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View from the bridge

Leaders need to look at the business from two apparently opposing perspectives at the same time: they have to see the big picture and the little details. When they try to marry the two views, they often find things are not as “joined-up” as they ought to be.

Organisations need specialised units, so integrating silos is a business issue, albeit one with a technical solution. To get the enterprise working the right way, we need to understand what it is trying to achieve and the roles played by information.

As our guest columnist Patrick Dewald says, despite the complexity of today’s enterprises the amount of exploration required to get people collaborating better with data is actually very little: it is about establishing the rules of communication.

Data standards can help to shape the exploration and then step in to provide much of the mechanism for sharing the information. Once people are sharing information better, they often begin to see how they can also reduce unnecessary diversity in the silos. They start to see they can share processes and services as well as data.

Bridging silos with a sound data governance approach is therefore also a great bridgehead for further improvements across the business. ■

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Breaking the silos: the data opportunity

The challenge for enterprise data management is to bridge, but not breach, silos across the business



Patrick Dewald, data governance architect and founding partner Diaku

Large firms have specialised functions that group together skills, knowledge and purpose. Separation of functions and duties also ensures separation between those operating the business and those controlling it. In today’s increasingly regulated environment, Chinese walls are a necessity.

But these silos make collaboration across the business more difficult. Each separate area has its own particular business focus, perspective and even terminology, making it difficult to build a shared understanding. Reporting lines can also reduce incentives to work outside the silo.

Although firms operate in silos, data flows across and feeds those functional areas just as blood does in a living body, so the challenge for enterprise data management is to bridge, but not breach, these silos.

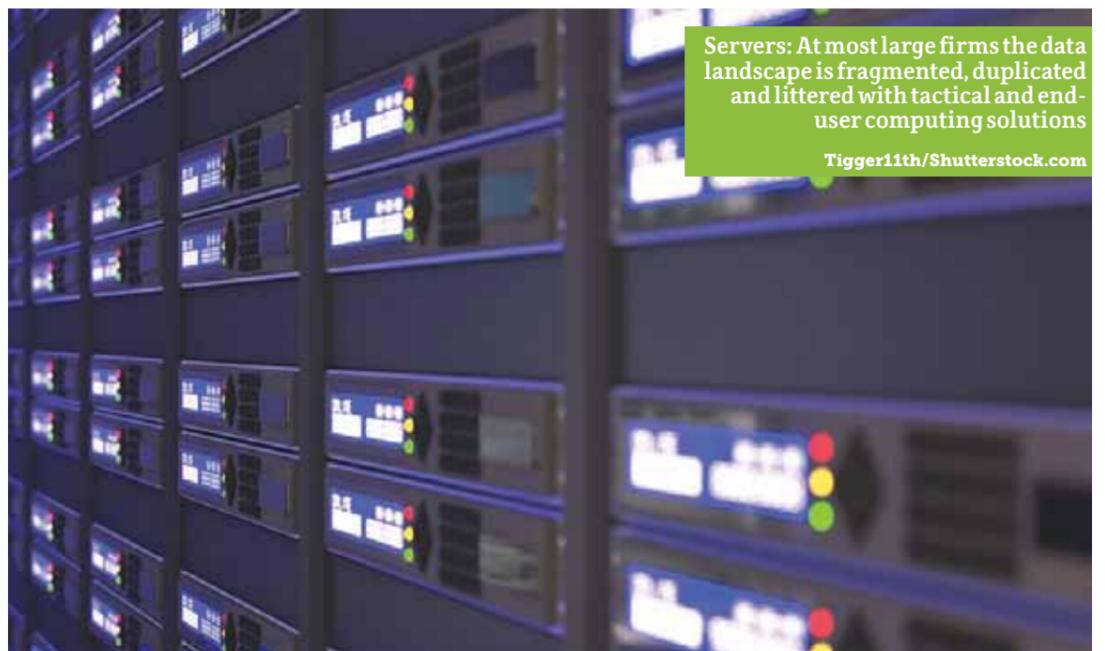
Joined by data

Data-integration efforts are often approached solely as technical exercises. However, the key to bridging the silos and creating a lean data landscape is to understand how data items are used. Unless we connect data flow to its business usage, data will remain siloed and the firm’s overall effectiveness will be compromised.

Organisations need a basic understanding of their data from three perspectives:

- Semantic: business understandable definitions of data items;
- Origination: where the data item is recorded and its provenance; and
- Business context: the data’s relevance in terms of process, policy, regulation, change projects and so on.

Making knowledge relevant also means being mindful of today’s messy business reality, which is



Servers: At most large firms the data landscape is fragmented, duplicated and littered with tactical and end-user computing solutions

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usually well removed from the architectural ideal of clean lines and perfect standardisation. At most large firms the data landscape is fragmented, duplicated and littered with tactical and end-user computing solutions. At the same time, lots of different terms exist for the same concept and up-to-date documentation or knowledge might not always be at hand.

Lower barriers

Surprisingly, the depth of understanding required to foster collaboration is fairly shallow. Less is more here. Too much detail can be

an obstacle to engagement across functions, whereas an accessible, lean layer of understanding focused on the essence and the interconnectedness of items can bring people together.

Many knowledge repositories already exist in organisations, be they data dictionaries, process repositories, project directories or data models, but these assets are rarely connected up. To empower everyone to find answers about data, basic information on the organisation’s core data items and the connected business environment in which they operate must be made readily available.

The data opportunity

Silos are a challenging part of the reality at large organisations and often perceived to be one of the main reasons why data is of poor quality. Rarely, however, is data viewed in terms of the opportunities it presents. We should recognise that data is the language in which we do business and, more than anything else, the one thing that binds the silos together.

Understanding data usage and flow across silos creates a shared understanding of the business that

allows information to be reused and connections to be optimised. A shared data understanding bridges the silos of the modern organisation to build a business-wide network, a lingua franca of data. To understand your data is to understand your business.

Taking action

These are the main topics I raise to get organisations started on silo-bridging:

- What is holding people back—is it really the quality of data or the fact they cannot find, trust or understand what data to use when?
- Is there a business view on data being managed within the organisation that captures core data items and their business usage? If so, is it linked up with a data governance framework?
- If there is an existing data governance framework, what metadata is available to help data owners and stewards make sound decisions? and
- Is data integration seen as a purely technical affair? Senior managers need to know if data is not expressed in business terms they are not in full control of business performance. ■