

despatches

Delivering Value from Big Data

by Jacqui Taylor, Founder, CEO FlyingBinary (www.flyingbinary.com)



Big Data has moved from a buzz word spoken about by technologists to a game changing approach to digital transformation in every sector Public, Private and the Third Sector. The recurring question I have been repeatedly asked by clients is, 'Where is the value in Big Data for my organisation?'

This question is asked equally by an SME in Tech City or a multinational company where a CxO has been tasked to deliver the next transformation. The answer is always the same "What business problem do you need to solve next?" Then we can decide how Big Data can help.

For those readers who have seen any of my Big Data keynotes, you will remember a slide where the "Big" in "Big Data" is crossed out, leaving just "Data". For every organisation Big is relative: for some clients, their 10 petabyte Social Gaming Cloud service is a lot to handle; equally for some CxO's their 5 terabyte on premise solution causes them similar problems. However the Big Data technical solution we deploy in each case is very different. Even though it is much harder to deploy multiple technology stacks to solve the Big Data problem, being vendor neutral is key to delivering the value from Big Data technologies.

From my first Big Data project in 2009 deploying regulatory change for a UK based Financial Services company across Europe in only 5 months, through to transformational changes across UK Government delivered using our G-Cloud (Government Cloud) GCHQ accredited Big Data platforms, we have put together an offering which categorises Big Data Projects according to 8 V's. Of the 8 V's, Value has proved to be the most significant V for the vast majority of organisations for their initial Big Data project.

Over the last 5 years the metrics we have collected across our projects have revealed some key statistics. Organisations on average have 8% of their people who have the ability to create transformational change with data, whereas the rest of the organisation are largely unable to make any impact. Once we have deployed our value Big Data solutions, on average this changes to 80% of the organisation able to influence change with data. One other factor is also key at this point. This relates to the data maturity

within an organisation and an organisations ability to leverage data skills across their own landscape.

Addressing the value from utilising the existing data within an organisation with a Big Data approach, plus blending in data which can be sourced externally such as Open Data and Social Web data gives game changing results. This transformational change cannot be achieved using traditional data technologies and existing IT legacy. However unlike other vendors in this field we are able to achieve this by connecting to the existing data capability in an organisation, leveraging the existing data investment rather than replacing it. Aside from maximising the existing investment and reducing the implementation costs this method has the added advantage of deploying transformational change for an organisation in months not years.

This new approach to Big Data also enables the development of data skills across the organisational landscape. This is usually achieved with an initial pilot group of users who are reskilled during the project, and the delivery of data to domain experts across an organisation on a self-service basis. This new approach uses interactive data visualisation to meet existing insight needs which are actionable, and also answers the Big Data questions you didn't know you needed to ask.

Our new clients typically contact us as a referral from previous clients as the word goes round that this Big Data transformation is hugely powerful. Additionally organisations are waking up to the power of data: either because their competitor has made the change like our first client in Financial Services, or because IT refresh is being mandated as it is for our Government clients. The question which remains is what can Big Data do for your organisation? Unlike other Big Data specialists in this field we can deploy our technology in a matter of weeks to help you leverage this opportunity and start to find the value for your organisation that Big Data can bring.



About Jacqui Taylor
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Jacqui is a Member of the Digital Enlightenment Forum, an Open Community of members from different backgrounds working together to develop a sustainable Digital Society. The members of DEF are regularly invited to set strategy, influence policy and articulate a vision which can be applied by organisations, governments and nations.

Jacqui in her role as a data journalist has collaborated with other thought leaders in the industry to produce her first book "Mapping the Future" which signals the next steps for the Industry she helped to create.

What would Whitehall be like fifty years' time?

by Henry Tam

Think about the worrying trends creeping through Whitehall. Imagine nothing is done about them, and they get worse by the year. Project your mind forward a few decades. There before you is the ghost of Whitehall Future.

What are these disturbing trends? First and foremost is the one that has been hidden from public view. Since the 1980s, people have been fed the 'Yes, Minister' caricature of civil



servants manipulating and thwarting the wishes of government ministers. Reality has been moving in the exact opposite direction. For a long time now, the overriding concern of senior civil servants has not only been to carry out what Ministers ask for, but to anticipate them so they can be 'ahead of the curve' in delivering ministerial objectives. Yet Ministers are bemoaning more than ever that civil servants are not dependable enough. They insist their policies (especially the half-baked ones) are pushed through, and when things go wrong, they cite that as evidence for why they cannot rely on civil servants.

