

DATA LEADERS WHO'S WHO

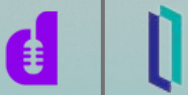
DRIVING INNOVATION WITH DATA

Featured in this week's interview

Elisa Koch

Head of Data & Analytics

Australian Football League (AFL)



TECHNOLOGY

Editors note

Data has become the core of how we operate as a society, and is central to business success. Data-driven businesses are finding new ways to compete by letting their data uncover unique points of differentiation. The value of data can't be overstated; it has been referred to as the new currency. We are proud to bring you the latest Data Leader's Who's Who and support the increasingly critical role that these emerging and established data leaders play both now and into the future.

The insights these leaders provide will be pivotal in strengthening the position of data in the business community and we thank them for sharing their valuable experiences.

Andrew Aho, Regional Director Data Platforms, InterSystems | Felipe Flores, Founder, Data Futurology

ANALYTICS AT THE AFL



Elisa Koch

Head of Data & Analytics

Australian Football League (AFL)

In Elisa's three years at the AFL she has been busy moving the needle in the data analytics team. Elisa shares on all things strategy & leadership in this in-depth article around the AFL's journey raising data literacy, maturing their data capability and building an end-to-end data capability for the AFL and all 18 clubs.

She also shares on the team's agility during the pandemic and successful launch of the team's first operationalised ML model to reduce member churn.

STRATEGY & LEADERSHIP

What are the essential qualities of a data leader?

I believe the most important mindset a data leader can take is to not consider them a 'data leader', but rather a 'leader' in the organisation and position yourself to the business with this in mind. This has been a journey for me to understand that although my expertise is in data, I can contribute to the broader organisational agenda even when data expertise is not required.

How have you found success in raising data literacy in your organisation? How do you get involved in educating peers and execs?

My Data & Analytics team at the AFL is a team of eight, comprising an Analytics team and Data Engineering team. My team not only services all key functions within the AFL, but also all 18 Clubs as a data & analytics shared service. In other words, we essentially service 19 different businesses. With my team's vision of making the entire football

industry more data-driven, a key strategic pillar of my team is to upskill the industry in data and analytics best practice. As the saying goes: Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. Internally, this is achieved through formal and informal training programs for AFL and Club staff. For Clubs, we have created a 'Tableau Creator Community' to ask questions and share visualisation and dashboarding best practice. It is incredibly fulfilling to see such highly competitive Clubs share and collaborate within these analytics communities.

What work at the AFL are you most proud of?

I started in my role as the Head of Data & Analytics at the Australian Football League (AFL) in October 2019. I was brought in to build the AFL's first centralised data function within the AFL to service not only the AFL, but also to be the shared data service for all 18 AFL Clubs. A daunting remit, but one I was incredibly excited to build from the ground up.

Fast forward to 2022 and we have built an end-to-end data capability for the AFL and all 18 Clubs – everything from data warehousing to business intelligence reporting to machine learning.

MATURING YOUR DATA CAPABILITY

What have you found to be the key ingredients to make data analytics capability create an impact on business outcomes?

'The work begins when the model is finished' – this is a quote from a boss early in my career that reminds me that fancy ML does not result in business outcomes, but rather working very closely with the business to implement the insights from any data initiative. Another heuristic I go by is that it takes presenting the findings from your data initiative to business stakeholders at least three times before they start to understand the insights. To generate concrete business outcomes, you have to remain persistent – it does not happen overnight.

How do you build an effective analytics organisation?

Always start with talent and your people – do you have the right people in the key roles within your analytics function? When recruiting for analytic talent, there is a base level of technical knowledge that is required but the most important candidate attributes are their capacity to learn. I also believe diversity is a key ingredient for building a successful analytics team – diversity in cultural background, work experience and personalities. It's about 'culture add', not 'culture fit'.

More than ever, I also believe agility as an individual but as a team is also critically important after having lived through (and continue to battle) COVID. The sporting event industry was severely impacted in 2020 and 2021, as were many industries. A primary focus of the AFL was how we can bring fans safely back to games. My team was asked to build a contact tracing capability that worked with health authorities across the country. If there was a positive COVID case at any one of our games, my team would provide to health authorities all at-risk attendees who would then be notified as a close contact. This contact tracing capability was built through automated feeds into our data warehouse and sent to health authorities through secure methods. No other sports league nationally had built this type of capability. This was the primary focus of my Data team for the 2021 season and luckily is not a requirement of health authorities in the 2022 season. Never in my career as a data professional did I think I'd ever work on building a capability like contact tracing. I am incredibly proud of the agility of my team to enable the AFL and the entire football industry to safely navigate the pandemic and most importantly bring fans back to their beloved football games.



"THE MOST IMPORTANT CANDIDATE ATTRIBUTES ARE THEIR CAPACITY TO LEARN. I ALSO BELIEVE DIVERSITY IS A KEY INGREDIENT FOR BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL ANALYTICS TEAM"

AI PROJECTS, PRIORITISATION AND PRODUCTIONISING AI

What have been major AI watershed moments in your career?

It would certainly be launching our first operationalised ML model for all 18 Clubs over the past few months to predict member churn.

At the end of each round, the model gets calibrated across all different member engagement points (ie, attended a game, bought Club merchandise, etc).

The churn scores are then released to Clubs on a weekly basis to enable Clubs to be more proactive with the member retention strategies rather than waiting until the end of the season.

TEAMS, TALENT, SKILLS, DIVERSITY

What is the best way to structure your data and analytics teams? What processes and methodologies are key to underpinning analytics project success?

I think the structure of D&A teams depend on the data maturity of your business or industry. At the AFL, although a data-rich industry, the maturity is low in terms of data-driven decision making at all levels of the business. Therefore, the right model at the AFL is a centralised D&A team that services different functions throughout the AFL and also across the 18 Clubs.



THE FUTURE OF DATA & ANALYTICS

What new technology and innovations do you see as being the most critical to the industry over the next 18 months?

The increased use of data safe havens which will allow organisations to collaborate on their first-party datasets through enrichment, without actual sharing of data.

What legacy do you hope to leave behind you at your organisation?

The legacy I hope to leave behind is that data & insights plays a critically important role in decision making at all levels of the organisation – from the C-Suite down to operational roles. I hope data is not seen as a specialty, but rather democratised and accessible for everyone in the organisation.



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