**Embarking on the Big – Data Journey**

**Robert Plant**

Imagine going sailing without a compass, the probability of reaching your target would be remote. GPS changed navigation forever. Now captains of industry are able to embrace their own strategic GPS through Big Data.

Big Data is not new. British teashop chain J.J. Lyons, were the first company to own a computer for business purposes in the 1950's and they used its 'Big Data' capabilities to improve the efficiency distributing  groceries to their customers.

Big Data capture has also been around for a long time, American Hospital Supply; Baxter, and American Airlines in the 1980's all captured and held more information on their business ecosystem than any of their competitors.   This enabled them to not only understand their own business better it enabled them to create powerful barriers to entry, lock in customers, and develop wide ranging strategic solutions.

The power of Big Data leadership for all these firms resulted in heightened market strength, often dominant positions that ultimately caused governmental scrutiny. They led precisely because their senior management teams got insights from the analysis that the other firms in their industry did not. In essence, they got visibility into the mysteries of 'know what you don't know,' as it pertained to their customers, processes, technologies, metrics deployed, and the relationships between these that lead to their financial position. It enabled them to establish strategic planning with greater accuracy, assurance, and visibility.

For many companies starting the Big Data journey their management teams need to be aware of three key factors that go towards achieving initial success.

*Create a technology roadmap.* It's called Big Data for a reason; there is an awful lot of it available, but don't be tempted to embrace it all at once. This can lead to data overload, especially within a technology environment that is potentially unprepared for the deluge. Start with a small project; say an emerging customer segment that has potential; use this to act as an alpha test platform. Better to run scenarios internally on a data set for a small but promising market, than to believe a faulty or incomplete data set on a large core market and take an ill-conceived action. The proof of concept around the pilot project will enable the technology to be put into place with confidence that there is alignment between the new managerial processes and operational procedures. An added bonus is that the pilot if successful will demonstrate the ROI and value proposition to senior management, including the neighsayers who consider Big Data to be not only a new technology fad but a management one also..

*Don't expect perfection first time.* Information may be power, but execution is king. An early pilot project will enable the management team to understand the process changes needed, for execution to occur. If the ROI is weak, the team will need time to reconsider their approach and tweak for a follow on project. For many organizations the process ripple through can take significant amounts of time. One

outcome of a pilot Big Data project may be that the company needs to reconsider its approach to reengineering processes, embrace agile, lean management practices, or as Tom Peters puts it a 'Bias for Action.'

Don't forget the Human Capital. The third component is the human dimension. Big Data requires at the management level, creative, adaptive thinkers. The Business Intelligence analytics operating on the data will throw out new, potentially interesting, information but action can only happen if the recipient is aware of its potential impact, able to act on that information, and disseminate it effectively. Managers down the chain will also have to be increasingly adaptive, numerically literate, and integrative in their thought processes. One key to achieving this is for HR to hire to this analytical profile. This can be achieved through engagement with universities who are developing programs in Big Data and analytics. Provide them with sample data sets, computing resources, and software applications that they may not have access to otherwise. This is a win-win for both the programs and the companies that can hire the trained workforce.

One thing is sure, that is Big Data is here to stay and it is going to get bigger. As the 5 billion internet of things comes on line there will be almost nothing on the planet without an IP address, tag-able information and tracking. As such companies will have to come to terms with this data storm and embrace it. By following the three steps outlined your company will be on the first steps to success. The leadership team will no longer consider this technological opportunity analogous to looking for the elusive needle in the haystack, but rather as a new strategic compass that provides the reader with a more accurate bearing upon which to head.