How Business Culture Defines Data Success

By Randy Bean | Contributor | October 7, 2014

Few business executives would dispute the notion that having good data is a key competitive advantage and a critical component to business success. Yet, these same executives likely can recount funding requests for data initiatives that were long on promise and short on results. I have heard more than a few executives exclaim over the years, "Oh no! Not another data project!"

When I began advising Fortune 1000 companies on data and information strategy issues over a decade ago, I was operating under the assumption that 95% of my time would be spent on issues pertaining to technology. It didn't take long, however, to realize how mistaken I was. My experience in the intervening years has been that technology is a very small component of the equation when all is said and done. Rather, I have found that 95% of the decisions that are essential to business adoption, and the success of corporate data initiatives, are related to organizational alignment and business process.

This is another way of saying that the leading barriers to successful data adoption are almost always cultural and not technological. Technologically speaking, there are many ways to skin a cat. My experience on the technology front is that it is more important that an organization select the right technology *partner* than it is that they select the right technology *solution*.   Partnerships are for the long haul, while solutions come and go, and change and evolve.

The biggest issues that I hear time and again revolve around factors including sponsorship and ownership of data-driven initiatives, alignment of business and technology functions so that technology capabilities are effectively mapped to business objectives, and the establishment of standard processes and practices that enable firms to develop a discipline around the use and management of data.

A few years back, I was hosting a group of corporate CIO's for an executive thought-leadership breakfast roundtable. The discussion was centered on how effective organizations were in leveraging their data assets to support their key corporate objectives. A number of executives cited the recent usage of the term "Big Data" and noted that, for the first time, board members were asking the executive team, "What is our data strategy?" and "What will Big Data mean to our company?"

In an effort to help executive teams respond to these questions, and shed some light on the current state of data initiatives within the Fortune 1000, we embarked on an informal survey designed to take

the pulse of top business and technology executives to understand the state of data in the large corporate world. The survey was more anecdotal than scientific, and was skewed toward heavy users of data, notably large financial services firms.

First published in the Fall of 2012, this executive survey of senior business and technology leaders is now in its third iteration, and here are a few of the preliminary findings of the 2014 survey, to be published next month, as they relate to the subject of business adoption:

- 65% of the 100+ executive respondents characterized themselves as a C-executive, or as chief of the data or analytics function for their company.

- Nearly 30% of the executives identified the CEO, COO, or CFO as the primary executive sponsor and primary executive owner for their data and Big Data initiatives.

- Nearly 87% of executives cited organizational issues as the most critical factor in successful adoption and data success – executive sponsorship, executive/business leadership, business and technology partnership, organizational alignment.

- Notably, only 4% cited choosing and implementing the right technologies as being the key to business adoption.

What is the takeaway from these preliminary findings? Organizations will continue to be flooded with a series of technology options in the years ahead. Many of these technology options will require deep and specialized expertise to evaluate their merits and their fit with the organizations environments and needs. Some of these technology solutions will provide meaningful breakthroughs in the ways in which they help companies ingest, parse, organize, report, and analyze the data at their disposal.

However, when the day is done, the ability of corporations to take full advantage of the technology options available to them will depend more on the corporate culture that has been forged to enable the usage of data and analytics, and the partnership and alignment of business and technology teams, than on any specific tool or technology. To paraphrase Einstein, getting the human things done right is always what is most important.

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