

The AI Blackbox Paradox

Creating a common
language for value

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The AI zeitgeist is creating a black box paradox: the more consumers think they know about the technology in their hands, the less they understand what is going on under the hood.

Inside organisations, this sensationalism of AI is transforming the roles of data leaders as the impact of technology becomes more intrinsic to strategic goals. Teams will need to find a way to unify in their ways of working and outcomes - or risk investing in AI that doesn't deliver against the measures of success that are meaningful.

Up against tight margins and P&L pressures like never before, data leaders need to do more than create value; they need to make it known. Data and AI is a language of itself, which needs to get translated and understood by the business. To understand how data leaders are addressing this challenge, Kubrick and Women in Data® brought together some of today's most influential data leaders to establish a collective Point of View, which draws on common experiences and innovative ways of thinking to establish a clearer route to value.

The session was conducted by Kubrick at the Women in Data® Flagship event on March 27th, 2025 as part of the ExeConnect series. Many thanks to our Chairs and participants.

Chairs

- Sarah Barr Miller, Director of Data & Analytics at British Airways
- Julia Pattie, Senior Associate - Data & AI at Kubrick

Participants

- Kinnari Ladha, Chief Data Officer, Merlin Entertainments
- Vicky Currie, Head of Data Analysis & Visualisation at Brambles
- Ayo Taiwo, Senior Director, Data Engineering – BI & Analytics at Expedia Group
- Louise Frost, Head of Data – Group Functions at Hiscox
- Susanna Moan, Chief Data Officer at Currys
- Celeste Kettler, Data Governance Lead - FMCG
- Karen Mullins, Senior Director – Marketing Analytics

PART 1

ALIGNING PERSPECTIVES

What 'value' means to Data Teams vs Finance Teams

Collaborating with the Finance function to demonstrate value on the balance sheet

The challenge of bottom line-centric value

The meaning of 'value' from data can vary dramatically between business models and industries. Some sectors, like retail, have relatively clear routes to value in top line revenue generation where data is intrinsic to performance success, predominantly within customer engagement activities (targeted marketing, loyalty programmes, and the like).

However, there is a mounting pressure facing data teams face to prove value against the bottom line, which can be the dominating meaning of 'value' from data when the definition is set by Finance. When the singular goal of data-driven optimisation is cost reduction on the balance sheet, which most is often a reduction in FTE headcount, data leaders can feel constricted in their initiatives and outputs. The challenge to prove value to Finance is heightened by a singular view of measuring value: it becomes distilled to a calculable, dollar-value Return on Investment (ROI) number, rather than accounting for any other metrics that improve business outcomes. This finite definition then makes creates a challenge for data teams to demonstrate their specific role in creating ROI in top-line value activities, given the risk of 'double counting' attribution of cost savings in the P&L between the data team and the team whose function was optimised as a result of the data/AI product.

When the expectation of data and AI initiatives it limited to solely creating bottom line savings, it becomes a root cause of a myriad of alignment challenges between data teams and the business at large. Therein lies the opportunity to make a difference to the definition, perception, and reception of valuable data and AI products; to work together in partnership with Finance and other aligned functions to widen the scope and create a unified understanding of what value data brings to the business. Data leaders must take a strategic - and creative - approach to generating value from data and AI, as well as how to communicate it.

Connecting to KPIs

So, if the Finance team determines the definition of – and future investment in – value from data, they are the first port of call for strategic alignment. While Finance teams are numbers-driven in their view of value, they do not measure the success of a data platform or product on its efficiency or scale; they want to see the cost savings it enables. Data leaders have found success in forming an internal business partnership with the Finance team to (1) understand their KPIs and (2) understand the language in which they communicate about their targets. This alignment then allows data leaders to (3) be able to relate the work of the data team to influencing outcomes in the terminology that resonates.

Building this partnership will prove essential in overcoming the looming alignment challenge with advent of AI; some leaders are already anticipating KPIs of 20% efficiency creation enabled through AI products, which will prove difficult to validate on the bottom line when considering the cost of scaling AI in the modern cloud environment. Gone are the days of simple, fixed-cost on-prem environments. These changing targets will require stronger communication and alignment strategies between Data and Finance than ever.

