

DATA LEADERS WHO'S WHO

DRIVING INNOVATION WITH DATA

Featured in this week's interview

Pieter Vorster

Group Head of Data Strategy, Product & Analytics

Westpac



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

DATA-DRIVEN INNOVATION AT WESTPAC



Pieter Vorster

Group Head of Data Strategy, Product & Analytics
Westpac

Pieter is a C-suite executive leader with 20 years international experience driving strategic change to deliver sustainable commercial outcomes across industries including retail, wealth, corporate and investment banking, financial services, insurance and mining and resources.

He has an authentic and visionary leadership style that has inspired a career track record of successful business transformations that enable global organisations to thrive through unprecedented disruption and market demand, by applying scaled agile and advanced data and analytics to successfully introduce and embed new operating structures, technology and processes. In this article Pieter deep dives into how to successfully future-proof an organisation with transformative change, keeping culture and data leadership at the core.

STRATEGY & LEADERSHIP

How do you devise a data strategy? What sets apart the good from the bad?

A good data strategy is not created in isolation, it needs to live in the context of core organisational outcomes, for example Digital Transformation. This is even more critical as data has become the lifeblood of the experience economy and as such is driving value at a sustainable, competitive level. For this reason, the breadth of a data strategy is also important to consider. As data transverses across numerous processes and decisions, the holistic nature of a strategy becomes important. The consequences of a fragmented approach will often be felt when a link in the chain of data breaks (e.g. quality of the data, speed of generation and even sub-optimal decisions based on shallow data and analytics). Lastly, like any transformative change, the intellectual understanding of how to future-proof an organisation with better sustainable outcomes, is often lost if the benefits, understanding and impact is not

clear to every leader in the organisation. Often the best intentions, most researched and problem solved strategy will falter unless it is change managed. With this, I mean building culture, knowledge and data leadership across not just the data teams in the organisation, but everyone in the organisation. "A data-pull outcome" is ultimately one of the signals of success. The best strategies are the ones that are lived and breathed by non-data specialists.

How do you structure metrics to create effective delivery of projects/ products?

One of the most regular challenges with projects/(non-data) products, is that they have a defined outcome, scope and purpose. However, the purpose and use of data often outlives the project intent. Most data use cases are not even in embryo phase when a project is considering the specific outcome it is aiming to achieve. For example, a new digital application may have functionality supported by operational processes linked to it. Any future use of the data

generated by the functions and process are not known/or in scope at the outset of the project. A typical digital project metric will be user uptake, straight-through automated processing and the like. Data metrics would be very different - for example real time data feeds and interactions tracking, re-use of the data in other applications and % of analytics built into the process decisions for smarter customer interactions to name but a few. More traditionally, these would also include data quality, availability, consistency etc. metrics. Ultimately measuring data debt and technology debt based on the data strategy and technology strategy needs to be baked into the project solution. The cost of not doing this is often characterised with remediation and further investment.

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

Data, like many other transformative technologies, typically gains momentum from the board and executive teams.

This creates the opportunities to engage in educational sessions setting out the strategy, the outcomes and measures linked to data transformation. A key factor here for me is to 'tell the data story relevant to the organisational context' – tell it often and consistently. The story must be grounded in the organisation's purpose and intent. It is very uncommon that an executive / board member can appreciate all the nuances of data in the first go and that should not be the intent. It starts with the overarching organisational-linked data strategy, and then we build the execution approach and plan. Often the reason for change is not clear until the problem data is trying to solve is shared. Furthermore, contextual positioning, looking at a diverse external perspective helps to showcase the outcomes that are strived for, but these outcomes need to be organisation specific. Unfortunately, the days of data evangelists selling the dream has been met by executive leaders with disillusionment when delivery and transformation does not materialise. Over the last nine or so years leading data transformation, this approach has always worked well, but it takes time, and perseverance. I can honestly say that the role of data and its strategic value is better understood since COVID than any other time before. The need to 'convince leaders about data' is likely long gone (or should be). The challenge now is to make smart investment decisions to execute the data strategy. This means involvement is now even more critical. The touchpoints to engage have increased substantively - whether it is more frequent board sessions on data, investment committees and resource prioritisation, to business leader forums or cultural interventions linked to large organisational transformation, down to risk management practices and operational leadership sessions.



"TELL THE DATA STORY RELEVANT TO THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT – TELL IT OFTEN AND CONSISTENTLY."

Lastly, investing in one-on-one time with key decision makers creates a heightened level of engagement on the topic with an open space to ask questions and ensure meaningful understanding.

What do you wish senior leadership knew or understood?

This is perhaps a story of success rather than a gap in understanding or knowledge for me – one where senior leaders have understood the role data plays in the organisation and the approach they need to take to embed the competency as well as how it links to the overall objectives.

As a consequence, the time wasted or potential friction generated with competing demands, instantly reduces and effort is spent more productively on moving to solution implementation and value generation. There is a saying that rings true, now, more than ever - 'careful what you wish for as you might just get it'. Particularly, over the last two years where we have evidenced the energy and success generated from the implementation of data strategy into tangible outcomes - this is the best method of learning and knowledge share. A few years back there would have been a daunting task ahead of any data professional to constantly explain the potential upside, that quality matters and embracing technology modernisation. So, invest time to understand the business strategy, connect the dots and make time to engage at all levels to provide the roadmap, and then deliver, deliver, deliver.

ACCELERATING DATA INNOVATION

How have you successfully accelerated new innovations to benefit customers or internal operations?

