



CONVERSATIONS ON BIG DATA

A podcast series on putting analytics to work at federal agencies



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Data analytics offers a powerful way for federal agencies to target resources and improve decision-making.

The following excerpts are from a discussion with Hewgley about the challenges, opportunities and lessons learned from his experiences managing analytics activities at FEMA, where he now is director of enterprise analytics.



Q: How was FEMASTAT used to change the way FEMA did business?

A: It was a little bit chaotic at first. You grabbed whatever data you had and it wasn't necessarily related to, "What's the most important decision we have to make right now?" In the third year, we've tried to focus on one specific problem and really pin it down to, "Within response, how specifically are we getting survivors registered for FEMA assistance?" When you narrow it to the right question that is high-priority and strategic enough that senior leaders really care about it, but specific enough so you're not boiling the ocean, you really hit a sweet spot.



Q: What changes would you make to FEMA's analytics program if you had leeway to change anything you wanted to?

A: My wish list is that we could get a common vision across the organization. If I'm solving a problem for my team's ability to use data, I need to solve it for the entire enterprise, getting everybody to agree on what tool we all need, how do we all get access to the right data, and how do we do that in a secure environment where we trust each other. Once you have that in place, there is no limit. You'll just unleash the talent of people to do predictive modeling and all kinds of stuff you see happening elsewhere.



Q: What advice would you give to those in other federal agencies?

A: Find a champion at the leadership level in your organization. Assess the culture as it is. If people are not into it, you're going to have to have a different strategy than if they are already on board. Then, you've got to demonstrate a quick win early. Pick a problem they care about and show them really quickly that, "Hey, if you did this differently you could save money or you could improve the quality of outcome for the people you're trying to serve, or you could just make people's lives easier."



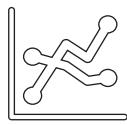
Q: What are the other important programmatic ingredients?

A: Data, and it doesn't have to be clean. I'm a big proponent of putting your dirty data up for everybody to see. That's the only way that data gets cleaned. Then you've got to have people who like statistics, can do modeling of data, can build databases, write code and can build ways of interacting with your data. We've got to be serious about that and recruit people who do that.



Q: How do you advise folks who are trying to figure out what to measure?

A: People have a sense for what they're trying to influence. They get caught up in the way that we've designed influencing it because you're designing that measurement around the current program you're implementing. Take that step back, remind yourself what you're ultimately trying to influence, then work backwards.



Q: How do you suggest organizations demonstrate success?

A: Make sure the success relates to money, time or service quality for an outcome that you're trying to influence. Think about the person you're serving and the quality of the experience they're having with you. Think about the money that you're spending to deliver that service, and about the time it takes to deliver a service, and try to reduce it.

The second piece is to communicate in a compelling way. It's not enough to make a table with some numbers on it that shows you the time savings and the performance metric trend. You've got to pair that with something additional that puts context to it and reminds people of why you chose that.

Excerpts have been lightly edited.



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