

**Mr. Eder:** DataMade is a civic technology consultancy. Civic Technology is a newer term and what we have been doing over the past four years is building applications with open data released by governments. We build tools that help citizens understand what is going on in their city and governments. We help governments themselves convey information to the broader public. We help academics understand and do valuable research. We also help advocacy organizations use data in order to make arguments to further their policy objective.

**CEOCFO: *What are some of the topics where you are able to offer data?***

**Mr. Eder:** There is a great amount of data out there. One project that we recently just launched is a website called Councilmatic. It is a website that lets you know all the different things going on in a city council. That is the legislative body of any city. We built this tool and deployed it in Chicago and New York, and have plans for more cities coming soon. The idea is that city councils are bodies that have an enormous amount of power and influence over what goes on a given city, yet they are oftentimes very hard to figure out. We built Councilmatic as sort of an intro to that world. It is meant to be very inviting, so anyone who has never heard of a city council before can figure out what they do, can look up who their council member is based on their address and then start browsing the different kinds of bills, laws, resolutions and ordinances that different council members are proposing and voting on. We also keep track of other meetings that they have which are public meetings. The idea is to get more engagement from the broader public and to take this very important piece of government and make it that much more accessible and open to a wider range of people. Another application that we have done are Chicago's Million Dollar Blocks, which takes a bunch of incarceration data for the City of Chicago and how many people have been incarcerated on a particular city block and then tabulates how long their sentence. Then multiplies that by an average number of how many dollars it takes to keep that person incarcerated for a year, which generate a map. That map has a bunch of city blocks on it, some of them totaling more than a million dollars of how much money we are spending in taxpayer dollars to incarcerate people. The idea behind that application is more from the advocacy perspective. We are trying to put this information that maybe people have heard about what is going on in mass incarceration in the US and put a different angle on it, saying this is more about resource allocation, and these are tax dollars we are spending in this particular neighborhood. Is putting people in prison the best use of that money or are there other ways we can spend money to improve those neighborhoods and change the way we outtake those resources. Those are more recent examples. We have done websites and applications ranging the campaign finance data. We have done a lot of work with the built environment around zoning. We have done a lot of work tracking where snow plows go during snowstorms. You can imagine anything that a government does; there is some sort data associated with it. Our goal is to make applications that shine a light on those particulars in a way that opens up people's ideas about what is actually going on with their tax dollars.

**CEOCFO: *What is the business model? Are people paying you to develop the apps? Are you developing them and then selling them to various organizations?***

**Mr. Eder:** We are a consulting company, so most of our income comes from projects that people pay us to build. In the case of Councilmatic, our clients got some grant money to build that project in NY City and we ourselves got some great money to build it in Chicago. In many other cases, non-profits in Chicago are our big clients, and also when academics are working our research projects, we are brought in to do data work and visualization work for them. DataMade has been around for four years and we are making a shift into some products because as you can imagine, we have been building many different tools and we found that if it works in one city, it works in many cities. Councilmatic is an example of a product. There are tens of thousands of decent size cities in the US that all have city councils. We are planning on selling this tool to groups that care about monitoring for many of the city councils but also governments themselves. We have some products that we are pushing towards in the near future.

**CEOCFO: *When someone approaches you about building an app, what do need to find in the way of available data to put it together? Can you accommodate almost anything?***

**Mr. Eder:** First, you have to go meet the client where they are. The number of clients that we have served, we have seen this all across the spectrum such as they got this data and do not know what it means and they need us to help them figure out. There are those who would like to create some data, or they know what they data does, but they cannot figure out a good way to frame it and present it to people. It really comes in all shapes and sizes and that is one of the things that ties the projects we do together, that we are experts in working with and analyzing, manipulating and presenting data. We can help people out at any stage on that pipeline no matter where they are.