Some civil servants may think that their independent policy input will one day be greatly valued again. But increasingly Ministers will be looking less for a good submission than just a show of submissiveness. This is compounded by what can only be described as corporate infiltration into our system of government. By offering vast donations (not to mention, future board positions) to politicians who will steer policies in their favour, and by seconding staff to Whitehall to work on the details of those policies, big business leaders are already expanding their control over government activities. The time will come when they will either buy their way into taking over an established political party (look at what is happening to the Republican Party in the US) or simply forming their own party (into which parties aligned to their agenda will be given financial incentives to merge).

In this timid new world, privatisation and deregulation will keep handing more power to large corporations until there are no viable checks or balances against them. Civil servants, on short-term contracts, will be made keenly aware that they have to spend time in the private sector to impress their corporate masters (inside and outside government). Those who cannot point to a successful track record of serving business interests

are unlikely to reach the upper echelons of Whitehall.

And once a corporate-led government has consolidated its position, it will remove any obstacle to the development and application of advanced technology to expand its powerbase and the profits of its allies. In the absence of any genuine public scrutiny, the power of surveillance, information manipulation, and promotion of addictive consumerism will be deployed without constraint. Few civil servants will dare to blow the whistle. Those who do can expect a long prison sentence. And with 24/7 monitoring, probably with the aid of bio-technology, there is little chance of escaping detection.

A government conducted for the benefit of the business elite will also want to make sure the majority of the population are unable to pool their resources to act collectively. The rich will accordingly be liberated from paying taxes, public services will be largely dismantled, and welfare safety nets will vanish altogether. At the same time, corporate leaders in the government and the media (including the privatised BBC) will work seamlessly together to present the most vulnerable people as deserving of scorn and ill-treatment – thus diverting public frustration towards those least able to defend themselves. 'Speaking truth to power' will have given way to 'Carrying out orders without question'.

With the mythical evidence-based policy approach long gone, the impact on public wellbeing will have ceased to be a relevant issue. Civil servants know that the policies they take forward must serve corporate interests irrespective of their effects on the wider population, and yet be seen as meeting the needs of the whole country. Consequently, corporate irresponsibility will escalate – accelerating environmental degradation and social unrest.

And if the police are already asking for the use of water cannons today, deadly force won't be far off the agenda when it comes to dealing with protestors who will in the future be routinely branded as dangerous terrorists.

Some will no doubt say that such a picture of the future is grossly exaggerated and it will never come to pass. Others will, on the contrary, observe that the scenario depicted has begun to happen already. Like many dystopian novelists, I'm an optimistic pessimist. I dread how badly the world may turn out, but I never lose hope that a better alternative is still possible – if the warnings are heeded.

About Henry Tam

*Henry Tam is a political writer, former senior civil servant at the Home Office and DCLG, and currently academic at the University of Cambridge. His first novel, **Kuan's Wonderland**, has been widely acclaimed and compared to the works of Orwell and Pullman.*

*His new novel, **Whitehall through the Looking Glass**, is now available in paperback and e-book format from Amazon. He wants to stress that any similarities the novel may have to actual events and characters in Whitehall are wholly coincidental. And he would be most disappointed if civil servants do not look for them.*

Regulation – a Goldilocks story – neither too big, nor too small, just right

by Tim Soane

It is one of the least attractive consequences of the 24/7 media world in which we currently live that interviewers frequently assert "Well, is it yes or no? Come on, answer the question: yes or no?". The real answer quite often is "Neither. It is more complicated than that...". But complex answers don't lead to great headlines. So the interviewer persists and the conclusion or quote the next day is not how simplistic the questioner was; but how evasive the interviewee was – "Would not answer the question" etc.

Regulation and regulators of all sorts – law-makers, interpreters of the law, inspectors and enforcers – almost always have to deal with this complexity and balance often conflicting objectives. This is the real world not TV.

The conundrum is compounded by the fact that the interviewer has the benefit of 20:20 hind-sight: an accident has happened or a dreadful tragedy has occurred. "Are you saying you wanted this to happen?"; or "Is the Government denying you the resources to prevent this happening again?"; etc.