This has varied over time for me in terms of approach, sponsorship and outcomes. Again, this is very much organisation specific, but a few key themes have surfaced to the top. Firstly, solve a real problem. Innovation without purpose has been called 'fashionistas' by me and my colleagues in the UK and Africa. Another phrase often used is 'a hammer looking for a nail to hit.' Again, investing time to use a data-led approach to determine the problem to solve is important. I had the Director and Professor of a prestigious Business school in Johannesburg's Doctor of Business Administration (supported by Professors from The Netherlands and Canada)

remind me that all problem solutions are easier solved through grounded theory, and even advanced analytics. The point here is that a fundamental understanding of the problem requires research and understanding, this helps spark innovative solutions and reduces trial and error. Trawling through anonymised customer complaints, talking to the frontline teams and talking to customers gives that grounded understanding of the issue. This solves for the challenge of embedding the innovation and overcoming change resistance, e.g. proactive customer servicing.

A second theme is make time (especially f2f and first thing in the morning). Daily lives often dictate that the operational requirement takes charge of the mental capacity of people. Switching to solving innovatively uses a different part of the brain and as such needs to be nurtured to enable success. Whether it was a day a week when I established the first data science team in my career, or more recently where it was operationally part of the process to think about the potential solutions differently (design thinking etc), it still achieves innovative solutions to customer needs. One positive is the target set years ago that 10% of ideas will succeed, has improved significantly due to the momentum created and agile delivery testing.

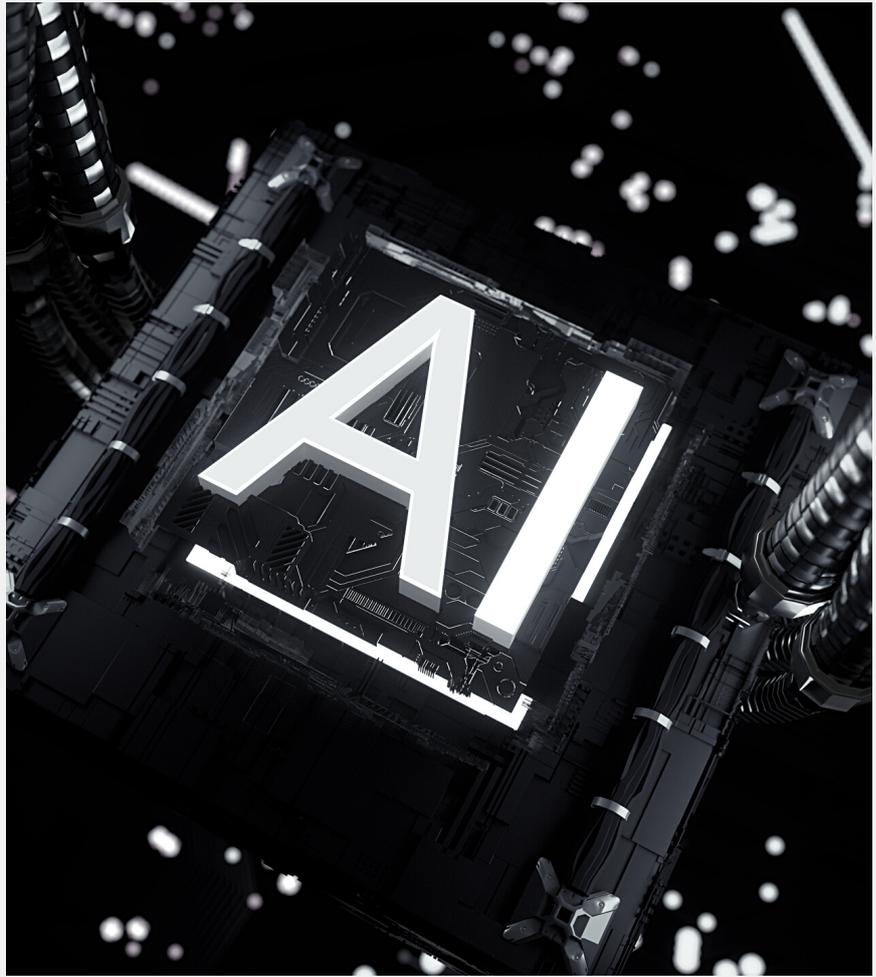
Last theme is less is not more. What I mean with this statement is that the skills and understanding of the problem, that helps the creative juices flow and truly innovate comes from many. The dynamic engagement on a topic, with the 'A-team' working together to solve for better customer outcomes, is by far an accelerator of innovation. This applies to both the need to understand the root cause or the approach to applying advanced analytics solutions. The principle is: hard nuts to crack have not been cracked for a reason - they require broad skills and knowledge to solve.



AI IN ACTION

What have been major AI watershed moments in your career - or alternatively in the industry?

I love this question, as it has helped me reflect on the numerous solutions that have been made possible over the years that would not have been possible at all without AI and ML. Whether it was when the Data Science team built the first ever banking chatbot in Facebook in late 2016 exploring local vernacular, especially of millennials from scratch or since then, the numerous tricky problems where we needed to take vast amounts of seemingly un-connected data and understand how it is interconnected in order to solve a meaningful problem. I never seem to get used to the capacity of AI to solve big hairy, almost impossible questions, and not be amazed at how we were able to solve them and make a real difference to our operational processes and deliver amazing outcomes. In a non-financial industry domain, I am always fascinated by the progress made on Genome editing (CRISPR-Cas 9 more specifically) and how DNA sequencing, editing, predicting treatment and effective diagnosis can potentially change lives - save lives.



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