Chapter 2
Effective Communication Approaches for Decision Analytics:
An Exploration of Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Analysts ignore the context that shapes and constrains communication at their peril. The rhetorical context in which analytics is enacted influences the communicative approach. In this chapter, two dominate elements are considered: 1) analytic complexity and 2) rhetorical context. Along this analytic-rhetorical spectrum, a four-square matrix is developed using these elements to describe distinct environments in which analytics is enacted. While each of the four positions are addressed for inclusion in this chapter, the focus is narrowed to an exposition of strategies for effectively communicating insights within the realm of decision analytics. Marked by a more basic analytic framework, decision analytics aims to support successful consumption and utilization at senior levels of organizations. Decision analytics differ from other types of analytics since they support the process of making decisions versus providing information. This chapter focuses on how analysts can use decision analytics to effectively communicate analytic results and insights to senior leaders of organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Communicating effectively and strategically benefits from an examination of context and intent. While generally accurate, this assessment is perhaps even more pressing when one is communicating analytic results in an organizational setting. When analysts focus exclusively on the techniques of their craft, important considerations such as the best way to convey results are minimized or ignored. Without an adequate appreciation for the rhetorical context in which analytics is enacted organizationally and aligned appropriately to a communication approach, analysts implicitly assume the weight of the results will be compelling enough for managers to accept and act. Analysts' actions suggest a belief in this even if the results and methodology are not fully understood by those in power. Such an approach, even if successful, is ultimately a disservice to analysts, managers and the organization as it rests on ignorant acceptance rather than deep understanding. Consequently, the rhetorical context ought to influence the communicative approach adopted to convey the results. This communicative approach benefits from an awareness of how analytics is often integrated into business decision making.

Businesses are making increased use of analytics (Bose, 2009; Kohavi, Rothleder & Simoudis, 2002; Năstase & Stoica, 2011). In fact, analytics and analytic insights increasingly reside at the core of leaders' attempts to make sense (Weick, 1979 & 1995) of what is going on (Bois, 1975) within organizations. As Năstase and Stoica explained, "data analysis is at the heart of decision making in all business applications" (p. 604). How is the integration of analysis into business decisions actually enacted? It is worth noting that analytics is a complex and emerging field of study. In fact, "the science of advanced analytics is not an easy concept or technology for users to understand or know how to use" (Bose, p. 166). As a result of its inherent complexity, there is a potential asymmetry of knowledge between those creating analysis and those consuming it. Kohavi, Rothleder and Simoudis noted that, "business users, while expert in their particular areas, are still unlikely to be expert in data analysis and statistics" (p. 45). This knowledge gap highlights the need for analysts to be able to communicate effectively. Năstase and Stoica admonished that "analysis results must be distributed to a wide audience" and that much of what analysts produce are not designed "for the broader base of business users who need the output to be translated into language and visualizations that are appropriate for the business needs" (p. 610). More succinctly, analysts need to "produce results that are actionable" (Kohavi, Rothleder & Simoudis, p. 48). In order for analysts to communicate effectively and transform analytic results into something which is organizationally actionable, it is advantageous to assess the rhetorical context in which analysis is consumed.

Rhetorical context can be defined as the elements comprising a specific communication act to include the nexus of purpose, audience, structure and style (Lamm & Everett, 2009). The concept of rhetorical context is particularly important for delimiting the parameters of effective communication approaches for decision analytics as it has application potential in both business (Randazzo, 2012) and scientific research methodologies (Herrera, 2009). From a general perspective, Cho and Choi (2018) assessed that "contextual factors influence the way we speak and write" and further, "an audience is central to the rhetorical context and helps identify the parameters of a writing task" (p. 25). Narrowing the focus to the highly specialized, rhetorical context of technological endeavors, Ornatowski (1998) described that "technology and technical artifacts," like analysis, "appear to be largely products of interaction and communication, not mere embodiments of scientific principles, laws of mechanics, and specialized, esoteric knowledge" and that therefor analysis might be beneficially understood as "a rhetorical enterprise," one in which, "the margin of indeterminacy surrounding technical artifacts constitutes a rhetorical space" (p. 317). Business analysis is consumed within such a rhetorical space. Jackson and Reboulet's (2019) work

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