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How to eat an elephant and other data challenges

Managing data has been a challenge in every organisation I have ever worked. I remember a university president who pleaded with his staff to tell him how many students they had, because each person he asked gave him a different answer. I remember a global company who spent millions buying a new system but invested nothing in customising it to local needs, rendering it practically useless. And finally, the senior executive, her desk covered by spreadsheets and reports, who didn't trust any of the results they displayed. There are many variations on the theme, but essentially, our data challenges boil down to some common themes: I can't access my data; I can't leverage my data; I can't trust my data.

How to eat an elephant

Like the adage says – one piece at a time. As much as we all love quick fixes, rarely are our data problems solved simply by buying a new piece of technology. This is because data runs deeper than the systems in which it lives. System enhancement is one piece of a complex puzzle.

Other pieces of the puzzle include establishing strong data governance to ensure we understand where our data comes from and how it is managed and used throughout the organisation. It may not be sexy, but governance gives us the quality controls we need to ensure our data is trusted and used efficiently.

Smart organisations know their data challenges can't be solved with quick fixes and have realistic plans, budgets, and timelines to tackle each part of the problem in a structured way.

Isn't data just something scientists worry about?

Data is everybody's business. Building a culture which values data, and a workforce who understands the power and potential of data, is critical in modern organisations. We don't all need to become data scientists, but we do need to understand the basics like how to collect, share, and leverage our data for the greatest effect.

We need to move away from traditional constructs where we perceive data as passive, static, and historical. Data can report on what happened in our organisation yesterday, but it is also capable of telling us so much more. We need to teach our people about the possibilities and embed strong data capabilities in our teams to drive the changes we need.

But where do I start?

Start small. Start with those who get it. Start now. You can't solve it all at once so focus on the piece you can do now. And don't wait; there will never be a perfect time; delaying is just procrastination. Start by reviewing one data set; trace and document its origins, and how it is being used. Think about who else in the organisation may benefit from this information and share it with them.

Or simpler still, just share what you are already doing. Tell people what data you collect and use every day. You may be surprised to find others collecting and using the same data. Pool your resources to produce better data, faster data, more trusted and usable insights.

But whatever you do build it into a wider plan that encompasses all aspects of your business – people, processes, systems, culture, and governance. Integrating these powerful drivers will speed your progress and help you build sustainable solutions to your data management challenges.

Tackling your data challenges requires patience, commitment, and a plan. It may feel daunting, but there are people who can help you do it. The university president did it. The senior executive is on the right path. You can do it too.

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