



The Holistic “Big Data” Recipe

By Carl Schleyer, 3D Results

Despite being a “data-derived decisions” kind of guy, I cringe a bit when I hear “big data.” These two words have been buzzing around the HR zeitgeist, and it concerns me because there’s a lack of clarity surrounding what “big data” really means, and I find media has created false expectations in the minds of business partners.

That said, I must acknowledge that big data as a concept is in the HR space to stay. Technologically, the time is right: the data sources are certainly voluminous, full of variety, and are coming at us with feverous velocity, but overall, we as an HR function need to retool our skills in order to extract the value that big data offers.

Helping organizations transition from reporting – data dumping, to analytics, decision grade information – is what I’ve been doing exclusively since 2009, before the words “HR” and “analytics” were regularly coupled. As my team and I looked to our most successful work products – the ones that created organizational value by bringing strategic intentions to life – we began to see a pattern, or recipe for success. This recipe required my team to learn skills that are not normally associated with analysts, or any HR people for that matter. I share it with you in this article with the hope that this recipe will both encourage you to consider all of the components necessary for extracting the most value from data, and think about the skills of the people in your organization who are responsible for promoting big data.

The Recipe for Maximum Value – An Analytics Strategy

While every project and question was unique, my team and I began to notice that our most successful work outputs contained certain common ingredients and proportions. With artisan care, these combined ingredients will ensure that your clients come back for more.

Data (25%): Data are your basic, organic ingredients. Gather, clean, and connect disparate data. Use only the freshest data you can afford, and pay attention to what outliers can teach you about data quality. Partner with Finance and Operations; you’ll often work with these teams on your pursuit of rigorous organic data.

Stakeholdering (10%): Collect key hypotheses from executives. This is a great way to sift lumps from your

research questions. Make sure to keep the conversations high level and don’t taint your ability to treat the data objectively. Create notable flavor by adding a pinch of business myth-busting. Caution: too many cooks in the kitchen can spoil productive collaboration.

Analysis (15%): Build inquisitive minds. Many HR professionals may need to acquire new skills with inferential statistics, and until then develop “insource” expertise from your customer, marketing or strategy teams. These teams are often surprisingly willing to help, and the common interest can forge new relationships. Keep in mind that the savory flavor of *regression*, *t-tests* and *p-values* can be an acquired, mature taste for most.

Storytelling (20%): Make the problem relevant. This includes reducing the research stock into one memorable slide and explaining the insights and how to turn them into action. Make it worth your leader’s time by shaking financial acumen liberally into the story. And, don’t forget that effective presentation of your tasty dish means it is garnished with recommended solutions.

Implementation (20%): Turn insights into action. This is where understanding the homemade flavor of your organization can make all the difference! Resistance or obstacles are often indicators of shortcuts in the analysis. Involving HR analysts in the implementation allows them to gain knowledge, which shapes future projects in actionable ways.

Embedment (10%): Create new cultural customs. Top off your delicacy by defining accountabilities, embedding purposeful reporting, and transferring operational ownership. Make the new behaviors part of “how things get done around here.” Celebrate short-term wins. Set a specific date to monitor outcomes. And remain flexible – drive value through change.

Finding the Artisan

As I began to utilize this recipe, I worked to define who makes the best *analytics* artisan. Don’t be tricked into believing that you need a lot of quant jocks or statisticians. At two separate large retailers, I staffed my teams with curious HR professionals who were not afraid of statistical tools and the scientific method. I’m convinced that success depends on the four competencies below:

Business intelligence is really the most important attribute, essential to building relationships with operations or line management. This includes an understanding of important factors in the business environment, the ability to present and communicate findings and insights in an easy-to-understand way, and the desire to partner with the business.

Analytical intelligence is asking the right questions of the data and taking initiative to understand the “why” behind the “what.” Here we are looking for a strong ability to manipulate data to create insight. We look for curiosity in approaches to research and unique ways of squeezing value out of data.

