CONQUERING DATA OVERLOAD

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Everywhere one looks, data is being looked at, discussed and manipulated. Whether it's data warehousing, data integration, or conversations about what data should be collected, data is an all-consuming topic in today's information environment.

As systems become more sophisticated and can report real-time information, the amount of available data goes up exponentially. It reminds me of the third stanza of Tennyson's poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," with a little literary latitude:

> *Numbers to the right of them,*
> *Statistics to the left of them,*
> *Comparatives in front of them,*
> *Swirled and flashed,*
> *Rushed at them in waves.*
> *Boldly they stood multiplying and dividing,*
> *Into the jaws of benchmarking*
> *Rode the marketers, the accountants,*
> *And the social media teams*

Seriously, though, how can one possibly analyze all of the information that is available today? And if one could, at what cost?

When I first entered the business world, there was far less data and we accessed it less frequently. Daily hours were manually calculated from a Simplex Clock time card. We had to go to the time card rack if we wanted to know which employees were punched in. A monthly Profit and Loss review coupled with daily quality inspections and some intermediate productivity data were the standards of the day. Now, we're confronted

with business intelligence of all sorts, and data is available throughout the day in smaller and smaller increments. It's both overwhelming and, at times, of questionable usefulness.

Further, much of the information we look at is one-dimensional. Most organizations look at guest/customer perception data, but rarely as it relates to causal information. It's a little like a student who takes a test and scores an 84 overall, but never bothers to review each response to better understand his or her areas of strength and weaknesses – or only looks at the individual responses if the score was below expectations. Too often we do the same thing in business, whether it's because we're not sure what else to look at, we don't have the time, or there is just too much other data to consider. We might look at guest satisfaction ratings, for instance, but not review each response along with other metrics to accurately assess what caused the rating.

The goal is to get the most out of the data available. Consider a restaurant meal rating, then think about all of the aspects of the meal that could have impacted that rating. The list might look somewhat like this:

☐ Accuracy of the initial forecast that drives all of the planning (food, labor)
☐ Attitude of each staff member (level of engagement)
☐ Amount of service staff in place at the time guest wanted service
☐ Proper kitchen staff
☐ Food prepared to the exact specification, including portion size
☐ Cleanliness of operations
☐ Accuracy of the order
☐ Timely service delivery of each course

To help the business continually improve, then, requires understanding the cause-and-effect relationships of the data/information that's being analyzed.

Furthermore, it's important to look at relative results and not only absolutes when analyzing data. Take the example of two 250-room hotels, both with basically the same layout. If Hotel A has an 82% occupancy and Hotel B has a 70% occupancy, it is highly probable that the room

operations will be more productive in Hotel A compared to Hotel B. Therefore, Hotel A gets rewarded based on absolute results.

Things look a bit different, however, if one views results in relation to actual labor requirements. Say Hotel A is achieving 1.15 hours/room on a requirement of 1.05 hours/room and Hotel B is achieving 1.22 hours/room on a requirement of 1.20 hours/room. This would suggest that Hotel B's productivity performance is better that Hotel A's and should have been rewarded. A simple analysis in relation to potential, then, can change the performance assessment.

Just about every data point that is used to assess results can be analyzed in relation to potential or opportunity. And while there are some absolutes, in most cases it is relative analysis that will drive overall better performance.

An important question to ask when dealing with today's constant barrage of data is, "so what?" Can a particular piece of information be applied to an organization's improvement efforts? And if so, how often is it needed – hourly, daily, weekly, monthly? Businesses too often spend far too much effort analyzing data that yields little real intelligence when they should be focusing on actionable knowledge that can strengthen and improve their business.

Organizations need to understand clearly what they are trying to achieve and then design the needs and analytical approaches they will use to meet those defined goals. It's this information in relation to a comparative parameter (which can come from inside or outside the organization) that really tells the story. But one thing is clear: Too much data can be a greater hindrance to decision-making than not enough. Finding the right balance is what gets the best results.

Hope you all enjoy our latest edition of FocusED.

Best regards,

Mark