PART 2

MOVING BEYOND FINANCE

Integrating Technology into the Business Strategy

Aligning with Commercial Objectives to drive influential business buy-in

Identifying need-driven wins

Data leaders are moving to position themselves as contributors to top line value in order to drive greater business buy-in and lessen the strain on bottom line objectives from Finance. To do so requires a strong shift in mindset and approach to the commerciality of their teams and products.

When data and AI products are designed from a technology-first approach, it is easy to lose attributable value from the outset. In such instances, data teams may find themselves implementing solutions which streamline and automate BAU processes which lack defined expectations for efficiency or outcomes, such as governance procedures or document retrieval, simply because the technology is applicable there. These tasks have great potential to minimise risk of human error and reduce laborious manual tasks to improve bandwidth for higher value activities, however they are difficult to assign dollar value on the balance sheet other than minimised labour hours.

Instead, many data leaders are finding success when they seek more entrepreneurial opportunities, which are need-driven by design. Creating tools that drive sales uplift, and therefore directly contributing to the top line, are indisputably influential. One leader noted that the roll out of a sales recommendation engine to a select trial group of sales team members saw a 40% increase in their pipeline, driving overwhelming buy-in from the team to invest in the ongoing product development and scale across the sales function.

The secure path to demonstrating value from data and AI is optimising commercial activities that have pre-existing metrics, so as to showcase the commercial uplift unlocked by degrees of comparison. The outcome is especially powerful when identifying novel ways to improve commercial outcomes beyond traditional BI tooling, putting the value directly into the hands of data and AI rather than the end user.

In digital advertising, for example, one data leader recognised the need to scale video content as it performs more effectively in customer engagement than static images. To eliminate the heavy uplift and cost for creating new video content, they used GenAI to convert existing images into video, such as generating rolling ocean waves on the backdrop of a beach, and saw an immediate increase in engagement rates that outperformed the marketing team's metrics.

Leveraging hype to secure investment

Amidst AI Hype, most C-Suite Executives are seeking to leverage AI for the top line revenue enhancement and bottom line savings they need to stay competitive. However, most data leaders remain concerned that they don't have the data foundations in place to enable trustworthy, accurate AI at scale. Some are still faced with consolidating dozens of siloed data warehouses with limited governance tooling, inhibiting the speed, volume, and quality of the data with which they can feed and train AI products.

The risk of putting the brakes on AI entirely is losing buy-in from influential stakeholders – including the C-Suite. Instead, leaders are finding success in playing to AI hype to ultimately secure investment in the foundational capabilities they lack. By finding quick wins in small, contained use cases that prove value against key metrics, data teams can showcase the art of possible – and then leverage the appetite for scale to show what is missing before that can be achieved. A singular Minimal Viable Product on a contained dataset can show the promise of mass efficiency gains on scale, but only if the siloed, outdated platforms are enhanced to enable the real-time flow of data, rather than systems that can still take upwards of 24 hours to run.

The difficulty with playing to AI hype, however, is keeping it contained. The most effective way of demonstrating value from data and AI tools is against a control group who don't achieve the same outcomes without them. Many data leaders have found success in rolling out within a select group to drive demand for scale (as explored earlier), but others have found it difficult to ringfence certain initiatives when the demand for AI is overwhelming, particularly with well-known products like Microsoft Co-Pilot. If the demand for a universal rollout is being driven from the Executive level, the challenge of productionising without a test group has risks for both implementation and adoption: teams will be tested to manage technical implementation at a largescale with many unknowns, but it is also more difficult to prove the impact of productivity gains without a clear comparison between those with the tool and those without.

