

The promise of data and the capability deficit

 By Paul Geary

26 Oct 2020

Were we not all inspired by the promise? Freshly motivated by every speaker at a business conference or a writer of a thought-leadership piece who highlighted the untapped potential in your data. Many a C-Suite decision-maker, resolved to leverage this newfound power and start driving it within their own organisation. For a decade, we've been hearing things like: "Data is the new oil!", "we'll make marketing and IT work together!", "we'll build dashboards and put them in reception!"...



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But – despite now being greeted by those shiny 78” screens with their live, animated graphs and figures – most of these businesses remain fundamentally unchanged.

They planned to build data-driven businesses, those that are characterised by prediction, an insights-driven, test-and-learn culture and continuous optimisation. The promise was that these businesses would use data as the foundation for agile and critical business decision-making and innovation to improve operational efficiency, minimise risk and drive new or maximise existing sources of revenue. Instead, many of these businesses – large and small – have only, at most, paid lip service to the approach; they haven't fully adopted it, despite the best intentions.

To 'do data-driven' properly, it truly needs to become the foundation of your business. After all, when we talk about data, we're (mostly) talking about our customers – the very lifeblood and foundation of every business since the beginning of time. It's not the kind of approach you can 'half-adopt' – the business is either all-in, or you're wasting your time and money.

There are plenty of reasons why adoption hasn't been as comprehensive as it should be, but I've posited seven major ones – and my theory is that most businesses will find at least three of these seven, true. Here they are.

Inclination and apathy

Let's start with the marketers. While many are adept at spotting trends, not many are good at adopting them, or adapting to them. Many marketers are stuck in a 'comfortable' phase, probably delivering acceptable brand strategies and communication plans, but without the requisite trust or technical ability to make the leap. The inclination is required to help drive the adoption of new tech – so maybe it's the team itself that needs a reboot, not just the methodology.

Down the corridor (in much darker offices) is the apathy of so many IT departments to implementing new tech. Stuck resuscitating outdated PCs and connecting HR to the printer, ironically they've lost sight of the fact that tech and innovation is surely what drew them to IT in the first place. They need to understand the value of building/changing systems, processes and running new software, for the bigger business, to help get them back in the game.

The business then needs to force collaboration and adoption - and then measure efforts and hold the full team accountable to real business results.

Siloes are still part of many businesses

Whether it's an internal team or a contracted business partner like an agency or specialist consultant, these groups are often fiercely territorial and will blindly defend their own efforts (naturally). Siloes form so easily and can make it hard for businesses to adapt.

Data volumes and systems are overwhelming

If you're dazzled by the volume of data, you're doing it wrong. Often times, the amount of data, the legacy and closed connected software and systems that generate this data, mean that the task is overwhelming. Data needs to be useful to other business applications and functions – in other words, it needs to facilitate more business! If it all seems like too much, it's time to go back to the processing drawing board.

Analytics and Insights (by themselves) generally fail as a proof-of-concept

Often as the starting point, businesses decide they will be more intentional with their reporting. And this is usually done only at the end of a project that didn't start with key **customer** hypotheses. Because this generally doesn't yield any major results or return, it's a matter of time before stakeholders lose interest. What is misunderstood, is the fact that data-driven is not the same as Analytics. Data-driven is a much more foundational and pervasive approach to business.

Your proof-of-concept should evaluate how a more holistic approach to data could be effective by implementing it across a smaller, more manageable aspect of the business. This should focus on a single part of the customer journey – with all its associated systems and data – that can realistically stand alone and be tested. Critically, that plan should include various ways in which using data could enhance the customer experience or optimise service delivery.

The Cambridge Analytica Effect

The idea that all data is evil and is used for nefarious purposes has deterred many a company from pulling the trigger. Data can be used in multiple ways – but if your intention is to help **serve your customers** and do better business – and you're willing to invest in doing it properly by making sure your gatekeeping checks and balances are comprehensive – you can only succeed.

Cost of tools

The tools employed in sourcing, managing, interpreting, and using data are often charged for in foreign currency, particularly US dollars. That makes them expensive for South African companies to adopt and license, thanks to the Rand's weak exchange rate against the major currencies.

For bigger organisations, successful-data-driven marketing also relies on an investment in expensive infrastructure and big spend on IT integration and maintenance.

There are often smart ways around this, but you need to know where you're going and map how you're going to get there. Unfortunately, it's often hard to do this without the practical exposure to various functional parts of the business and experience with implementing quite varied solutions. It should really go without saying but, ultimately the investment should make the business more profitable.

Tools without operators

Many businesses have been sold – by a highly-trained and effective salesperson (with a secret weapon in their own data intelligence!) – on a piece of glossy, expensive software and the power of one-stop-shop customer solutions. These tools are paid for with chunky ongoing budget, they're installed and connected, and they sit... not doing what they were promised to...

The reality is, tools will always gather dust if they're not being actively used. This means: used by people (inside or outside the organisation), with know-how, mandate and responsibility, and with a proper plan that is being measured.

That's it. There are many other reasons, but these are the big ones that we see most often with the clients that we're called in to help.

So don't lose that excitement. Just remember: successful data-driven businesses are entirely underpinned by strategic intent and operational follow-through that embeds effective information systems, customer data and predictive analytics at their core.

ABOUT PAUL GEARY

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