Systems intelligence refers to understanding general information systems; including how and where data are stored. People who have implemented, managed or built HR software can quickly learn new programs. We also look for a demonstrated ability to retrieve data that others believed to be unavailable.

Human Resources intelligence resides in people who have figured out the human capital levers that drive top-line and bottom-line growth. It includes general knowledge of HR practices and regulations, plus the ability to communicate with other HR professionals in a credible manner.

When looking for additions to my team, my interview process is built around these attributes. Asking questions like, “When did examining outliers shape the course of a project?” helps us to evaluate analytical intelligence, as well as personal curiosity. Having candidates “describe an interesting unintended consequence after you applied an intervention” helps us gauge human resource savvy, as well as business acumen. My interviews conclude with a request for a short case study, and the recommendations or solution our candidates present will point out their storytelling abilities.

It is pretty rare to find one candidate to score high in all four competencies. But, staffing your team with diversity of strengths will encourage collaboration and cross training. Some of my team’s most valuable ideas have come from providing curious and creative analysts space to tackle their “wish lists.” Nothing squashes creativity faster than an urgent deadline, so I’d encourage you to spread deliverables appropriately when creating the “insight manufacturing system.”

Key Lessons Learned

My years of dedicated focus on HR metrics, measurement, and analytics could be described as a crawl, walk, and now run progression. When we got started, there wasn’t much industry information about how to form a team, what work to do, or how to do it. Here are some important lessons learned:

Behavior – In the space between strategy and results is human behavior – organizational culture – “the ways things are done around here.” My secret to unlocking value has been to focus on the few behaviors that lead to improved outcomes, rather than on measuring the outcomes alone. This is not an easy task because the outcome data (sales, turnover, and customer service) is readily available, while the data required in building behavior metrics often does not yet exist. Galileo is my personal source of inspiration:

“Measure what is measurable, and make measurable what is not so.” You can intentionally change culture and do so quickly when the link between behavior and improved outcomes – what I refer to as inspiring profitable behavior – goes viral.

Momentum – Overcome organizational inertia by driving value through change. How many times have you been in a meeting that ended with the decision that “we need more data to make a decision?” A trick we use to help speed progress is to ask, “What would you do differently if you knew the answer to that question?” This tactic helps us to get underneath client concerns as well as politely surfacing the fact that enough information probably exists to make a decision. Attention: Listen to learn, and learn to listen. Ask open-ended, probing questions to discover business pain points, which organizational hypotheses are in operation, and which myths are worth busting.

Purpose – Use strategic intent as your importance filter. Be sure to balance the immediate with the important, and don’t let what is urgent win over what’s truly critical. This also applies to designing reports: every tool should answer a question. Don’t be shy about putting the purpose statements right at the top to focus clients on how to interpret the information.

Action – You may have worked hundreds of hours on a problem and may be very proud of your statistical models or analytic creativity, but when it comes to telling your story, remember that your client wants less information and more application. Keep your executive recaps focused on insights that influence decisions and use metrics, the language of business.

In order for big data to be more than an empty buzzword, HR professionals must be sure that they utilize a holistic recipe to extract value and consider the right qualities when looking for HR artisans. Enjoy the journey and *stay nerdy, my friends*.

About the Author



Carl Schleyer, people strategist at 3D Results, is an HR data scientist who focuses on exploring and predicting employee behavior. He has spent the last decade committed to improving the lives of employees, strengthening HR brands and increasing the profitability of organizations. He is a frequent speaker at HR analytics conferences and previously held roles as director of HR Analytics & Reporting with The Home Depot and director of HR Operations & Analytics at Sears Holdings Corp. Schleyer has a bachelor’s in Business Management and a master’s in Human Resource Management and Development from National Louis University. When not at work searching for the “why” behind the “what,” he can likely be found at the playground being chased by his twin daughters. He can be reached at Carl.Schleyer@3DResults.com.