By this time of course it is very hard to give a rational argument about the economic consequences of over-burdening regulation; the risk-based approach to enforcement you were adopting; or the sheer impossibility of being everywhere all of the time waiting to step in and prevent an accident.

Goldilocks would have had no trouble. Why? Because there are three bowls on the table, not two! The interviewer couldn't ask the simplistic question without looking a complete clot. Applying this to regulation, it is vital that the third option is clearly visible on the metaphorical table.

'Right regulation' (using many different monikers over the years) as the way to go has been agreed by governments for years and years and yet for all that time it has generally been an obscure concept. This is partly explained by party politics. One party wants to portray the other as either soft on regulation and in the pockets of business; or an over-regulator trying to stifle growth and innovation. Neither is a true picture of course. All too often it comes down to a fine point. For example, "Minister, if we just add these three additional conditions,



we can reduce the number of people affected by x". Almost always the marginal effect is small but the cumulative effect is huge – hundreds more pages of explanatory notes, more training needed for enforcers, more non-compliance through ignorance and so on. On the other hand, if the conversation goes like this: "Minister, reducing the complexity will lead to X more 'free-riders'" and the Minister agrees, he or she knows there will be a difficult interview ahead. It takes confidence and strong leadership to stand up for 'right regulation'. I for one would rather see such leadership, than let interviewers win the argument and have Goldilocks forced to eat either scalding porridge or cold porridge.



About Tim Soane

Tim Soane is a former senior civil servant with long experience of policy development in the business-facing work of Government.

He has been a regulator a number of times (telecoms, shipping, labour markets, unions, steel, textiles, power generation) as well as a de-regulator, leading the Better Regulation Executive in his final posting.

Since leaving full-time employment, he has drawn on his expertise to advise officials and ministers in the UK and overseas.

See the main catalogue for related training programmes

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Demystifying Trust, Digital Security & E-ID – p10

Governing Electronically: e-Government and Public Administration – p11

Managing Freedom of Information (FOIs) – p13

Policy Making in Focus: Managing Ministerial Expectations – p22

Strategic Management of Regulatory & Enforcement Agencies – p19

The civil service reform plan one year on, and the international evidence



by Guy Lodge, Associate Director for Politics and Power, ippr

Can greater political oversight of Whitehall be reconciled with a fundamental commitment to a merit-based and non-partisan civil service?

Our review made a number of recommendations which have helped to inform the current phase of civil service reform, most recently set out in the *Civil Service Reform Plan: One Year On Report*.

The proposed creation of Extended Ministerial Offices (EMOs) takes forward our plans for strengthening the level of support provided to ministers. To sharpen accountability, future permanent secretaries are to be placed on fixed-tenure appointments, and those officials tasked with delivering major operational programmes (known as 'senior responsible owners' - SROs) are to be made more directly accountable to relevant parliamentary select committees.

On the controversial matter of permanent secretary appointments, we argued that the Prime Minister should be allowed to choose from a list of appointable 'above the line' candidates produced by the independent Civil Service Commission.

Two things might be said about a set of reforms which seek to promote what we termed the 'accountability and responsiveness' of the Civil Service. The first is that they are not comprehensive. As we stated in our report, a systematic reform agenda must seek to improve a range of Civil Service attributes, including the approach to policymaking and service delivery, the ability to work across departmental boundaries and ensuring that the skills base is robust enough to meet the challenges it faces. The second is that measures designed to strengthen the accountability of officials, increase ministerial involvement in appointments and introduce private office reform touch on the most sensitive aspects of the ministerial-*mandarin* relationship. This underlines the need to tread carefully.

Private offices are small by international standards and mostly staffed by junior officials and advisers. Precious time is taken up with firefighting and managing departmental processes, which can make it difficult for ministers to provide strategic leadership.

Equally, there is a real muddle over accountability. Constitutionally, civil servants are accountable for their actions to ministers. But the tradition of Civil Service neutrality means that ministers have no formal say in the appointment or dismissal of mandarins. Conversely, senior civil servants cannot speak up for themselves. Put them in front of a select committee and they have to speak in their master's voice, upholding the ministerial line.

