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### Data – use it or lose it

Data is the lifeblood of business, the fuel of the economy, the treasure of nations. Given its central role in our lives, organisations invest relatively little time and attention in the management and exploitation of data.

I know what you're thinking: but we spend masses of money on technology!

I agree, but too often we neglect to invest in the processes and practices that will make the technology really effective.

The greatest technology in the world can't deliver on its promises if the organisation isn't able to make use of its data – rapidly, confidently and securely.

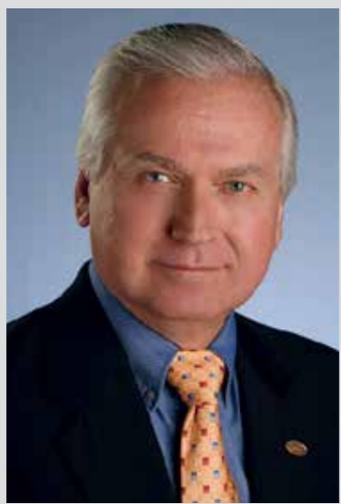
Data has gone from being an obscure subject for technicians to a taken-for-granted business asset. Neither of these perceptions is helpful.

Data always has been and always will be a source of human action. Data doesn't do anything on its own. You have to use it. And to use it, you've got to know what you've got, where it is, what it's for and how to use it.

Data standards and models like the Acord Framework help with all this. But they are tools, not magic spells.

Someone has to take up the tools and apply them. The questions Patrick Dewald poses are a great way of starting a vital conversation. Data is only an asset when it is usable. ■

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# Data really is an asset

Both data and data knowledge are valuable assets in themselves and need to be managed accordingly



Patrick Dewald  
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“Data is an asset” is one of those slogans that frequently gets bandied around in management circles. Every modern organisation relies heavily on data. It provides insight into business performance as well as strategic direction, and if used properly, it plays an integral role in running the firm.

Many large organisations have recognised the strategic importance of data and have created an executive position of chief data officer, dedicated to overseeing and developing this important asset.

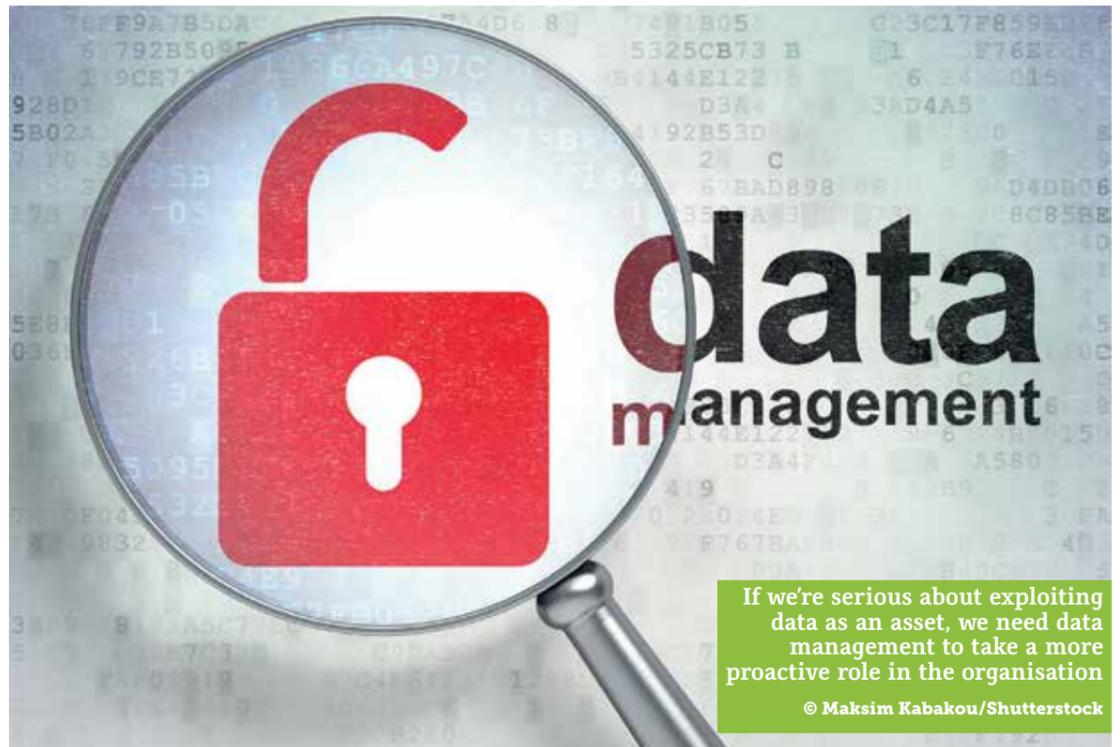
Despite this apparent investment, is data really treated as an asset? All large firms hold comprehensive registers of other more tangible assets, such as human capital, financial resources and facilities. If data is indeed considered a strategic asset, one would expect there to at least be a register of what data is held and where, for which purpose and who is involved.

Both data and data knowledge are valuable assets in themselves and need to be managed accordingly. Knowledge management has been an established practice for many years now. So why is knowledge management about data not an active focus of the enterprise data management professionals?

#### The corporate memory

Many people assume data is a billion-dollar asset for most global firms. However, collective understanding of this asset is partial at best. It is also not readily available in language used outside specialist teams.

In most large organisations, collating existing understanding of a given data type occurs in an ad hoc manner, with a mad scramble of people quizzing one another. The data is all there, but the cor-



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porate memory needed to locate and use the data is missing.

Such a question may sound brash. After all, technology and information experts are working hard at building their understanding of the data landscape. They have system, server, interface and architecture diagrams, data models and dictionaries. So what's getting in the way?

The existing technical and specialist data-centric views lack the business context in which the data operates. In plain language: what is the data used for? Organisations must be able to answer the most pertinent questions one has of any corporate asset: is the asset fit for purpose and is it compatible with the firm's overarching strategic objectives?

Whenever a firm's business functions rely on data, it is crucial to know whether or not the data concerned is:

- performing as a trusted asset;
- containing relevant information; and
- delivering great value.

Given the reliance on data in the modern organisation, not being able to state confidently whether or not the asset meets current and future

business requirements is a major shortcoming. Ten years ago, applying roles and responsibilities to data was a revelation to most and the start of data governance as we now know it. However, little focus was given to creating a shared understanding of what was being governed.

#### Speaking the language

Part of the problem is that discussions around data are not currently being conducted in business terms. This prevents the business community from taking an active role in ensuring its business requirements are being met.

Data and the broad business context in which it operates needs to be captured and managed as a core body of knowledge in a way that is accessible and understandable to a business audience. Deliberate and active management of data knowledge by and for the business is imperative for organisations to manage the data asset in line with business needs and priorities.

This approach will help bring data governance out of the basement and into the forefront of management thinking. I believe this is the next necessary step in the evolution of enterprise data management.

If you are responsible for maturing the governance, quality or compliance of your data, here are some important questions to ask within your organisation to help you gauge potential areas for improvement:

- Does a data register exist and how widely is it used?
- Is there a go-to point to find out about data sourcing, usage, quality and so on?
- Does every project start from scratch in clarifying and confirming its data requirements and the as-is data landscape?
- Does the business have an integrated view of its critical data elements and where these are used?
- Who is tracking the level of data duplication and fragmentation across the firm?

If we're serious about exploiting data as an asset, we need data management to take a more proactive role in the organisation – working with the business to make it smarter. ■

Patrick Dewald is a data governance architect and founding partner in Diaku