

How Today's Leaders Can Empower Young Data Professionals



Peter Allan, Head: of Business Information at Dubai Airports, is a data, analytics and transformation leader with over two decades of experience in this domain. He has experience implementing data programs across rail, airlines, airports, tourism and telecommunications industries, acquiring international experience in Australia and the Middle East. Peter's passion for data began through building applications in revenue optimisation, pricing and operations. This experience opened his eyes to how much was possible through unlocking the full potential of all of the data we have at our fingertips, and he has been delivering solutions across all business domains ever since.

Peter believes in democratising data and empowering everyone to achieve more through data literacy, accessibility and education. He focuses his efforts on developing collaborative environments where traditional boundaries are replaced with deeper engagement between technical and business teams. He considers himself an analytics evangelist, problem solver and finds himself most energised when the challenges seem hardest.



Empowering Today's Young Data Professionals

I was fortunate to begin my career in the 1990s. I worked for a long-distance rail operator in Sydney. It was a very different time for a lot of reasons. The internet was in its infancy and very slow. It didn't matter as there were no websites to look at anyway. We had a corporate email system, but we only used emails to send jokes to each other (dancing baby, anybody?). Mobile phones were only useful for phone calls.

You tended to leave work at work. We had one departmental laptop that was used as the "on-call" laptop. Everyone in the team could take it home one weekend a month and connect it to the dial-up internet connection. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. Some websites would take half an hour to load. Funnily enough, this was the same amount of time the battery would last.

It's fair to say that the pervasive connection to the internet and each other didn't really exist at this time.

Data and analytics wasn't really a thing at the company where I worked either. Any reports we used were a result of anything that was available directly from the systems that we used every day - the ERP or the reservation system. You tended to do everything inside the ecosystem of that platform's reporting system. All reports were pre-canned.

I never set out to work in analytics. Like many people at that time, my analytics journey was a combination of being in the right place, at the right time, with the right attitude. I was part of the team that built the first analytical data warehouse at this company. We set out to build an inventory management platform that could optimise pricing. We figured a database and some reporting capability would be more cost-effective, and faster than an off-the-shelf application.

By today's standards, what we built was simple. Four tables from the reservation system, refreshed every night. It was populated with bookings, cancellations, passenger details, distribution and inventory settings. I memorised the schema by heart. If I wasn't at work, I'd write my queries in an exercise book. Then I'd get to work, type in the code, and spend the rest of the day debugging the query (with my little Oracle handbook that had every error code and description of what the error meant). I loved that job. I loved transforming data, and creating something from nothing. I loved the thrill of debugging code. I loved solving problems.

The only reliable self-service tool back then was Excel. I was one of the people who used more than 5% of its features. I was able to create context and meaning in data at will. People liked what I produced. I loved producing work that people found useful.

The other thing that made this job so cool was that I was the end-to-end production line. I was the business analyst, engineer, architect, tester, UI/UX team and the analytics function. I got to work with anyone who wanted information. There was no Teams, WhatsApp or other instant messenger back then. I hated the desk phone. My preferred method of communication was to get up and walk to someone's desk and have a conversation. I'd meet in person to get requirements. I'd meet in person to show progress and get feedback. I'd meet in person to present a hard copy of the analysis I'd produced, and to walk them through the findings. I did this to get to know people and spend time talking about their role, why they needed data, and how they used it.

In my early twenties, I was working with the president of the company as regularly as I was working with the pricing team. I was learning so much every single day.

I learned about the business and how people thought. Every time I got something wrong, I got to work through the solution with my stakeholders. Many times, I'd deliver what they asked, and see them have a light bulb moment before my eyes, and the next great idea would come. I got better at predicting the next thing. I got better at working with data to design products before anyone would even ask for them. I went from producing last month's reports to optimising the rail network in a few years.

I saw my role as much as helping people to access information, as it was about educating them on the possibilities of data in general. This was the start of a lifelong obsession with bringing people to data. If I could do this, so could everyone else.

Fast forward to today. Our data professionals have very different introductions to the industry to that which myself and others of my vintage experienced.

Data teams are bigger. In some cases, much bigger. Roles tend to be more clearly defined as well. You're a data engineer. Or an information architect. Or a tester. Or a business user. There are structures, processes, standards and rules that determine who you can talk to, what you can discuss, and what you are authorised to do.

Self-service tools have equipped end users with all the tools they need to do everything at the coal face. Users are very prescriptive about what they want.

We collect requirements digitally. We look at projects in the context of an agile board. You are already planning what's next while you're struggling with the three things currently on your plate.

We meet on Teams to discuss and prioritise things. No one turns on their camera anymore either. We don't ask as many questions, partly because we can't see each other, but also because there tend to be so many people in these meetings that we can't get a word in.

There are hierarchies. These ensure that people stay in their realm of influence. Analysts talk to analysts. Executives talk to executives. There are structures as well. If you're a business user, stay in your box. If you're in IT, just deliver a platform and let the business work with the data.

Analytics has evolved. A lot of it for the better. But is everything better? What is the experience like for people entering the field of data today?

GITEX was BIG this year. My LinkedIn feed and water cooler conversations were all about Generative AI and Large Language Models. They did a great job selling the vision that all this good stuff is ready to go. Plug and play and reap the rewards of AI immediately.

Like most data teams, we will be going back to working on the important tasks of creating a centralised data platform and convincing users to adopt it. We will be laying the foundations for all the good things we learned at GITEX, but we will also be competing with the expectations of a hungry business, who wants access to new data products, and also wants to know when they get

“the AI”. And don’t forget that data warehouse you have already been working on for over a year now.

There are so many competing priorities for data teams today. So much urgency, so much pressure. And so little time.

