



# 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 Steve Beltz about the challenges, opportunities and lessons he learned from his experiences managing analytics activities at the Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board, where he is assistant director of the Recovery Operation Center.



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**Q: When you did analytics training for federal agencies what kinds of things did you tackle?**

**A:** I tried to show them what a full analysis shop does from beginning to end. Some shops have backed themselves into a corner. An agent will say, “Hey, I need to know about Joe Smith,” and the analyst will find as much information about Joe Smith as he can, but basically pumps it out into a paper stack or a CD and gives it to the agent to finish the analysis.

We don’t just find the data. We analyze the data and then put together a report. In the shops that only do partial analysis and give the data to the agent, the agent doesn’t know what to do with it, very few of them anyway. You’re really doing a disservice to your customer if you can’t do a full analysis and you take that shortcut of just dumping out the data.



**Q: What are the most important ingredients for a successful analytics program?**

**A:** You have to have good data, good analysts and good tools, what I refer to as a three-legged stool approach. If you’re missing just one of those components, you’re going to sell yourself very short on the program and not be able to do full analysis.

Where I see most agencies fall is with the analysts. They can’t shortchange themselves on that. You can have the best data and tools in the world but if you don’t have the right person who knows how to ask the right questions, you’ll get nothing. Somebody has to know how to understand the answer and then dig deeper.



**Q: Where do you find people with that skill set?**

**A:** It's a question I get asked all the time. I gave up trying to find people who know how to use particular tools or even have a huge background in analysis. It's very rare to find somebody with that kind of skill set or who has used our particular tools because they've only been out for a couple years. So I'll look for personality, somebody who's very trainable, and who is going to get along with everybody in the office. These folks train up very nicely and very quickly and work very well with others.



**Q: What aspects of data collection do you enjoy the most or find most compelling?**

**A:** This leads to management style. I call my management style a bookended approach. One end of the bookend is we have a certain way that we have to collect or manage the data. At the other end we have a certain way we have to report it. In the middle, it's a very creative process.

I can sit down two analysts and they'll find the same information, but they'll take a totally different approach. That's the part that's hard to train. I like my analysts to be able to get into the zone and do their own thing. But they're not on their own. We have a quality assurance program and whatever they find, it's got to go to a peer review and then it's got to go to a supervisor review and then to me for the final signoff. We're not leaving them hanging out there by themselves with their creative process.



**Q: What advice would you give to others on how to improve their data analytics programs?**

**A:** They have to understand their data. That's very important. If they can't get good access to their data or in an understandable format, then you're not going to get anywhere, and that's what most agencies are struggling with right now. You need to buy good tools and then the next part is finding good analysts.

Excerpts have been lightly edited.



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