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Looking Beyond Big Data in 2015

By Randy Bean | Contributor | December 3, 2014

This is generally the time when we take stock of the past 12 months and look ahead to the year in front of us. In this context, I was having lunch with an esteemed colleague and pundit the other day when he asked me somewhat rhetorically, “So, what will we write about after Big Data has run its course?” Hmm, good question. While Big Data has yet to run its course, we should expect to discover fresh topics to write about and call attention to. So, looking back at the run that Big Data has experienced over the course of the past four plus years, here is a reflection and a forecast.

Big Data captured the moment. Love it or hate it, the term Big Data has resonated. It has been noted here that senior executives have expressed a widespread dislike for the term Big Data, believing it to be unhelpful, insufficiently specific, overblown, or generally devoid of substantive meaning. That being said, Big Data has been the right term for the right topic at the right time, which is why it has resonated both broadly and deeply.

Let’s be clear that Big Data is not a magic bullet, a surefire path to success, or a breakthrough that all alone addresses a long challenging set of business issues. Big Data is however a “big idea” which has galvanized widespread interest and attention, resonating with a large non-specialist audience. It should be acknowledged as having moved “data” from obscurity to centrality and relevance. Largely because of Big Data, data as a subject area has been transformed from a field for specialists and technologists, to a topic of interest among the general population, from CEOs to casual observers. While Big Data may represent varying things to different audiences and constituencies (e.g. social media data, sensor data, unstructured data, massive volumes of data, all data), no previous term or characterization has more effectively captured the power, the opportunity, or the fascination that the emergence of data as a business science (e.g. data scientist) has attained in recent years.

Why is the topic of data of broad general interest now? Managing data is not new. Organizations have been capturing, organizing, analyzing, and reporting on data for decades. It would appear that Big Data has captured the imagination of technologists, executives, media, and the public as data has become more available, accessible, integral, and relevant to our professional, personal, and consumer lives. Data has become part of the cultural conversation, from Money Ball, to widely popularized data breaches, to the data capture activities of the NSA.

The impact of Big Data will emerge over time. Looking ahead, what should we expect? Most importantly, we should expect to be patient, realizing that the exact shape and form of the most compelling benefits of new capabilities tend to unfold over time. We cannot yet see or fully appreciate where Big Data will be most impactful. The practical benefits of the Internet have played out in ways sometimes more powerful, yet different, than many of the earliest forecasts. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has enabled us to understand (“360 degree view”) and serve our customers better in many regards (e.g. “get, keep, grow”), but not always as originally anticipated.

Many years ago, I asked the CIO of a leading financial institution how long he expected it would take for his company to adopt a series of new capabilities. I was surprised when he responded “10 years.” To me, that seemed to be a lifetime in business. With the benefit of experience and hindsight, I can now appreciate the wisdom of his comment. Adoption implies change, and change rarely happens overnight. Many companies are staffed with organizations filled with data experts, but Big Data implies new skills and approaches. Universities are now graduating a next generation of technologists and business executives who will have been born of the Big Data time. Only as new skills, approaches, and expertise supersede and meld with traditional approaches will the practical impact of Big Data be felt in full.

To my colleague’s question over lunch, I am not sure what we will be writing about in 2015. As Big Data enters its adoption phase and the focus moves from concept to execution and implementation, we will find new topics and challenges that warrant our interest and attention. The poet Carl Sandburg, once noted, “I don’t know where I am going, but I am on my way.” Stay tuned in 2015.

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