RIDING THE WAVES OF BIG DATA

BY **LYON POH**

SMEs can use big data to enhance decision making, increase productivity and strengthen their competitive advantage

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BIG data is increasingly becoming the next big thing for enterprises and firms thinking strategically about how they can get ahead of their competitors. From hiking productivity to better understanding customers' needs, SMEs are applying data and analytics (D&A) technology intelligently in enhancing their business decisions.

An avalanche of data however, can lead to an overload of information, especially if the data is presented in a raw and inaccessible format. Such data will be of little benefit to businesses if it is not translated into meaningful interpretations that can lead to improved performance.

For data to flourish and be put to good use, a holistic D&A technology implementation approach should be adopted. Aside from just having the facts and figures, companies should also include their business knowledge and data management experience in the process.

Here, we look at some of the ways to make it easier to deploy big data, using it as a stepping stone to increase your market share as you outmanoeuvre the competition.

BALANCING THE ACT OF ANALYTICS INTEGRATION

Data can be complex and difficult to maintain, and requires careful evaluation of its applications. By assessing the usefulness of analytics and understanding how to apply them, SMEs can achieve real-time insight. They can then make better decisions and capitalise on new opportunities without any business disruption or waste of time.

Instead of only reacting to a problem that has occurred or after it has caused damage to the business, they can proactively respond to potential issues, avoiding business losses, time wastage and reputational risk.

Having speedy and easy access to relevant insight is also vital for big data to be effective. There should be minimal barriers so as to reduce confusion. One example is the health care sector, which sees hospitals working towards an integrated care model that reduces the incidence of patients having overlapping or contradictory treatments.

TIMING IS ESSENTIAL

Timing is of utmost importance, and businesses need to master it to refine their services and expand their potential. Knowing when there is a need for big data for your business is also important. Often, some businesses might baulk at the idea of big data adoption due to concerns about the size of their company.

SMEs will need to master the ability to present their data in a clear and practical way such that it helps them with their business decisions. As they have a grip on identifying trends and forecasting demand, this will help them find their data-driven decisions to be reliable.

Timing is also essential when it comes to mining the information from social media. Through open source big data technologies, SMEs can quickly gain big data's benefits by detecting new opportunities, measuring the success of an online marketing campaign and evaluating customer needs.

BEING VERSATILE AND EASILY ACCESSIBLE

Flexibility and ease of use are both crucial to an organisation, when presented with new opportunities or overcoming new challenges. With better data points, SMEs would not be limited by options that are ineffective and generic. SMEs can enhance their customer experience through knowing the preferences of each client to personalise their suite of goods or services. They should also improve their connectivity and touch points to make it easier for consumers to respond to business information, anytime, anywhere.

By improving the productivity of their workforce as a result, SMEs can witness richer customer engagement and higher rates of customer satisfaction. For example, a British utilities company has been able to process data in real-time to better anticipate equipment failures and respond quicker to leaks and adverse weather.

JUGGLING DATA WELL WHEN IN ACTION

Similar to the accessibility of data, pacing and maintaining it are equally important for a successful strategy. A data and analytics strategy that is implemented hastily could face problems like high costs, low acceptance and slow adoption.

Without having the appropriate data entry points, it can be tough to have solid and sustainable models that are capable of drawing on real business cases. This is due to having too many variables that make it complex or having models that managers find difficult to deploy.

Hence, caution and discretion have to be applied when fleshing out the plans. Potential business pitfalls such as an organisation's vulnerability to leaked information and risks that are easy to miss have to be factored in and dealt with effectively when it comes to integrating data-driven business decisions.

INTEGRATING D&A INTO BUSINESS STRATEGY

A problem that enterprises may run into is how to integrate data across operations, transactions and customer interactions. Integrated data is part of strategic business thinking that allow companies to better identify the needs of their customers and complement their expectations.

Making the optimal choice is critical as swift and steady decisions are required to integrate volumes of information that can provide powerful insights. This may involve a new type of data architecture, developing a series of possible models and tools or aggregating customer data to expand loyalty programmes and tailoring services to their needs.

Management and executives also play a pivotal role in communicating the relevance of data and analytics to the staff. They can apply it in daily operations and encourage their teams to adopt it.

BUILDING A DATA-DRIVEN CULTURE

People have talked about data-driven cultures for some time, but what is required to create one effectively is rapidly altering due to the variety of new tools available. In today's fast-changing business world, an effective data culture is characterised by having organised and accessible data, commitment and employee engagement that goes both top down and from the bottom of the pack.

Developing competitions that reward employees for innovative insights, training boot camps where end-users can learn how to use self-service tools and having a community of end-users to validate findings and support users in their analyses are all good ways of employee engagement.

Creative interactions and adaptations will push companies to move beyond blindly adopting the latest fads and instead root their cultural change in well-defined, distinct action.

THE WAY AHEAD

In Asia, the call for business leaders to integrate data into their leadership will become more visible. This rise in importance occurs as Asian leaders will rely on data insights to scale up their businesses and compete globally. Business leaders will need to move beyond becoming analytic specialists or data scientists but show capability of applying it to real-life and real-time situations encountered daily and globally.

Ultimately, embracing big data is not an option for businesses of the future. It is about how effective a company uses data to know and engage its customers as well as employees. Using records of customer interactions, buying histories, social media, surveys and online communities, businesses can predict future actions faster and with greater accuracy than ever before. In addition, data solutions that track employee engagement, satisfaction and retention are key to the future of building and sustaining a happy and motivated workforce.

Companies which adopt data-drive employee engagement and strategies as well as leverage on customer insights are bound to find themselves ahead of their competitors. ∎

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