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## TECHNOLOGY FOCUS



### Going live: Creating tools and services that make a difference

Getting real business value out of information is often a matter of looking at it in new ways. Our guest columnist this month picks up on one of the major problems with big data today, which is that big data talk tends to obscure the need for meaning and instill fear instead.

Eugene Lee's solution is to switch the emphasis from the data to apps that make the data useful and relevant. We need to provide information services that are intuitive, fitting naturally into the flow of people's daily lives. We may be working with large amounts of complex data, but that must not stop us from making the output simple and compelling.

There is a further level to Lee's message, which is no-one can run a business on a report cycle basis any more. We are in a real-time world that just cannot be managed that way. Today's business is about live communication and on-the-spot decision-making, backed by solid information and guided by reliable, flexible processes.

To support this style of working, organisations need proven, well-supported data and process standards that provide the foundations and power source for apps. Using the community standards available to us all, we can put our energies into creating tools and services that make a real difference – at the sharp end. ■

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# We don't want analytics – we want apps

## Big data can be fascinating and its power and possibilities are largely untapped, but the real instinct driving our obsession with it is fear



Eugene Lee, senior director, new initiatives  
Guidewire Software

Map app: the map hides the data it uses, displaying only red, yellow and green roads

It seems like all anybody wants to talk about these days is big data. You have probably heard the stats – things like “more data is created every day than existed in the entire world back in 2003” and “72 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute”.

Impressive as they are, I must admit I am beginning to find the entire topic very tiresome. The problem I have with the way people talk about big data is the focus is always on the data. Business people don't want more data – we have too much of it as it is. We want answers so we can take action.

Why are we so obsessed with big data? Fascination is certainly one reason. We live in a wondrous time. The power and possibilities of big data are still largely untapped. Like other significant historical technological advancements (for example the printing press, the industrial revolution, the rise of the internet), big data is likely to change our lives in ways we can still only imagine.

### Fear is the key

But in my travels, speaking to insurance companies around the world, I sense a more basic human instinct driving our obsession: fear. We fear we will be trampled by big data. After all, we never adequately solved our small data problem. Our businesses still run largely on static reports, a paradigm we know is broken.

Nobody likes reports. Business users hate them because they never get the exact answer they need to the question they have – too much is left to guesswork and gut feeling. IT people hate reports too. Aligning and formatting reports is like working in IT purgatory. You want to tick your IT team off? Just

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ask them about their reporting backlog or how many of their reports are still in active use.

Human beings are social, interactive, visual creatures. Take a good look at those reports, all those rows and columns. Rows and columns are not optimised for humans, they are structures built for databases. Human beings should not be forced to think like machines. We yearn for something better while also fearing the change that is to come.

### Making data meaningful

What then is the answer? Let business users build their own reports? Offer them more dashboards? Helpful, perhaps, but these are just incremental improvements on the same outdated paradigm. Prettier reports and more colourful charts are not enough. Flexible output options do not solve the problem.

This is where all the big data talk has failed us. We do not want analytics. We never asked for big data. What we need are answers: “How

can I optimise our new business conversion rate?” “Which customers were hit by the storm and how can I serve them better?” “Who on my team is underperforming and why?”

### Get the look

The best big data solutions do not look like data. When they are done right, the numbers and stats disappear and blend into the background. Take all that real-time traffic information you need to get to work on time. Google is aggregating it from the movement of all the smartphones of all the people driving in all the cars on all those roads ahead of you. You do not see the data; you see green, yellow and red roads. Even then you do not see them as colours, you see them as meaning – the meaning you need to make a decision, in this case the decision on what route to take.

### Let there be answers

We would do well to learn from this emergent consumer paradigm. Need directions? Want to find a place to eat? Looking for a good physician? There are apps for that. Apps are not monolithic tables of numbers. They are as varied as the questions that need answers. They are visual and interactive. They are easy to install and even easier to use. Apps retain context and allow for action: what decision needs to be made? Who is making the decision? What does she want to do next? Developing apps requires our creativity. Using apps affirms our humanity.

The data explosion of the past decade has been remarkable, especially if you enjoy watching online videos of cats. But for those of us trying to solve real business problems, very little has changed. When will we realise rows and columns are food for machines? They are not suitable for human consumption. People do not need more reports and analytics. We need to make decisions. We need answers so we can take action. What we want are apps. ■

