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The Big Data Business Adoption Journey

By Randy Bean | Contributor | November 19, 2015

Big Data represents a business adoption paradox: It promises speed, but successful business adoption takes time.

When I advise executives or speak to business groups, I encourage organizations to view business transforming initiatives like Big Data as a journey. Success ultimately depends upon organizational alignment, process change, and people. Organizations need to develop a long-term plan and destination with many checkpoints along the way. True there are opportunities for “quick wins”—to ensure credibility, build organizational support, establish momentum, and secure funding—but for the most part, patience and persistence are essential.

The challenge is that technology transformations come with great promise and excitement, which often lead to impatience and insistence on immediate results. Big Data brings big expectations. For some organizations, an appreciation for data is already in their DNA and adoption is easier. But most organizations that aspire to a data culture lack a strong data tradition. These firms will face an uphill battle as they embark on a transformation in the hope of establishing a lasting foundation for data discipline.

The adoption of data and analytics in professional sports provides an illustrative example. Not too long ago, proponents of data analysis and statistical techniques had to overcome the skepticism of sports executives and field managers. But as professional sports teams employed new data-driven techniques, and won as a result, the old guard came to appreciate the value of embedding data into decision-making processes on the field and in player selection and development. Who ever heard of a “pitch count” before data analytics? This is the kind of transformation, and accompanying shift in mindset, that assumes the form of a journey that plays out over years.

Customer Relationship Management provides a lesson in business adoption in the corporate world. In the late 1990’s, firms saw an opportunity to organize and integrate their customer data into a consolidated view, with the benefit of superior client service, coordinated customer interaction, and greater customer satisfaction. An impatience for immediate results led many organizations to set

unachievable goals and expectations, leading to disillusionment and stories of “CRM failures.” Big Data faces this challenge now.

Transformations require cultural change within an organization. Political, cultural, and technology revolutions can be seen as the tipping point of forces that have been festering for years or decades. CRM was driven by a perpetual drive to better serve customer needs. Big Data is driven by a perpetual drive to enhance the quality of data insight. The tipping point for CRM was the introduction of the Internet and the ability to enable customer self-service using online channels. The tipping point for Big Data is the acceleration in the rate at which new data and sources of data are proliferating. While technology breakthroughs enable change and advancement, people and organizations drive the pace of business adoption.

When the term “Big Data” came into common usage around 2011, my initial reaction was, “My god! Isn’t this exactly what I’ve been doing for the last few decades?” Yes and no. Yes, because organizations are still striving to learn and gain insights from data. No, because new technology approaches could now hasten these efforts in a way that was not possible before. This represents the critical difference that characterizes and differentiates Big Data from all that preceded it. Realization of the benefits will require a cultural change that impacts people, organizations, and business processes.

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