**“We are experts in working with and analyzing, manipulating and presenting data. We can help people out at any stage on that pipeline no matter where they are.” - Derek Eder**

**CEOCFO: *Why the decision to work in this arena?***

**Mr. Eder:** The business came out of curiosity and many of these projects in the beginning we just did because we wanted to. One of my first projects, the snow plow tracking app I mentioned earlier, is actually a project we did completely pro-bono because we thought it was something that was interesting and worth exploring. Over a period of time, we had built a number of different applications under a different name known as Open City. That is just a volunteer group that builds these kinds of applications. I was doing this outside of my normal nine to five job as a web developer. Eventually I built enough of these different applications that got people approaching me to build tools for them for hire and that was how I started DataMade. It sort of started as a passion and then turned into a business from there. All along the way, as I was building all these different applications, I was also building a pretty impressive portfolio of applications. Since then, we have grown, I have gotten a business partner and we have full time employees now working on this stuff. They really started from that curiosity, specifically the curiosity about Chicago and what is going on in Chicago. That was because there was open data where there was none before. The open data being released in cities is a pretty relatively new phenomenon. We really did not have open data back in 2011 but we have new administration and they decided to fund initiative to release that data. From the open data came ourselves and the projects we have made. If you Google the term “civic tech,” you will find all kinds of organizations in groups and individuals all across the country and even across the world who are doing similar kinds of work. Much of it stems from the fact that open data is being released now more than it ever has before and it has spurred on innovation. This open data has allowed many folks to think about how government operates with the different technology that government uses. Therefore, there are many market opportunities out there to sell to governments but also to groups that are interested in things that government has data about.

**CEOCFO: *How do you decide where to focus when it is such a wide open field?***

**Mr. Eder:** I would say that our focus primarily in Chicago, we have been very active in building and looking at different things and aspects of Chicago. It has become kind of a test bed for many of the different applications that we have. Like I said earlier, it is a way to pilot it here and then potentially that could turn into something that spreads to other cities. We focus on certain kinds of data like legislative data or political data about the candidates or campaign finance data, data about the built environment, about what is going on in a particular building at an address and that kind of thing. It has been a geographic focus but there are a few different silos out there. This is such a new industry that there are not as many players out there yet, which means that one group can go and experiment in a bunch of different directions and figure out which of the models are profitable ones to really focus on.

**CEOCFO: *How do people come across DataMade?***

**Mr. Eder:** There are a number of different ways. If they are online, we make sure that all of our applications are easily searchable. Google is a great referral and oftentimes many of our more popular sites end up getting 60-80 percent of their

traffic coming from Google as a referral. That is usually it has some useful information that they are seeking. That is a big channel. Another one is an event I run called the Chi Hack Night, which is a weekly event for people to build, share and learn about civic tech and that is held in downtown Chicago every Tuesday at six pm. It has been going for about three and a half years now, about as old as DataMade. It started with just four people showing up to basically get together and work on projects in a volunteer capacity. Now we get about 100 people every week, working on all kinds of different projects ranging from transportation to education to people that are trying to model what is going on with pensions in Illinois. DataMade is a primary sponsor and I run that event. It is a great way for people to get exposed to not just DataMade but the tech community here in Chicago, which is quite large now. So there are online and offline channels. They both yield clients for us and much our business comes from word of mouth just because we have had so many projects and good successes with our existing clients.

**CEOCFO: *How do you work to make user friendly apps for something as complex as the budget of a big city?***

**Mr. Eder:** Budgets are particularly tricky just because the nature of them is they are so complicated as multiple funding sources and there are all kinds of different hierarchies of how the money is categorized. We work with all of our clients to simplify the language and remove all the acronyms and buzz words and write as plainly and clearly as possible. That is our guiding light for all of our writing, but it is also how we do our user interaction. When build something, we absolutely build it and to make sure it looks great on mobile. With that Million Dollar Blocks that I mentioned, half of the traffic came from Facebook on mobile. That was because we made sure it not only looked good on a mobile phone, but when someone actually tried to share it on Facebook, we made sure it had all the rich details you get when you share a link on Facebook, which does not just happen automatically. It is trying to cover all of our bases. We always check on our analytics on a regular basis to make sure we know where people are coming from an on what devices. We make sure that the applications we build look great on all of the devices with which people are reaching us. Mobile is continuing to be a bigger and bigger chunk of the audience and something that we cater to and is essential.

**CEOCFO: *Why pay attention to DataMade?***

**Mr. Eder:** We are one of the leaders in the civic technology movement. We've built dozens different kinds of applications all dealing with open data and we have become experts in making very popular, usable, engaging applications. We have that ability and can do it better than many other groups that I have seen out there, and we are focusing more in more on building particular products that are going to help not just the people of Chicago, but everyone around the United States and the world.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

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## **DataMade, LLC**

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