Why do people bash on about 'Single Source of Truth'?

I was involved in a conversation with a client today where they were talking about a manually maintained Microsoft excel based data source that was required to be included in data being pulled into a database for reporting purposes. After asking some more questions it was established that this data was actually being generated from a source that originated with Human Resources.

I think most of you would be surprised at how often this sort of conversation happens. A team in an organisation who is manually maintaining some form of data source, when the true source of the data is a system that is being maintained by another department. It is scenarios like these that are a nightmare for CEOs! Why, you may ask?

When a CEO asks a question to members of their team and different departments give them different answers this is very frustrating. They then need to determine which answer is the best answer for them to use and when they make that decision how do they know if the answer they chose is correct or not? All this stems from there being multiple versions of a data source.

So, what do we mean by 'single source of truth'? While it would be nice for there to be only one system in every organisation that contains all that organisation's data, that is completely impractical. Most organisations separate their HR system from their operational system from their finance system and that's just practical, as not one system is going to serve all those functions. So, if 'single source of truth' is not referring to a single system then what is it about? It's about the type of information that you are looking for and where it originated.

In the example at the beginning there was a manually maintained excel sheet that contained HR data, this would be better sourced from the HR system as the single source of truth for that type of data rather than there being manual intervention to maintain this manual data source.

So how do organisations best approach this problem? I know that many organisations are struggling with this problem currently. They feel they have too many different sources to try and pull together to get an accurate answer.

1. The first step is always assessment (sometimes it's better to get an outside consultancy to help with this step)

   What you need to do is assess your current situation. How many data sources are there? Is there only one version of each data source in a database? What are the sources of all major reporting and are they systems or manually updated?

2. You then need a plan, please don't just jump in without a plan.

   The old adage of 'failing to plan is planning to fail!' is no more true than in this process. If you take the scatter gun approach and try and do it all at once you are bound to lose your way and it will become too hard. Many of the different systems are most likely interconnected so trying to change too much all at once will create more chaos.

3. Choose one area, usually the one that's the biggest mess, and start there.

   By choosing the one that's the biggest mess you are most likely to get the biggest bang for your buck - the biggest return on investment. If not then feel free to start based on return on investment.

4. Communicate out to the wider business

   This sounds like putting the cart before the horse, normally you tell the business what you have done not what you are about to do. The reason being that the only way to know that 'Betty' has an excel spreadsheet on her PC that she maintains is to ask. So ask the business who uses the data you are looking to revolutionise. And don't do it in tech speak, a colleague of mine used to refer to a paginated reports portal as 'SQL', don't assume that people know the tech speak.

5. Most importantly, START…

   I know plenty of organisations that have got plans to clean up their data and create this 'single source of truth', many have even got budgets that they haven't spent on it, and they had it budgeted last year as well. The attitude of 'It ain't broke so don't fix it' will only get you so far and if you leave it until it's a problem then it's much harder and more expensive to fix. Be PROACTIVE!

So, there it is, my 5 steps to getting closer to a single source of truth approach to data. If your business needs help to get started with step one, please contact a Fujitsu Data & AI specialist now.