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HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY **LEAD** A **BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE** PROJECT

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The primary reason why a business embarks on a business intelligence (BI) project is to gain knowledge that is used to make better, faster, and fact-based decisions to increase profits.

The ability of a business to transform itself by using business analytics through information technology requires recognition by senior management that they, not the IT department, own the vision, strategy, and implementation for the BI project.

Successful projects deliver the technology to enhance knowledge processes through increased speed and lower cost of acquiring, storing, and distributing information. With the promise of employees throughout the firm making use of the information to make profit-maximising decisions, why should senior management be worried? There are a number of major project risks associated with these types of projects that need to be understood and managed. BI projects are complex and risky due to the number of source systems involved, scale of the business and IT problems being addressed, business processes affected, finding and allocating the right business and IT people, and culture of decision-making. All these risk factors when not managed properly result in high failure rates, cost overruns, and delays in business user adoption, however, the biggest risk factor is the lack of ownership and leadership from senior management.

Given the benefits and potential pitfalls, it is imperative that senior management ask AND answer the following 5 questions about their BI project before they start and periodically to ensure they can effectively lead the project.

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1 *Who is responsible for the success of the project?*

This is the most critical question that needs to be answered. The ability of a business to transform itself by using business analytics through information technology requires recognition by senior management that they, not the IT department, own the vision, strategy, and implementation for the BI project. Senior management is responsible for creating the business processes, restructuring, and retraining the entire organisation to enable it to take full advantage of the new capabilities delivered by the BI project.

They are responsible for ensuring that the IT department has the ability to recommend technology that will most likely prove successful and profitable in practice, manage BI projects, design and implement the technical architecture, and security. In other words, senior management must ensure the IT department has people whose knowledge and incentives are aligned with the business goals.

2 *Why are we undertaking this project?*

Senior management must clearly and specifically articulate the purpose of the project and the business reasons for undertaking a project of this scale. In other words, business leaders must clearly define the key decisions required to increase revenues and/or decrease costs. These key decisions that need to be made will serve as the guiding light for all implementation decisions made by the project team.

3 *What information do we need to know to make key decisions?*

Once senior management have articulated the key decisions that need to be made, it is essential to determine what information is needed to be able to make those decisions. This will drive your search for data sources, internal and external, and required analytical techniques to transform raw data into knowledge. Just gathering and sharing information that does not result in decisions is unprofitable as procuring information bears a cost in time and expense to both the provider and receiver.

4 *Who needs to makes those decisions?*

Senior management must determine who in the organisation is best positioned to make the key decisions based on the information provided by the BI project. They need to discuss and determine where top-down vs. bottom-up decision making will be employed. In addition, they must ensure that the right people are in the right roles with the right decision authority.

Knowledge of who the decision makers are will drive your choices on where solutions will need to be deployed (e.g., mobile, office, production line), when information is needed (e.g., real-time, end-of-day or monthly) and appropriate tools (e.g., visualisations, dashboards, or reports) to make the necessary decisions.

5 *Who do we need from both the business and IT departments to achieve success?*

Given the complexity, criticality, and profit impact to the business, senior management must ensure that the right people are allocated to the BI project team to ensure the highest probability of success. Senior management has to answer why they wouldn't want their best people on this project. These employees will need to be freed up from their day-to-day demands, as they tend to be the critical persons in their departments, in order to dedicate the required amount of time to ensure that the business is achieving its goals.

Achieving a successful BI project

In summary, if senior management ask AND answer these 5 critical questions and, at the same time, unite and align the IT and business teams, then senior management and the rest of the firm will understand their BI project goals and benefits, able to identify and manage the associated risks, determine the key decisions, decision-makers, data and analytical requirements, and the team needed, to deliver a successful BI project and a more profitable business.