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# Start Small, Gain Support, Collaborate, and Quantify – The Keys to Data Governance Success

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*I recently had the opportunity to participate in the webinar "Data Governance: Three Steps to Get Started...or Back on Track." Based on the discussion, questions from the audience, and the results of our live polling during the event, here are a few important points I would like to share.*

## Begin with Business Problems, Senior-Level Support, and Quick Wins

It is important to first understand that data governance is a business challenge. Unfortunately, there are many organizations that still view it as an IT issue, an exercise in paperwork, or something that is disconnected from business performance. Further complicating the matter, the ownership of data governance within an organization is often murky, or the person who owns it is not senior enough to lead the broad array of changes, including processes, culture, and technology, needed to make data governance successful.

For organizations looking to get started with data governance, or for those that have already started but have veered off course, it is essential to begin with small projects and secure sponsorship at an executive level. Key to this is applying a lean data governance approach, which has core principles focused on driving efficiencies, minimizing waste, and delivering robust, reliable, and timely outputs for specific processes that are within your area of responsibility. Do not try to solve all of your enterprise-wide data problems at once.

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Successful organizations first identify business problems within their organization and describe them in terms of the business impact. You can do the same. Ask yourself where your group or even your boss feels pain. Then ask whether and how that translates to a cost, risk, or even a lost revenue opportunity. You can then start to define the processes or issues that are preventing your organization from growing revenue or that are increasing your risk exposure.

For example, is your organization unable to effectively market to and support its customers because it doesn't have a unified customer view that includes accurate personal information, purchase history, contact preferences, and more? Is the quality and availability of this information so poor that you can't make the right decisions? Describing this situation in business terms and demonstrating the impact it can have on your business in lost revenue or decreasing customer satisfaction is an important step toward making it clear that you don't just have a data problem – you have a business problem. When this connection is made, you will be well positioned to secure sponsorship from the right executives.

After identifying the business problems and securing the appropriate level of sponsorship, it is important to start with small projects. These small-scale projects can serve as building blocks for broader initiatives, and because of their size you can quickly shift direction and adapt as business objectives, competitive threats, or regulatory mandates change. Even where the challenge may be broad, such as when addressing regulatory compliance, breaking the problem up into manageable and achievable targets is important to driving overall success. The key at this stage is to achieve some quick wins, demonstrating the impact that data governance can have on one area of your business so you can establish a workable model and apply a similar approach across your organization.

## Collaboration Between Groups Is Erratic at Best

During the webinar, we received a number of interesting questions that make it clear there are communication challenges among groups, especially business and IT.  If left unresolved, these communication issues will make effective data governance nearly impossible.  Further complicating the situation is the lack of available, relevant information.  During a live poll of the webinar participants, approximately 30% of the respondents answered, "None/I don't know," when asked what data governance information is communicated in their organization.

Effective communication is the foundation of any successful data governance initiative.   It is essential to identify clear, agreed-upon terms that are understood and accepted across groups and to communicate constantly from a business and not a technical perspective.  Also, it is important that your organization has high-quality, accurate, and complete data that teams are using as the basis for discussion and decision making. Without a common set of data, facts, and terms, communication and collaboration break down, substantially increasing the likelihood that your data governance initiatives will fail.

When you have the right information in place, it is important to work through the barriers between groups and ensure that this information is not proprietary by sharing it across the organization.  Your group may have done groundbreaking work to better understand your customers' preferences for purchasing new products or may have uncovered a significant set of risks related to outdated equipment used in your operations.  However, if this is an isolated project or the information is unknown to people who need it to make better decisions, it is essentially useless and the problems will continue to occur months and years later.

An effective data governance program provides key stakeholders with the appropriate forums within which to define, refine, and manage data processes and to improve the quality of data, with the added ability to discuss and resolve issues.  By advertising your work and bringing stakeholders together, you can better identify and fix problem areas, share information and best practices, demonstrate benefits, and expand your successes further out across your organization.

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## Manual Data Management Processes Are Costly

One of the hidden pitfalls of data governance initiatives is the business impact that manual, time-consuming data management and remediation processes can have on your operations. We asked the webinar audience what percentage of their time is spent on finding data, reconciling data, or fixing data problems as opposed to their core job responsibilities. Approximately 26% of the audience answered greater than 50%, and 30% answered 25%-50% – that's more than half of respondents spending at least a quarter of their time on data and not their "day job." Think about the impact that has on productivity and the cost of wages for these tasks that fall outside of their core responsibilities.

To address this, organizations must adopt data governance processes and automated tools to uncover problem data and broken processes and then establish a new approach for resolving and monitoring them. For example, if you have a significant volume of seemingly duplicate customers in your CRM system, are you wasting money or not generating the proper return due to ineffective marketing campaigns? Or is this a sign of potential fraudulent activity of people intentionally submitting similar information?

A critical step is building an impact statement with clear evidence from a pilot program, including expected improvement, project roadmap, and specific milestones with dates. This will enable you to build an ongoing business case that will create an internal demand for your services because there is clear proof that data governance works. Lastly, and very important, you must be able to finish projects. Yes, data governance must be an ongoing, sustainable process. However, it is essential that you have specific projects that you can complete in order to test your processes and evaluate, refine, and reapply to other areas of the business. As I like to say, finish early, finish often, and do not linger.

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## Conclusion

In summary, it is important that organizations looking to establish and implement data governance stay lean and agile while taking advantage of a framework of data governance best practices.   Using such a framework as a guide, focus on starting small projects in which you identify business objectives, secure executive sponsorship, and get some quick wins that will be good building blocks for other initiatives.  It's critical to share this information across your organization, breaking down the silos that keep information hidden from people who need it in order to improve business performance.  One of our audience polls during the webinar identified "overcoming organizational culture" as the biggest challenge faced for adopting and implementing data governance.  Improving communication, working with a shared set of high-quality information, and demonstrating effective practices can go a long way to strengthening relationships and uniting people behind a culture that embraces data governance as an underlying principle of business.  Lastly, it is important to quantify the business value that your data governance initiative drives, and to continue to look for ways to improve performance.  Only by taking this approach can you move from looking at governance as a "data" issue that only IT should care about, to seeing it as a business issue that can enhance decision making and improve the performance of the entire organization.