



# Top five deliverables Executives should demand from Big Data projects

Big Data. ***“The Incomprehensible in Pursuit of the Unattainable”***, in the minds of most business people (with apologies to Oscar Wilde). Why should this be? The Economist recently reported how Big Data is winning elections and changing the nature of democracy. Retailers profit from better customer profiles by cross-referencing instore and online behaviour, dating websites now compete by offering “better matches”, and local government avoids the same road being dug up successively by different utilities. So is something new happening?

Big Data is a much-hyped approach that has suffered from being viewed through the wrong end of the telescope - no one cares about the size of the Data (apart from a few BI and technology geeks, and of course the technology vendors with a “solution looking for a problem”). Not even the insight derived from refining the data gets business executives interested - the Holy Grail for them is the improved outcomes they can achieve.

But executives have always had access to data, haven't they - via regular board reports, sales forecasts, manufacturing reports and market analyses? They have BI teams, business analysts and financial planners to produce these - so what is actually new here? And how should leaders evaluate the requests for funding Big Data projects that are starting to appear in greater numbers?

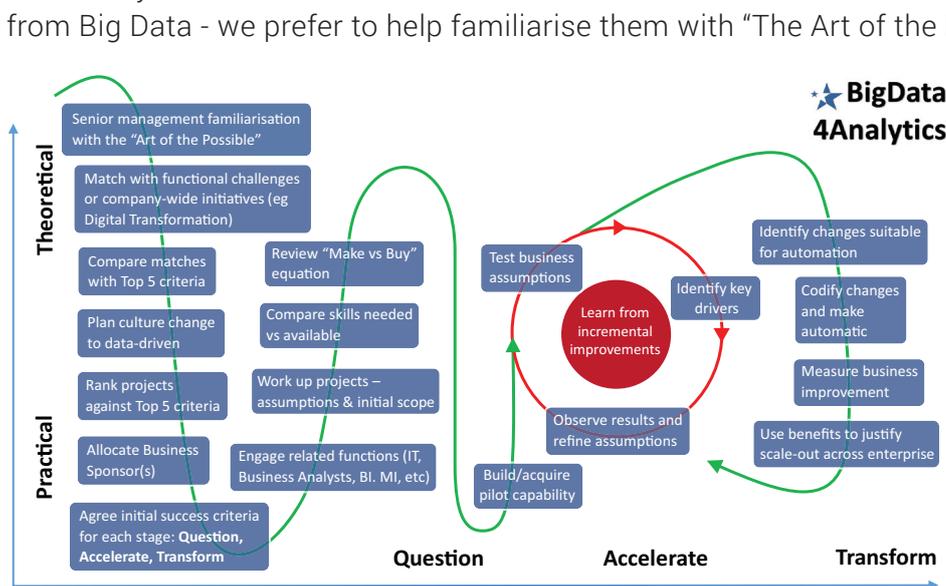
The “What's New” is actually quite significant, and our work with clients has helped us identify five key business criteria that executives should use as to qualify each new Big Data initiative they are asked to fund. These are: “Holistic-ness”, Immediacy, Action-orientation, Accessibility and Deployability:

- a) **“Holistic-ness”**. All business suffer to some extent from an inability to see the “big picture”. There is no “single version of the truth” – just fragmented, partial views that have evolved to reflect the needs of each “silo” of the organisation. Big Data can mitigate this – joining the dots to make it easier to highlight one-off inconsistencies or systematic anomalies for example, benchmarking performance more effectively and helping with the interpretation of what is important. And it makes patterns easier to see with “new” context from merging in external data, whether demographic, economic, or environmental/climate related.
- b) **Immediacy**. Done properly, a Big Data approach provides executives with a perspective on their business that is more nimble than their traditional reports, with no loss of accuracy. Corrective or opportunistic actions can thus be initiated earlier and followed up more closely to check effectiveness. Bottom line: the organisation can be more agile and responsive, assuming that the focus is on action (as per (c) below)
- c) **Focus on actions and outcomes**. Anticipate what will happen, rather than just record what already happened - turning the “Rear-View Mirror”, as it were, into a “Head-Up Display”. “What-If” optimisation, risk management and stress testing can now be built into business planning and decision-making with less effort and more objectivity based on emerging predictive approaches. An analogy is the in-car Satnav, whose value is not to tell you where you've come from, but to provide continuously updated guidance in reaching your business ambition.

