How To Turn Data Into Margin: A Playbook

By Jay Hawkinson | Forbes Technology Council Member

Originally published: Forbes Technology Council, September 3, 2025

Many executives, and even my family, ask me, "What does a chief data or digital officer actually do?" My answer is simple: I turn data into margin. But delivering on that promise takes more than dashboards and strategy decks. It demands cross-functional alignment, clear prioritization and modern platforms that convert insight into action.

Over the past 25 years, I have led data, AI and digital transformation initiatives across consumer goods, manufacturing and industrial sectors. These efforts have included both turnaround situations and growth-stage scaling in public and private equity-backed environments. I have seen well-intentioned strategies stall, and I have seen disciplined execution unlock real enterprise value.

A disciplined playbook can reduce costs, accelerate insights and protect compliance all at the same time.

Why Data Efforts Often Fall Flat

Too many data and digital programs fail to deliver real business impact because they (1) focus on governance before business value, (2) concentrate on what's missing rather than leveraging what exists, (3) build dashboards instead of driving decisions, (4) treat data as though IT owns it instead of the business and (5) measure activity instead of outcomes.

In one global enterprise, I inherited more than 800 reports tied to the same KPI. Each report was subtly different. None were trusted. The result was decision paralysis. We had to rebuild trust and streamline visibility before we could even begin optimizing performance.

The Playbook: How To Turn Data Into Margin

- **Start with margin math.** Do not begin with technology. Begin with value. Where is the business leaking profit? In some companies, there are many temps hired to enter data during certain events or issues with inventory. A focus on automation and AI-powered inventory optimization could eliminate these extra roles and reduce costs significantly.

- **Govern what matters.** Governance is not about managing every piece of data. It is about protecting the information that drives business performance. Implementing a scalable, value-based governance program can increase data quality, improve compliance and accelerate the ability to deliver AI solutions.

- **Modernize with purpose.** Leaders who modernize with hybrid architectures can reduce latency and accelerate reporting, improve compliance and enhance operational efficiency. This is incredibly important to finance and commercial teams, and speeds the time to insights by six times, in my experience.

- **Deliver reusable data products.** Data is not a one-time project. It is a product. By creating reusable models for different needs, like revenue, inventory and forecasting, these assets can save time, improve scale and enable repeatability.
- **Embed insight where decisions are made.** The goal is not more dashboards. It is faster and smarter decisions. Whether using SAP Analytics Cloud, Power BI or custom applications, build systems that deliver insight where work is happening. With AI, we can now go further. Teams do not just view visualizations. They can ask intelligent agents for recommendations, trend analysis and context.
- **Drive AI with accountability.** AI is not magic. It is a force multiplier. In industrial operations, we used AI-based safety insights to reduce incident rates, align with audit standards and deliver measurable performance improvements.

What Success Looks Like

From my own experience, organizations that apply these principles can often see seven-figure savings, major pipeline acceleration and measurable safety improvements within the first one to two years. These are not technology wins. They are margin wins.

Why Boards And CEOs Should Care

Boardrooms today demand innovation but are rightfully cautious about risk. AI, cybersecurity, ESG reporting and digital transformation are now core elements of board oversight. The leaders they trust must speak the language of technology, governance and value creation.

Drawing on my experience as an NACD.DC executive and CERT Cyber-Risk credential holder, I have seen that the real opportunity lies in using data not just for profit, but to build strategies that balance innovation with accountability. This is an approach any leader can apply to drive lasting impact.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Hawkinson is a board-certified (NACD.DC) data and digital leader turning data into margin through AI, analytics and strategy. Founder, Hawksroost LLC. Contact: jhawkinson@hawksroost.com | hawksroost.com