Chapter 14
Re-Imagining Data Governance

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary business environments reflect the growing influence of data as a mission-critical resource of relevance across the enterprise, suggesting a need for robust infrastructures to enable good data management practice. This includes data governance, a particularly foundational infrastructure with a crucial role to play. Data governance models in common use however, reflecting traditional top-down, hierarchical structures, and relying on designated governance roles, are not equipped to effectively embed data accountability within dynamic business environments. In response, this chapter offers a new approach designed to foster accountability by cultivating data knowledge and promoting good data management behavior amongst all relevant staff. Drawing from an operational data governance framework developed for New Zealand government, the new model employs a core set of capabilities and a steady states model to map data flow. It provides a deliberately business-centric view of data accountability and offers a means of maturing data thinking to support improved integration across operating scales.

INTRODUCTION

Almost it seems while we weren't looking, the world around us has changed.

Far reaching developments in technology, transitioning for all intents and purposes from the stuff of lofty ideas to indispensable components of our daily lives, continue to emerge at a profoundly rapid rate, undermining our ability to leverage traditional means of informing our choices and values (Allenby, 2015). And all the while we accept this state of flux as something altogether normal.

Fuelling that accelerated pace of change and shaping our opinions about the possibilities of technological disruption, is a vast network of data, sometimes visible, often unseen. Driven by interactions between producers and consumers, directed by the gravitational forces of sources and sinks, coursing in a myriad of ways through a complex labyrinth of connections, data streams continuously through its channels as the lifeblood of our modern world. And much like the technological tools that we employ for everything from managing an investment portfolio to locating the closest cup of coffee, the underlying data that we leverage for our varied purposes has thoroughly permeated our personal lives.

So too in business contexts, the proliferation of data and subsequent dependencies on it have recrafted operating environments, leading to a landscape of playing fields reflecting new sets of rules and novel realities, but also rife with possibility. Success in contemporary business environments is dependent more than ever before on the ability to harness and leverage the vast potential of data, on a willingness to adopt a sufficiently aspirational strategy that is nonetheless founded on solid data management principles and delivered through appropriate organisational infrastructure.

In response, this chapter presents a new approach to a particularly critical infrastructure, data governance, designed to better equip organisations to manage increasingly important data assets in the face of unconventional and rapidly changing operating environments.

Based on a Data Governance Framework developed for New Zealand government, the proposed model turns traditional governance on its head, to mature thinking beyond a longstanding bias that favours hierarchical and decidedly top-down execution. Emphasising instead elements of a bottom-up implementation that cultivates deeper levels of data knowledge and improved principles-based data management behaviours, it accentuates the role and relevance of governance within the operational contexts of line staff. This distinct shift in thinking about the purpose of governance addresses existing capability gaps and serves to embed data management good practice and accountability as an inherent, business-as-usual outcome across all parts of the enterprise.

BACKGROUND

Attitudes, Expectations and Opportunities

Notably, as more efficient and relevant technologies are adopted with increasing frequency, giving rise to a condition where a steady flow of new developments is the norm, the public hardly has time, or the inclination for that matter, to respond in a thoughtful manner. And this can have profound repercussions on how society operates. As Allenby (2015) explains, "The cycle time of technology innovations and the rapidity with which they ripple through society have become far faster than the institutions and mechanisms that we've traditionally relied on to inform and enforce our choices and values."

This shift in the traditional norms associated with technological choice extends to data as well. As the stuff that keeps their apps functioning, data is regarded by many consumers as something of a given, if acknowledged at all. It need not be thoughtfully considered because it is always there, always available and always in a format that is readily interpretable and consumable through familiar user interfaces. This engenders high levels of expectation amongst those consumers for data to deliver, to offer itself as intuitive information in response to any expressed need. And it better not make them wait.

A public that operates in an environment where data is a resource upon which it can unquestionably rely, where it is freed from the burden of choice, is also a user community with the opportunity to expand its thinking around the role of data. The idea of a so-called Age of Data has been around for some time, but based on recent advancements in the technology to collect, store and serve data, such an age may truly be upon us (Lohr, 2012). In a time when the collection of data is nothing if not efficient, where data is streamed continuously from sources across a wide range of contexts, users are increasingly well placed to consider how to glean more and truly meaningful value from that data.

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