

A Call to the Data & Information Quality Community: The Time is Now!

By
Thomas C. Redman, Ph. D.



Editor's note: Dr. Redman's new book, *Data Driven: Profiting from Your Most Important Business Asset*, was recently published by Harvard Business School Press. Readers will find a link to Dr. Redman's book at the IAIDQ Bibliography page at bibliography.iaidq.org.

INTRODUCTION

Many of you may have heard that my new book, *Data Driven: Profiting from Your Most Important Business Asset*, has just been released. The book advises urges managers and organizations to recognize that data are business assets, proposes what “manage data assets” means, and provides prescriptions for doing so. To my knowledge it is the first “data book” written explicitly for the senior business audience and published by a mainstream business publisher.

Michelle Dy, the Editor of the IAIDQ Newsletter, suggested that I provide an excerpt for this quarter's edition. I've decided not to do so for two reasons: first, an excerpt is already available; you'll find much of Chapter 5 at thedata drivencompany.com. My second reason is that I have something else I want to write about.

I know that each of you is struggling mightily inside your organization. I see it everyday. Data/Information quality is difficult, demanding work, even without the politics. And the politics are brutal. All too often, your efforts go unappreciated. It is easy to get frustrated and tempting to seek employment with better hours, cleaner reporting relationships, and more certain rewards.

But the time has come for us to re-focus, re-energize, and re-double our efforts and I am explicitly asking that you join me in doing so.

Let me remind you of the vision that draws us together. Ultimately, of course, one component of our goal is “exactly the right data and information in exactly the right place at exactly the right time and in the right format to complete an operation, serve a customer, make a decision, or set and execute strategy.” But that is not enough.

We also seek:

- A world in which decision-makers at all levels, but especially senior decision-makers, bring all the relevant data to bear in setting strategy, selecting tactics, and evaluating alternatives.
- A world of fully “informationalized” products and services, where economic growth is driven by data and information.

- A world in which organizations understand that data is the only asset that is uniquely their own and manage it to unlock the potential that still lies dormant.
- A world that is safer, freer, richer, and more equitable as a result.

It is a grand vision. And many will argue that it is unattainable. But we sell ourselves short if we pursue anything less. All the essential components are now in place to pursue this vision. Let me cite a few examples:

- More and more business people, including those in leadership roles, understand the importance of data and data quality. Heads of business units such as Stephanie Fetchen, Liz Kirscher, and Kim Russo are even keynoting at our IDQ conferences.
- More and more of our methods are fully documented: I cite books by David Loshin, Arkady Maydanchik, Danette McGilvray, Gwen Thomas, and Theresa Kurshner and Maria Villar as recent examples.
- We're well past the "bleeding-edge" stage. Companies in every industry and government agencies have demonstrated order-of-magnitude improvements in data quality and reaped huge rewards as a result. There are several examples in my book and Larry English's next book will feature more.
- Educators are with us. Thanks to the efforts of Elizabeth Pierce, John Talburt, Rich Wang and others, there is now an advanced degree program at UALR. More are on the way. And Christian Walenta and Lwanga Yonke, IAIDQ President and Advisor respectively, are leading an effort to develop a "Certified Information/Data Quality Professional" program. It should be ready next year.
- More and more companies understand the power in data. For examples, see the recent books by Ian Ayres, Stephen Baker, and Tom Davenport and Jeannie Harris.
- Chief Data Officers are appearing. And more and more of us are getting our arms around the political issues that have held us back.
- My own book. It is far and away my most innovative work and I am fiercely proud of the insights and prescriptions it puts forth. But even more significant is that Harvard Business Press, perhaps the world's pre-eminent business publisher, took on the project (and I am personally indebted to my editor, Jacque Murphy, who took the time to understand data, the roles it plays, and its potential in the C-suite). No longer can anyone argue that "data are the province of IT."
- We're building a network of practitioners with expertise. Indeed, for every person I've named, hundreds, maybe even thousands more are contributing.

As you well know, progress on today's problems and opportunities require unprecedented levels of quality. Everything, from reducing the added cost in the simplest process in a small department, to unlocking the potential of a data warehouse in a mid-size company, to improving health care at a large hospital, to resolving the credit crisis, requires better data. This list could go on and on.

So I ask each of you to join me in redoubling our efforts. But don't just work harder. Work smarter! Perhaps paradoxically, most of us need to narrow our focus. Don't waste time on the data that "might be valuable," the untenable problems (there are plenty of those!), and those who argue that data can't be improved.

Instead concentrate on the data that are most important in your organization's marketplaces; make small, but measurable improvements on the most solvable problems; and enlist those who already value data to join us.

All of us must become better salespeople and agents of change. We must better understand our organizations' business strategies and marketplaces. We must translate that understanding into more tightly aligned data programs. We must explain and demonstrate to business leaders how better data means greater revenue, faster, more certain innovation, and happier customers. We must greet their skepticism with solid responses and demonstrated improvements. We must embrace the politics and patiently build support. We must let others feel our passion. We must learn from our mistakes. And we must keep at it. Above all, we must keep at it!

For the past several years, I have spent more and more of my time selling and helping others lead. It has been the most uncertain yet exciting (even exhilarating), frustrating yet satisfying, and demanding yet productive time of my career. In part it convinces me that our time is now!

To close, I ask you to join me. Take a moment to recall our grand vision and to re-energize yourself and others. And then get back at it, with even greater energy, purpose, and focus.

Please send your questions, comments, and thoughts on this note directly to me at tomredman@dataqualitysolutions.com or to Michelle Dy at michelle.dy@iaidq.org.

About the Author



Thomas C. Redman, "the Data Doc" is president of Navesink Consulting Group in Little Silver, New Jersey.

He is an IAIDQ Co-Founder and his latest book, *Data Driven: Profiting from Your Most Important Business Asset*, was published by Harvard Business Press in September 2008.