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There is a dirty little secret that is not talked about much in our industry. The secret is that most initial enterprise data warehouse projects fail. Depending on who you talk to (and who you can get to talk), the percentage is somewhere between 40% and 70%. That's a lot of high altitude failure in a market that is estimated to be between \$8 and \$12 billion in size, again, depending on who you talk to (although getting them to talk about market size is never a problem).

Why doesn't anyone want to talk about failure? It's not a very attractive subject, and it tends to steer the conversation away from the outstanding features of the latest product from Bits 'R Us Technologies that is going to solve all of your problems, and those of your entire data warehouse team. This remains a vendor driven space, and the vendors want to concentrate on selling products to all those new customers who are trying data warehousing for the first time, not on talking about why so many of their past customers have failed.

Richard Rist, Vice President of the Data Warehouse Institute was a lonely voice indeed when he defined a key characteristic of the new leaders of the data warehousing space as one who talked about failure. This would certainly be a refreshing change from the hype fueled vendors and the "never been within 40 light years of a real implementation" analysts and other ivory tower gurus and pundits spewing idealized theory who currently dominate the space.

When these new leaders do emerge, and begin to discuss failure and its causes the vendors who have so long feared full disclosure will discover their fears were largely unwarranted. Although it is true that many hundreds of linear feet of IT shelves are being held down by abandoned data warehouse software, the overwhelming cause of failure of data warehouse projects is not technology, but human issues.

Of the many scores of sites I have exposure to, I know of no site that failed solely due to technology. I know of many dozens of sites that have failed exclusively due to human issues. This, of course, is a major problem for our industry. It is not possible to sell a piece of software or hardware that will cure the raft of human issues that torpedo so many projects. This is ultimately very frustrating for all of the technologists who believe to their very core that a properly placed 1 or 0 can cure all the ills of our modern world.

Unfortunately, no technological silver bullet exists to cure the cultural, political, ownership, boundary, and human process issues that permeate most organizations. Given the fact that enterprise data warehouses, by their very nature, are inherently cross functional, cross empire, cross political, and cross every other possible process and ownership boundary, it is easy to see that our projects serve as lightning rods for human conflict and strife. Couple this with the fact that IT professionals are not exactly renowned for their political savvy and you've got a high risk, low probability for success scenario that is borne out by the high rate of failure for initial enterprise data warehouse projects.

What can be done? The first thing that we can all do is answer Richard's call and get people on the podiums that can relate real stories about what went wrong, what was done to fix it, and how others can avoid the same mistakes in the future. Although my "7 Deadly Sins of Data

Warehousing” presentation is a perennial favorite among data warehouse seminar and conference attendees, it would be nice to not be the lone voice in the woods pointing out the land mines that await the unwary.

Secondly, we can pinpoint the specific human issues that cause us the most trouble and generate specific methodologies to overcome them. As technologists, we love bits and bytes and things that do what they’re told to do when they are told to do them. We are ultimately frustrated by these unruly humans who refuse to be logical and act and react in a predictable manner. We become averse to human issues due to our lack of ability to understand and conquer them. Consequently, the methodologies that we adopt for data warehouse projects are filled with specific points on the project plan for every conceivable bit and byte issue, but are bereft of any processes to deal with the political and cultural issues that kill most projects.

Lastly, we can build teams that are led by a business person, not a technologist. Technology led teams tend to deliver solutions looking for problems and other technology driven failures. Business people look to deliver value to the business, and are more likely to have the political skills to navigate the shoals and rapids of a long running, usually late data warehouse project. A smart business person can learn the critical technology issues related to data warehouse success in a reasonable time frame, it takes a lifetime of day to day reality experience to learn the nuances of power politics in the dog eat dog corporate world.

If you’re just starting down the path of data warehousing, be comforted by the fact that the secret is out, and you now know that your project won’t fail because of 1’s and 0’s. However, also be aware of the fact that you are at high risk to fail unless you proactively address the critical human issues that are the major failure drivers in our industry.

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