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Powered by data

Many organisations have a fuzzy take on business data and lack a focal point to make sense of this vital asset. There are often lots of roles identified with data management and exploitation, so the responsibility for creating a unified understanding of the business's information is fragmented.

The answer is not necessarily a "data tsar", although it really helps if the tone from the top chimes with good data practices and an instinctive respect for the value of information.

It also helps to remember data is not alien stuff. We generate data when we operate the business. We collect data to understand the markets in which we are operating. We produce data to enable functions within the organisation and to collaborate with partners and customers. The people who run the business are best placed to care for our data – and to ensure it makes sense.

The collaborative model Patrick Dewald recommends in our guest article has been proven to work well at the industry level. This is the approach we take to building, maintaining and supporting the data standards that keep information flowing throughout the insurance industry. Within the single organisation, getting people closer to their own data is the first step to empowering them. When they feel responsible for business data and confident about its meaning and usage, people are better able to improve their processes and innovate. ∎

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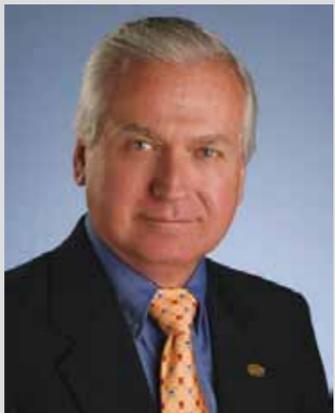
A collaborative data governance model would benefit insurance firms

Data does not occur in a vacuum, nor is it intrinsically complex. It is the environment and business reality in which data operates that makes it challenging

Patrick Dewald
Diaku

Most data governance implementations are conducted through roles, committees, policies and maybe the odd data dictionary. While this approach may interest the data crowd, it neither engages with nor brings much value to the day-to-day concerns of most business users.

The main challenges concerning data for the average business user are the lack of overall visibility and understanding. They face issues such as:
- From where should I source a given data element?
- Are fields A and B used for the same purpose across the different systems in which they occur?
- How does my data stay in sync? and
- What is the provenance of my data?

Think about your organisation for a moment. Chances are there is no go-to point where you can quickly answer questions like these – at least not yet.

Data does not occur in a vacuum, nor is data intrinsically complex. It is the environment and business reality in which data operates that makes it challenging.

The typical data landscape at a large organisation is fragmented across a few hundred systems, thousands of Excel and Access data sources and several thousand business processes. If only you could make this fragmented, largely obscured landscape a more visible and better understood whole, you could begin to exploit data better and reduce your management costs.

It turns out you can. You build a better data landscape by leverag-

ing and incentivising business users. The key to doing better with data is creating an improved and shared understanding of data and its usage beyond the specialist data crowd. Shared understanding brings people closer together, builds engagement, fosters collaboration and lowers barriers to changing behaviours.

Imagine data – its connections, usage, dependencies and broad business context – being described in business-understandable terms and recorded in a single, easily accessible knowledge repository for all to use and contribute to. This is not such an insurmountable task, as many committed and imaginative groups are proving every day.

The collaborative model
In the consumer world, millions of people are collaborating together on valuable open source projects, wikis, networking groups and community portals without ever meeting or even speaking to one another. Meanwhile, the corporate world is falling behind. Colleagues working for the same firm continue to have regular face-to-face meetings, happy to write up data requirements in Word. They will follow up with some email ping-pong, wrestle with "track changes" and then bury the document on a project network drive.

How can we hope to leverage this

slow, uncertain and fragmented approach or form an integrated, accessible and insightful whole?

Up-to-date knowledge on data and its usage is present in your organisation right now. But this knowledge is segmented and trapped in the heads of individuals across many functions and disciplines. The knowledge needs to be documented and shared across the business, rather than staying with – and eventually leaving with – the people who have it. What is needed is a framework and platform to liberate, collate and connect understanding.

Understanding requires context. The business context of data and how it is relates to business processes, reports, projects, regulations and so on can be built up collaboratively by repeated small contributions from the business community within the organisation. Matching the distributed nature of data and its usage with a distributed and collaborative approach to building shared understanding lets us harness the knowledge that is already there and paid for.

In return, the community gets an increasingly rich, comprehensive living body of knowledge that enables people to make sound, joined-up and informed decisions. With a collaborative, systemic approach to data governance, knowledge about data is captured, made available and continually enriched.

Taking action
To help you implement some of the ideas in this article, I have posed some questions below I use to help organisations gauge potential areas for improvement. Feel free to copy and adapt them to your situation.
- What data knowledge assets (data dictionaries, business glossaries, logical data models, data quality registers) exist in your organisation? How joined-up and widely adopted are they?
- What other business knowledge assets (process modelling tools, policy directories, change project registers) exist? Do these assets enable business users to construct a connected data view?
- Do data owners and other responsible parties in your organisation feel they have a sufficiently integrated understanding of data and its usage? Is there an integrated view of critical data elements and the business contexts in which they are critical?
- How engaged is the business around data? Does the business have a standard way of communicating data requirements?

As part of a data governance initiative, the business community needs to take ownership of its data. Having people take ownership and stay engaged on the basis of a shared understanding is not only more productive, it also enables them to make far more informed and responsible decisions. Our business is data, but let us remember our data is about the business. ∎

Patrick Dewald is a data governance architect and founding partner in Diaku. He has been leading data governance initiatives and designing and implementing groupwide data services for 15 years. An earlier version of this article appeared at Data Quality Pro.