For many of today’s data leaders (I’m talking to Gen X’ers and Millennials here!), we learned our trade in simpler times. We had less complexity, less expectation and probably better access to people and their time. And that gave us a great opportunity to learn our trade. For me, it gave me a great chance to master the art of communication. We use this skill every day to sell ideas, to solve problems, to convince people and to challenge views. It’s such a critical skill in the realm of analytics.

Working with so many younger professionals in our domain, I wonder how well we are doing in giving them opportunities to practice their skills in communication. To take risks, propose ideas and engage with stakeholders. What can we do to develop the soft skills of young analytics talent to ensure we get the best out of their technical skills? Here are some relatively simple things I have applied based on what helped me to develop.

1. Equal access to training and opportunities for technical teams as their business counterparts

I’ve always been an advocate for educating everyone on every aspect of data and analytics. Getting everyone in the business to work with data is the best way to scale a data team! We’ve made analytics accessible to everyone:

- Platforms such as Data Camp have helped anyone with a passion to become a data person.
- Our internal training functions blend different learning techniques and platforms to create bespoke educational programs.
- Tools are easier to use; drag and drop workflow orchestration, no-code data science (become a data scientist in twelve weeks without writing a single line of code!)

But what about technology teams? Engineers come to us with degrees in computer science or engineering, and proficiency in different programming languages and tools. From then on, we give them very little help to grow their careers and expertise. What are we doing to help technical workers to develop skills to be better business people?

There are so many options to support technical teams develop more confidence and knowledge in business domains.

- Co-location of our technical teams with business teams.
- Offering short-term job rotations.
- Short courses teaching soft skills such as active listening, presentations, time management or public speaking.
- Invite them to sales meetings.

These are all relatively easy, and cost-effective ways to build up peripheral skills that broaden the knowledge of technical teams. Skills that are too often overlooked but are so important.

2. Overcoming the limitations of digital communication

Up to 93% of communication is non-verbal. Up to 55% is body language. When it comes to defining complicated data products and concepts, non-verbal communication is even more important. I prioritise in person catch ups with tech teams and product owners because I see the positive impact of this on the outcomes, as well as the people involved.

Much of what I learned as a young practitioner was through making mistakes. The big difference back then was that the feedback loop was instantaneous and in-person. It was clear when I didn't understand something. It was clear when a stakeholder wasn't completely satisfied. Being able to resolve issues quickly and close the loop was great for my education and confidence.

I'm trying several things in this space:

- In person, physical meetings whenever possible with tech teams and product owners.
- Whiteboards rather than screen mirroring and slides.
- When someone is explaining something complex, they go to the board and draw – it helps them learn to articulate, and others to understand them.
- If we must meet on Teams, cameras on (this one is a bit harder and takes more effort!)

This consumes a lot more energy every day as a leader. But it yields better results very quickly. And you eventually find yourself required in less meetings because teams learn to communicate more effectively with each other.

3. Alleviating the impact of organisational hierarchy in teams

It never ceases to amaze me how many people come to technical meetings and don't speak. Nothing kills productivity in agile environments as much as hierarchy.

Giving our teams the autonomy to work without constant supervision is important for their development. It's also critical in achieving the pace and scale we need to deliver across many competing priorities. As leaders, we are meant to foster collaborative environments for teams to work. When the smartest people in the room must defer to the biggest job titles, progress is slowed.

Engineers and architects can and should become the stars of the show. They understand the data better than anyone. They know where to find data we don't currently have. They know which processes feed into which systems, and they can get at it quickly. But they need leaders to have the patience and confidence to create opportunities to help them shine.

Letting go of control and trusting our teams can be daunting, but as their confidence grows, so will their contribution. I am learning to stop providing solutions and opinions. I'm asking my team what they would recommend when there is a problem. I'm asking them to deliver bad news, as well as to take ownership of success. Sometimes I learn something new by listening to their ideas rather than my own.

4. Providing a safe and innovative culture in which technical teams can flourish

Popular corporate culture is filled with fabled mantras that have fueled the rise of some of the great companies of our times. “Think different” was Steve Jobs approach. Mark Zuckerberg wanted his guys to “move fast and break things”. These mantras create a mindset for people operating within those organisations, but also tell customers a lot about the culture of the organisation.

A previous boss of mine used to share his favourite mantra regularly. “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”. What culture do you provide for your teams?

Rather than prescribe a solution, I reflect on the cultural aspects of my first jobs. These were the things that helped me develop the skills to go from a nineteen-year-old with no knowledge of data or business, to a functioning data professional within a few short years. I reflect on some of the small cultural aspects that helped shape me:

- Senior leadership taking the time to say hello when they walked past my desk. They knew my name, asked me how my weekend was and went about their business. Simple, daily two-minute interactions meant that I became confident to talk outside of my “pay grade”. I saw these leaders as people rather than job titles.
- Participating in problem-solving sessions at the invitation of business stakeholders, rather than just receiving a use case made me more invested in finding the best solution. It also helped me understand how different teams thought about the business.
- Regular, short conversations where my boss would ask me questions about what I was working on helped me articulate my thinking more effectively. He would regularly ask me questions like “Why do you think that?”. There is nothing like rehearsing conversations with stakeholders to fine-tune communication.
- Being given credit for my work and getting to present it myself. I learned what it meant to be accountable for what I committed to and delivered. I got to own both my mistakes, and successes.

As we all navigate the fast-paced and quickly evolving world of data, my hope is that today’s leaders take some time to reflect on their own journeys to success, and how they may empower and inspire the next generation of data leaders. By embracing strategies outlined here — equalizing training opportunities, enhancing communication, overcoming hierarchy, and creating a supportive culture — we can play our part in making someone else’s journey through the world of data as amazing, if not more so, than our own.



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