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The Culture of Data

By Randy Bean | Contributor | July 22, 2014

We live in a time when data is ascendant. It wasn't always this way though. Before there was a Google Inc., before terms like Big Data came into vogue, and before jobs like data scientist and chief data officer became sought after positions, data and analytics were considered to be something of a niche relegated to back office practitioners in market research, statistical analysis, and actuarial groups. The processing of electronically maintained data was referred to by the quaint moniker of electronic data processing.

For the better part of a generation, even as data progressively became more prevalent, and as firms wrestled with how to wring insight and benefit out of the accumulating hordes of new data that was being captured and maintained electronically, data and analytics remained largely a backwater for all but a few leading edge innovators. The technology community progressed through an evolution of terms used to describe fresh capabilities that would enable business executives to derive insight and value from their data assets – decision support systems, executive information systems, and ultimately, database marketing which evolved into customer relationship management and business intelligence.

There was a time when I would go to cocktail parties, and could not comfortably confess to working with data and analytics without driving other revelers to the far corners of the room. I often diverted the subject to discussion of travel, food, sports, the world financial markets, art or anything else that had more general appeal. That all changed with the release of the book and subsequent movie, [Money Ball](#), starring Brad Pitt. When asked what line of work I was in, I could now proclaim, "I do Money Ball for Business!" It was around this juncture that I detected that data and analytics had now become fashionable.

The predominant applications of data and analytics have varied by industry over the years. In the early days of database marketing, I was engaged with clients who were attempting to enhance their cross-sell ratios, and increase the marketing propensity of the next-product-to-buy. My wife, working in the health-care field, was using data to analyze weekly morbidity and mortality rates. That put things into greater perspective for me.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Pentagon. I had been thumbing through my university alumni magazine when I noted that a former college housemate of mine had recently been confirmed as the Assistant Secretary of Defense and Chief Technology Officer for Research and Development. When I contacted my old roomie, to my surprise I received an invitation to travel to the Pentagon to speak to an august assemblage on the topic of Big Data. Coming from private industry, and observing the dozen or so meeting participants attired in an assortment of full business suits, military uniforms with many stars and bars, and combat fatigues, I simply had no idea who in the room was the decision makers.

The fascination of this meeting for me was that I gained a greater appreciation for new facets of data and analytics as these military leaders discussed the criticality of capturing and analyzing sensor and others form of GPS data and military intelligence (e.g. chatter) to calibrate military actions and strikes in the field. Talk about getting your data quality and analysis correct. About a year later, I went to see the film Zero Dark Thirty about the Bin Laden raid. The film depicted the advanced levels of sophisticated data analysis required to track the Al Qaeda leader to his hideout in Pakistan.

We operate in a culture today where data and analytic practices have been acclimated into the mainstream. Whether this proliferation of data and analytics capabilities will yield sharper insight, engender greater social benefit, or enhance human wisdom, remains to be seen. Before we get too enthralled with the expectation that data and analytics will solve all of our problems and challenges, perhaps it's worth recalling the humble observation of the late Albert Einstein: "It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer."

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