PART 3

DATA CULTURE FOR CHANGE

Changing perceptions and improving outcomes organically

Engaging the business to create a common language for value

Aligning through communication

The value of a data or AI product is only realised through strong adoption. Data literacy continues to be a top priority for data teams to improve and unify engagement with data across the organisation, but the types of activities have evolved significantly from traditional education methods, like courses and quizzes. Creativity in your data literacy initiatives pay dividends through the art of storytelling. Finding the right people to engage business users on the promise of what data and AI can deliver through engaging storytelling is often a missing role, but it has the power to transform data literacy into a thriving data culture across the business. Repositioning communication around storytelling, with dedicated personas in the business who drive outreach in this mode, helps lift the lid of the ‘black box’ of AI so users not only gain a stronger understanding of how it works, but more importantly ascertain why they should engage with it; storytelling ties the technology to the business outcomes that help users see what is in it for them and drives adoption.

Training is still a valuable tool when deployed correctly, especially for the C-Suite who set a top-down strategy for AI transformation. However, data leaders need to think critically about how they lean on partners to support. The top technology vendors have the insight, experience, and investment in innovation to educate with credibility, especially within their own tooling suite. However, they may be inclined to provide ‘white glove’ demos, where everything goes exactly right, rather than showing the extent of both the opportunities and the challenges of AI. Opening the black box for the Executive Level requires training that drives buy-in from the C-Suite on the art of the possible, but also allows data leaders to share their concerns, manage expectations, and find a viable path to value.

Creating a shared data culture requires a common language that can only be built through empathy. Many data leaders have seen tangible improvements through ‘day in the life’ schemes, whereby their team members shadow – or even take on the role – of their business counterparts. This strategy not only opens communication channels and an understanding of their role requirements but also gives data teams insight into how their data is both being collected and used on the ground. What is less common – but equally as effective – is reversing the initiative. When data leaders have invited end users to observe the working practices of their teams, they have cultivated an empathy for the challenges of data wrangling which inhibit data teams from meeting requirements at the speed at which business users often seek.

Making data known – and celebrated

Building a strong data culture relies on lasting engagement. By positioning business users as the ‘customers’ of data, data leaders have driven ‘customer’ loyalty by creating a brand that is known and celebrated. Creating internal brand initiatives like throwing events (happy hours, meet-ups) and creating branded merchandise (‘We Love Data’ mugs and branded slide decks) not only builds a sense of pride within the data team, but boosts awareness across the business of their work and impact.

The ultimate proof of a strong data culture is when engagement is driven by the wider business, rather than from within the data team. Data and analytics employee community groups are often seen as a platform for data teams to showcase their work and impact, but one data leader doubled the engagement when she turned the model on its head. Her community group champions contributions from business users on how they use analytics in their field, which has drawn an audience of over 1000 employees over the course of the last year to learn and share.

PART 4

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The value of data and AI goes beyond protecting the bottom line. Creating cost optimisation may be the most direct route to value in the view of some Executives, but today's data and AI leaders are creating novel, efficient, and need-driven solutions that supercharge revenue opportunities. And they are doing so with a passion and creativity that builds a genuine data culture.

While this discussion shared some tangible, lived examples of effective routes to value, it also challenges data leaders to be bolder in their approach. Through understanding business users and their needs better, data leaders can be empowered to approach the business with engaging storytelling and a strong internal brand story that positions data and AI at the centre of business transformation – where it belongs.

Many thanks to our partners at Women in Data® for hosting the session.

ABOUT KUBRICK

Kubrick exists to transform lives through data & AI. We help global organisations realise lasting value from data and AI with a workforce we build ourselves.

We deliver data and AI solutions that minimise operational cost, strengthen resilience against risk, and uncover revenue opportunity. Our clients can retain our people to drive lasting adoption while futureproofing their workforce with exceptional talent.

Since 2016, we've created over 3,000 data & AI specialists by removing the systemic barriers to the tech industry. We find incredible minds from all backgrounds to train with us, creating a diverse team of experts with 2x industry average representation of females in technology roles. We've been a proud partner of Women in Data® since 2020.

Learn more about our data and AI solutions and talent: speaktous@kubrickgroup.com



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 speaktous@kubrickgroup.com

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