DATA STORYTELLING
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THE ONLY WAY TO UNLOCK TRUE INSIGHT FROM YOUR DATA
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Data visualisation has failed, but not because tools like PowerPoint and Excel are inadequate. Businesses fail to gain insight from the huge volumes of data they collect because they do not use data visualisation as part of a data storytelling process. Data should not be the beginning of the story. Audience, objective and story must be established before it is decided what data needs to be collected and analysed. Only then should data visualisation come into play, with a tool selected to bring the story to life, in a way that helps improve decision-making and ultimately increase a company’s return on investment.
IS POWERPOINT REALLY THE PROBLEM?
Like bad workmen, businesses often blame their tools for the lack of insight they get from their data. For years the process of data visualisation meant little more than using PowerPoint and Excel to create pie charts and bar graphs. With that method of communication largely failing to generate much in the way of insight, many people switched to tools such as Tableau, Qlikview and Infotools, hoping they would magically bring their data to life in a way that the Microsoft packages could not. However, when the Chartered Institute of Management Accounts and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants surveyed 2,000 financiers in late 2013, they found that 86% of respondents were still struggling to turn vast volumes of data into valuable insight. This is because many businesses have forgotten the golden rule of data visualisation: it doesn’t matter what tool you use, it is how you use it that counts.
COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN
The other main barrier preventing people from getting insight from their data is communication. Often companies implement processes to extract meaning from their data but struggle to connect them with decision makers. It is rare for people who are responsible for data and people who make decisions to talk to each other and when they do, they fail to understand what the other is saying.

“Business and IT have always had difficulty talking to each other,” says Oliver Halter, Principal at PwC. “Traditionally business creates requirements and IT executes. In the world of exploring data that doesn’t work so well anymore. I think what we’re looking for is a new organizational approach, which means new talent and new ways of exploring that data.”

With the volume of data increasing and pressure from on high to turn the company’s spend on data into something meaningful, communication between business and IT is critical to success in a data-driven culture.

“COMMUNICATION BETWEEN BUSINESS AND IT IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS IN A DATA-DRIVEN CULTURE.”
DATA STORYTELLING
Just producing data for its own sake is not inherently valuable. Data only starts to deliver returns when it offers insight that people can use to make better decisions for their business. This is a connection that many businesses struggle to make, because the process of capturing value from data hasn’t changed much since companies started taking data more seriously towards the end of the 1990s.

Typically this process begins with a set of data, continues through the selection of a tool to help visualise that data and ends with some conclusions drawn from the pie charts, bar graphs and graphics created to bring the data to life.

This is the single biggest cause of the failure of data visualisation to provide businesses with consistently meaningful insight.
Although the process is ingrained in most companies around the world, it must be abandoned alongside the notion of data visualisation being enough in its own right if data is to become truly helpful to decision makers. Even the name is restrictive; data visualisation essentially means making things look pretty. What people need is data that drives interest and communication across the business. That’s where data storytelling comes in.

Unlike the pure data visualisation approach where the data defines the process, data storytellers should begin by establishing who their audience is, what the objective of the exercise is and what they want the overall story narrative to be (for help on how to do this in practice see the ‘5 steps’ in the next section). This process will inform what data needs to be captured and analysed in order to tell the story in the most engaging way.

Only once the story arc has been defined should thoughts turn to how it should be presented. Used as part of the storytelling process, data visualisation can be an incredibly powerful tool because it is grounded in purpose. However, that doesn’t mean that only the latest data visualisation software should be considered. For many companies Excel and PowerPoint are the natural choice for visualising data and it should be remembered that the perceived problems with these tools stem from the way they are traditionally used, rather than their inherent abilities.

The culmination of the storytelling process is to recognise that the story can always get better. Feedback should be sought from colleagues on everything from the data to the medium to the visualisations, so that lessons can be learned for the future. Likewise, those hearing the story must in turn make themselves heard. It’s sometimes difficult to admit a lack of understanding but it is better to speak out and improve than let potentially valuable insights slip through the net.
FIVE STEPS TO GIVE YOUR DATA A HAPPY ENDING
Like the sound of data storytelling but not sure how to put it into practice? Here are five things you can do immediately to help create data stories that provide valuable insight to your business:

Ask yourself:

Who am I reporting to?
How do they like to consume information?
Is there just one group or different audiences?
Where and when can I communicate with them?
ESTABLISH AN OBJECTIVE AND STORY

Ask yourself:

- What business decisions do my audience need to make?
- What problems are they trying to solve?
- What do they already know?
- What have they been told before?
- How important is the decision?
- Am I recommending a decision or providing the facts?
DECIDE WHAT DATA WILL HELP YOU TELL THAT STORY

Ask yourself:

What data does the company have available to investigate the story?
Do I need to do anything to use these datasets?
Can I gather new data? What analysis techniques can I use to surface the insights?
DECIDE HOW TO TELL YOUR STORY

Ask yourself:

What is the best way to bring my story to life for my audience?
What visualisations should I use?
What software do I have available?
How often do I need to update the data?
IMPROVE NEXT TIME

Ask yourself:

Did my audience understand everything?
Did I give them sufficient information?
Was the decision successful?
Is there anything new to add in the future?
Size doesn’t matter to us. Whether your data problem is large or small, we can help you solve it because we’re unlike any other company.

We understand that data must be designed for decision makers. That’s why ours is the only business of its kind to be made up of data scientists, engineers, designers and user experience consultants. We ensure that every one of our clients gets the right analysis presented in the right way for them.

If you’d like to find out more about how we can help you to improve your business performance please contact us on:

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www.brightnorth.co.uk
DRIVING THE DATA REVOLUTION

The data revolution has begun. It’s transforming the way companies do business. Don’t get left behind.