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BIG DATA ANALYTICS

Quantifying Gut Instinct: From Inklings to Ink
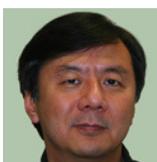
Kon Leong, CEO/Co-Founder, ZL Technologies
10/8/2013
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When it comes to quantifying gut business instincts, the secret may be utilizing the data we've had lying around all along.

The struggle with the unstructured
Unstructured data, like the human-generated content they contain, have a relatively recent history in the enterprise. They snuck up on us, and many businesses are still struggling just to meet bare minimum requirements laid out by the government and regulators in terms of storing and accessing data. Email messages, documents, enterprise IMs, corporate social media accounts, and sprawling file-share systems, such as SharePoint, are rich in information about the human process of business, but are notoriously difficult to analyze or harness. It's considered unwieldy, cluttered, problematic, and a liability. But what we're often neglecting as business leaders is that this data, managed correctly, can be a goldmine.

We've spent decades processing relatively un-messy structured information, because it is easier to deal with. Numbers are great for generating more numbers, and advances in business intelligence (BI) and analytics have revolutionized the way we approach corporate decision making. However, the allure and cleanliness of structured data has created a bias. Like the anecdotal character looking for his keys under the light-post, we tend to search where it's easiest.

Going after the harder to analyse stuff
In this sense, the stats and quantification we've derived from structured information have occasionally led us astray. Increasing analytics availability has increasingly made qualitative decisions subject to ridicule in the boardroom. As a result, we're neglecting a vast amount of information simply because it is harder to analyze. With some estimates pegging unstructured data at approximately 80 percent of all data on earth, it's unsettling to consider that we're often ignoring most of the information we generate in the very process of doing business. Gut instincts carry a peculiar stigma in a business world obsessed with data, but those instincts don't exist in a bubble. They reflect vast experience and knowledge of how the company works. They reflect data that is messy, but not impossible, to process.

As business leaders, it's time to quantify our gut instincts.

Data are all we have
The data are already there, but in order for them to be leveraged, they need to be aggregated and centralized. Email archives, ECMs, file shares, and dozens of other types of systems have popped up over the years to address data management needs, but these tools have partitioned our information. You can't know what's "trending" in the enterprise as a whole if you analyze only email, or only messages. We need to think of unstructured data as continuous corporate memories, rather than as dusty files. As technologies such as semantic analysis and natural language processing advance, they will change how we look at data that, currently, is regarded as mostly junk.

Conserving knowledge as employees retire or move on, detecting possible harassment before it surfaces as a legal issue, gauging employee morale, and blocking sensitive data from accidentally leaving the company firewall are all within our reach. The next steps in business strategy will be adopting the inclusive infrastructure to support this data and bringing analytics to the table.

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