Bridging the Divide Between Great Analytics and Business Value

By Kathleen Maley

If you've ever played Minesweeper, you have felt the elation that comes when you finally know – after countless painful missteps – *the* answer to one of the best logic puzzles ever created. I love that feeling. I'm addicted to it. It's why I still love analyzing data. These days, I solve different types of problems, but the process is largely the same – identify the problem, gather data, analyze it, develop a hypothesis, fail and adjust, until, all of a sudden, the answer comes into view.

One of the biggest problems facing analytics professionals today is the persistent disconnect between the work we do and the value it should generate. We were told that if we did a few simple (but not easy) things, then our partners would surely leverage our solutions: learn the business, gather context, use "business speak" and never mention p-values, create solutions relevant to business objectives, represent solutions in terms of business opportunity, and gain business buy-in. But even after all of that, companies say they still aren't getting the value they were promised.

So how can we bridge the divide between the great analytics we produce and the business' ability to capitalize on it?

In answering the question above, I'll first tell you about an experience of my own. I'll then share what I learned from it. Finally, I'll provide five recommendations for putting that knowledge into practice.

Not too long ago, I was invited to work with an organization that was struggling to reduce its customer-service call volume. The organization had created self-service capabilities to address the issue, but their release had little to no impact on call volume. After thoroughly analyzing customer-profile and cross-channel engagement data, I was able to correct several misconceptions and establish an accurate understanding of who was calling, what actions they were calling to take, and why they were choosing to call instead of self-serve.

Based on this new understanding of the data, primary business objective and operational constraints, we decided to build a customer-level indicator that would be used to inform a new call-routing strategy. Very conservatively, this initiative had an associated cost savings of $6 million annually – a more than twentyfold return on investment.

Before beginning my analysis, I did all the things I've learned to do. I understood the business and their objectives; I gathered the appropriate context; I put the solution and opportunity in relevant terms. My work was understood and the potential opportunity represented real money. Leadership, the head of the call center and the team were thrilled!

But when it came to implementing and adopting the solution, the business was wholly unprepared. It's important to note that the issue wasn't lack of "buy in" or an inability to execute in the general sense. There was no question that it was my job to build the indicator, but we'd had no discussion about the business change management required to leverage the new indicator. So when it came time to do so, there was no implementation team in place and the $6 million opportunity was at risk.

My primary objective is to the help the business create value through the use of analytics. In the case above, that meant not only producing a relevant analytical solution but also guiding the business through its own change management. That's when it became clear to me that analysts needed to add one more task to their already long list of duties: They need to help their business partners learn how to be great users of analytical solutions. In fact, I'll go as far as to say it's unrealistic, a bit unfair and totally unproductive to expect them to just figure it out on their own. Here's a better way:

1. Create and work toward a shared business objective
This starts with understanding and communicating that there is no such thing as an analytics initiative – only a business initiative. As described in the case above, by not consciously establishing this way of thinking, I inadvertently created a psychological hurdle for myself and my partner. We were focused on the analytical component of the initiative – the indicator – but gave much less energy to our real objective: reducing call volume and creating a $6 million efficiency.

2. Set realistic expectations up front
It is almost always easier to develop an analytical solution than it is to implement it. If I don't make that clear at the outset, then a couple of things happen. First, my partner will feel duped – like I made a promise to deliver a solution but now it turns out all I've done is create a bunch of work for them. Fair or unfair, it is how they will feel. Second, if they haven't planned for the initiative they won't have budgeted for it in person-hours and/or dollars. In this case, even if they want to implement the solution, it might not be possible. This is the worst possible outcome: a good solution can't be leveraged, time and effort have been wasted, and everyone is frustrated.

3. Explain the analytical process
The fact that different problems require different solutions is a familiar concept for me, but that is often not the case for my business partner. Whether I'm answering an ad-hoc question, creating a dashboard or building a predictive model, there is a certain process I will follow. Walking my partner through the high-level "what" and "why" of my process demystifies the experience and enables better planning on their part. It also gives me the opportunity to explain at the outset what I'll need from them.

4. Ask how the solution will be used

In addition to asking the business what problem they need to solve, asking how they intend to *use* the solution has proved to be a useful and non-threatening way to start their change-management wheels turning. When I asked this question in the case above, I did so because I knew that the relevance of the indicator was directly tied to its intended use. A secondary, albeit unintentional, benefit was my partner's realization that they hadn't yet thought that through. This question triggered the development of their adoption strategy, the critical component of our eventual success.

5. Participate in business change-management planning

Although business initiatives are typically owned and run by the business that will benefit from them, I still play an important role in the project-planning process. As the analytics expert, I will be aware of opportunities and risks that might not be visible to the business. For example, I know that my development data has to align with data that is available in the system in which the indicator will be implemented. As such, I need to facilitate a decision on the production platform sooner rather than later. This is also the time to establish the importance of back-end performance monitoring, and to include those deliverables – for me and for the business – into the overall project plan.

For the last decade and a half, analytics professionals have been focused on upstream requirements like data quality, relationship building and understanding business strategy. We have made significant strides in these areas, and our analytical solutions are more reliable, relevant and sophisticated than ever before. Launching from this strong foundation, we can now turn our energy toward downstream implementation and adoption. Only by filling this last big gap will we finally see our organizations achieve the value we've been promising.