7 Golden Rules
for Big Data Projects

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Ben Davis, Senior Industry Consultant, Teradata ANZ

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About the author

Ben Davis is a Senior Industry Consultant, Teradata ANZ and is responsible for pre-sales activities in the Federal Government market in Canberra. Ben consults across a broad range of government departments developing strategies to better manage the continual flood of data that these organisations are now facing. Ben is a firm believer that management of data is a continual process not a one off project that if managed correctly will deliver multiple benefits to organisations for strategic decision making.

Introduction

Today every organisation seems to be running a Big Data project. And the reason why they are is because it should lead to smarter decisions with the potential to increase revenue, provide better customer service and deliver organisational efficiencies.

But like most IT initiatives there are a number of critical building blocks that you must put in place to ensure success. There are the obvious ones like Executive sponsorship but what about selecting the right type of data scientists and ensuring change occurs across the whole of the organisation and not just pockets?

This article explores 7 Golden Rules that should form part of the foundation rules of any big data analytics initiative. Without these you put your project success at risk and fail to maximise the value of the project deliverables.

7 Golden Rules for Big Data Projects

A survey by Infochimps.com asked IT professionals what are the challenges in a Big Data project and it delivered some interesting yet not to be unexpected results:

The following are some basic rules we should all be adopting if we are to embrace a Big Data Project:

1. Don't Start a Big Data Project Without Understanding the Value

It should go without saying that when you go up to your CFO with cap in hand to kick start a Big Data Project, you should know exactly how to demonstrate a Return on Investment (ROI).

Not only do you need to know intimately the ROI of your project, but be able to discuss in detail the benefits such as increased revenue. But don't just say that revenue will increase by x%. You need to weave the benefits and tie them back to functionality.

For example "The big data project will allow us to better understand our customers through the use of sentiment analytics. The results of which will allow us to respond quicker to customer's needs resulting in increased revenue".

Big Hurdles (Infochimps.com survey)

Surveyed IT professionals currently involved in big-data projects cited the following as significant challenges they face when working with big data:

80%	**76%**	**76%**	**75%**	**73%**
Finding talent for projects	Gathering data from different sources	Finding the right tools	Time to work on the project	Understanding the platforms

IT professionals were asked the question: If you could make sure 'the boss' understood one thing that they don't understand today about big data, what would it be? Here are some of their responses:

"The need for a business plan, so we can define the technical challenges/options to meet the business needs."

"We need to work on it continuously, not get excited briefly, burn a couple of weeks, and give up because there are not yet any clear results."

"Noise reduction is key. Getting lots of data also means throwing out a lot of data, inevitably."

Source: Infochimps

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2. Don't Ignore the Wider Enterprise Story

More often than not, we tend to pigeon hole Big Data projects into specific departments or functions.

Big Data brings with it the power to draw upon data across an organisation and merge it together to create insights. HR, Sales and Customer data coming together to deliver value.

'Therefore don't ignore the impact that your Big Data project will have across the organisation'.

If you can tie in your ROI discussion in point 1 to go beyond just your area by demonstrating value across the organisation, then the stronger your project will be and the more visibility it will receive.

3. A Big Data Project is Not a Technology Project

A lot of the hype around Big Data are the products themselves and as such when we go to deliver a big data project it's often about the technology. However a Big Data project should be seen as a business change project.

Big Data changes the way we interact with our suppliers, customers and peers. Executive support from the CEO/CFO/CTO is a must to ensure that the project garners the right focus and achieves the right organisational shift to make it a success.

"A Big Data project is more about Business Change than the technology itself".

4. It Pays to Have the Right Type of Data Scientists On-Board

The problem with the industry is that it seems that there are a lot more people calling themselves data scientists without any real qualification or experience. And most probably one of the reasons for this change is the higher pay grades that real data scientists demand because of their specialist skills.

So for a project to be a success, you must build a strong delivery team which involves making sure you get a data scientist with the runs on the board. Don't skimp lower and get a data/business analyst who now calls themselves a data scientist as you will get lower than expected results.

5. Build a Support Structure From the Beginning

It's very easy to get caught up in the moment and therefore overlook some of the less exciting components of a Big Data project such as Data Quality, Data Governance and Metadata. However these components are often the building blocks to the success of the project.

Get started early on these and results will come quicker and the output will be much more valuable to the end users.

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6. Build for Tomorrow

The pace of change in this industry is extreme. New products, features and technology hit the market everyday. The problem this speed of change presents in a project is the issue of scope creep.

If you design a Big Data solution with only the technology in mind today, then by the time it's delivered it's value will be diminished, or you'll be making that many changes to the design during the project that it will never be finished.

So be bold and become visionary. Understand the possibilities that big data can have on your organisation in the future and design a system that will deliver this.

7. Involve the Organisation.

Often the vision of a Big Data project comes from highly paid consultants or someone from within the tech team.

But Big Data is a pervasive technology and as such you should involve all parts of the organisation to contribute to the vision. Involve sales, marketing, HR and customer facing staff to bring ideas to the table.

What do they want to see and be able to use to make their jobs easier?

Not only may you get ideas not previously thought of, but subconsciously you are getting the organisation to embrace the concepts of Big Data as they have had the input.

Conclusion

In conclusion, like anything planning is the key to success. Just because you have the best technology does not guarantee success. In fact technology plays a small part in a big data analytics project. Getting in place the building blocks and structures will not only put you on the right path towards success but deliver small wins along your journey that you will be able to leverage. Stay flexible and don't be afraid to change direction quickly. Data analytics is all about exploration of data and trying new techniques. Shouldn't your project be the same?

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