Naturally, civil servants worry that any attempt to improve the responsiveness and accountability of officials will jeopardise the non-partisan character of the civil service. Nothing better illustrates this than the recent spats over whether ministers should be given the power to choose candidates deemed to be 'above the line'. You might argue that such a reform would at best lead to politicisation by the back door, but the front door? This reflects how intensely polarised debate in the UK has become. Responsiveness and civil service neutrality are seen as polar opposites: locked in some zero-sum relationship where one can only be gained at the expense of the other.

Perhaps the most useful benefit of comparative study is that it provides a distinct set of perspectives on this debate. The striking thing about the international evidence is that it demonstrates how it is possible to reconcile greater responsiveness with civil service neutrality - so long as certain safeguards are put in place. It also shows that in all countries the balancing act is an ongoing process which needs to be continually managed and adjusted.

Take appointments. Even a cursory glance at a number of overseas models suggests that fears about politicisation are greatly exaggerated. It is common even in countries which retain a merit-based non-partisan civil service for ministers to appoint permanent secretary equivalents. The degree of political involvement varies, as do the rules and procedures underpinning the appointment process. In Australia the Prime Minister is given fairly free rein over permanent secretary appointments, whereas in Singapore the Prime Minister chooses from a list of names produced by

an independent Public Service Commission. In Canada and Sweden there is a longstanding tradition that politicians appoint the top mandarins. The outcome is not politicisation - the vast majority of posts are given to career officials. Because the politicians know that since they are ultimately judged on the performance of their senior officials, they seek to appoint the individuals they consider to be the most able and competent to do the job.

Some say that officials under these models are less prepared to speak truth unto power, but the evidence for this is slippery at best. No doubt some officials are more reluctant to challenge ministers, but it is hard to say this is a function of the appointment procedure, and not more readily explained by other factors - such as the character and temperament of the individual official. It should not - and rarely does in the countries we studied - follow that just because someone is appointed by a minister, they will be less willing to challenge that minister's view.

We based our recommendation on prime ministerial involvement in permanent secretary appointments on this international experience. Allowing the Prime Minister to choose from a list of 'above the line' candidates would allow for greater political choice, while also maintaining the merit principle. Why the Prime Minister and not the Secretary of State in the department concerned? Prime Ministers come to understand the strengths and weaknesses of individual ministers and departments, and are therefore well placed to think about what will make for the most effective permanent secretary - ministerial partnership. And given the relatively high level of ministerial turnover in the UK, reshuffled ministers are more likely to have confidence in their permanent secretary if they are appointed by the Prime Minister rather than their predecessor in the department. Of course the Prime Minister will want to consult the relevant Secretary of State, but s/he should have the final say.

In other important respects, international experience points the way forward. In Australia and Canada ministerial offices are larger and more powerful, with four or five times as many staff as in the UK. These models are not perfect - at times such offices have become too disconnected from their departments, and thus insulated from official advice. To guard against this it is critical that the ministerial private office remains sufficiently integrated, which depends on maintaining a good balance between political staff, other expert outsiders and permanent officials.

Also critical is transparency: information about ministerial staff, covering the job descriptions and salary band for each appointee, should be publicly available. All Codes of Conduct should also be kept under review, including those governing Business Appointment rules to address concerns about a revolving door between government and the lobbying world.

The introduction of fixed-term agreements for permanent secretaries is also a step in the right direction. However, as we argued in our report, further reforms are required if this measure is to really sharpen accountability at the top of departments. Most obviously, the institution of the Head of the Civil Service needs to be strengthened - and made fulltime - so that the role can more effectively hold permanent secretaries accountable. The exemplar here is the New Zealand State Services Commission, which is a powerful body that line-manages and holds departmental heads accountable - a unique innovation in Westminster systems. Managing thirty-plus officials on fixed-term contracts is a major responsibility and a specialist discipline in its own right. Something similar is needed in Whitehall.

In sum, the current Civil Service reform agenda is neither perfect nor comprehensive, but at least it is moving forward, albeit slowly. Perhaps a Parliamentary Commission as proposed by the House of Commons Public Administration Committee would help to further galvanise much-needed change. But the danger is that the opposite might happen: an unfocused remit could see the current momentum for change go the way of so many previous reform efforts and wither in the long grass. Is that really worth the risk?

The full version of this article can be seen in issue 85 1 of the Political Quarterly and published here with kind permission of the author and IPPR