- d) Accessibility.** Just as it's always easier to converse directly rather than through an interpreter, so executives no longer need to engage with the data via "BI specialists" with little business knowledge to understand their questions, who translate them into queries the computer understands and then translate the results back. Recent "self-service" developments have now made it possible for executives with little statistical or programming knowledge to engage more directly with the data. This not only reduces translation delays and errors, it also makes it easier for them to get closer to the business drivers, to spot correlations and to test their own hypotheses via ad hoc exploration. And the results are now far easier to share and tell as a story, thanks to improved visualisation capabilities.
- e) Deployability and affordability.** In contrast to most IT-led projects which tend to be expensive, monolithic and risky (remember those massive ERP and CRM fiascos?), Big Data analytics

deployment is different – in several respects. First, the core technologies it relies on are largely Open Source and thus broadly free. The second difference is that they go beyond just codifying existing processes - their purpose is to uncover insights that are not yet visible. This in turn requires a different approach – more experimental and more incremental – making such projects more of a journey than a destination. These two differences together reduce the costs of getting started in analytics to surprisingly low levels – further reduced by making use of cloud infrastructure to run pilots. However, leadership and new skills are required for this journey if it is to deliver business benefits along the way - and this should come from the business. Most IT departments are rarely well placed to take the lead for the enterprise on Big Data – they either do not possess these skills or are overloaded with just "keeping the lights on", avoiding data breaches, supporting home/mobile working and so on.

One of my most popular [articles](#): "**Big Data – neither about Big, nor about Data**" debunked the flawed marketing efforts of many global technology vendors creating hype that is holding Big Data back. Many of these treat Big Data as just another "Technology Wave" - using it as a marketing opportunity to promote existing technologies via jargon-ridden messages to their traditional customers in the IT department. The flaw is that IT typically neither owns the business problem Big Data might solve, nor has a budget for a solution. Rather than alienate in this way the business leaders who will benefit from Big Data - we prefer to help familiarise them with "The Art of the Possible", describing it - not in



not in technology terms - but as "a new way to accelerate Business Transformation" (Digital Transformation, even). My article postulates that Big Data is defined – not by "The Four V's" idea promoted by (and understood only by) technicians – but instead by the "Three Pillars" that the business leaders we work with find more meaningful: **Question, Accelerate and Transform.**

**Key take-aways** for executives that merit further reflection are thus:

- Big Data is already changing industries and the relative competitiveness of established players
- Contrary to the agendas of the traditional IT companies, Big Data does not require massive investment to trial, and initiatives are best led by business rather than IT
- It is essential, before committing to any initiative, to be clear on what the business benefits will be and how business people can use it directly – using the five criteria described
- Widespread analytics deployment will – like any other transformation – require effort to change culture to “data-driven”
- The new skills needed are scarce and costly to hire. However it is better to start with the business requirement and work back towards the technology – supported if needed by Business consultants who understand Big Data, rather than by technology specialists who may lack the necessary understanding of business



**Mike Fish** is founder of BigData4Analytics, Europe’s leading “Management Consultancy in Big Data” – with a refreshingly different three-pronged approach:

- Business consulting that helps business leaders identify “early wins” and adopt the “data-driven culture” needed to get the best from analytics
- World-class data science consulting – delivered as consulting or as “Interim Chief Data Officer”
- An “ecosystem” of innovative analytics technologies that provide clients with more choices on the “make-buy” scale.

*Our consulting clients include a top 5 global professional services firm and several top tier retailers. We run “The Art of the Possible” analytics orientations for executive teams, showing live demonstrations from our “Ecosystem” partners - in Predictive Analytics, Enterprise Yield Analytics, Excel replacement and Boardroom Visualisation, for example – all in a “vendor neutral” environment.*

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