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[callout: I foresee their future clearly, and it prominently features a glue factory ]

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As I watched the thoroughbreds rounding the 4th turn the words of Phil Georgeff, the voice of Chicago horse racing for 34 years, rang in my ears. "Here they come spinning out of the turn…" he would deliver in his trademark style. Although we were standing and screaming for our picks in Del Mar, California, his voice clearly carried across the years and the thousands of miles. As a particularly stunning mare crossed the finish line I reflected on both my feeble attempts at walking in cold and handicapping the races, and at the changing fortunes of the horses as they circled the track. Though one might be an early leader, by the fourth turn they could easily be 20 lengths behind, an also ran, and heading for the next claiming race to be purged from the stable.

I have thought of this often in the weeks since our visit to the historic and elegant track within earshot of the Pacific Ocean. As I sit in meetings with executive management teams and listen to their reasons for not investing in business intelligence (BI) I foresee their future clearly, and it prominently features a glue factory. These managers are blinded by their early successes, and comforted that as they are rounding the fist turn, they are in the leading group of contenders. Little do they realize that as they make conscious choices to disregard the power of business intelligence, their competition is pulling away.

As the business intelligence landscape has evolved, we have seen three basic types of companies emerge. The first are the winners. They have embraced business intelligence, have adopted it early in its life cycle and are now reaping ever increasing, ongoing rewards. These are the organizations that can fully implement and leverage e-commerce because they have the prerequisite BI infrastructure (data warehouse and data mart systems, information distribution, data mining, etc.) in place. These are also the organizations that are information empowered across their cultures, with very short decision cycle times; informed, information enabled stakeholders; and sophisticated users who have long past moved beyond simple "product by customer by geography by time" analysis into highly complex business questions that reflect day to day business life.

The second are the "place and show" runners. Many of these entrants have stumbled out of the gate with their first attempts at data warehousing, often tripping in the potholes of "build it and they will come", "the dream of homogeneity" or "we're IT, we know what they need." They have recovered and are on their second or third attempts at building business driven solutions to specific business problems, sprinting hard to catch up to the leaders. Others in this class delayed their entry into the field, taking the stance that the risk of early entry into serious business intelligence outweighed the possible benefits, and besides, they could always make up ground due to their superior intelligence/people/processes/marketing/etc. Unfortunately, this group is finding that unlike bracket drag racing, where the slower car starts first, then the faster car leaves the line, thus providing a close finish; this is indeed a horse race, where waiting at the starting gate gains you nothing.

The last are the losers, headed directly to the end of the line. They are either straggling out of the starting gate long after the field has disappeared around the first turn, or are still in the paddock admiring their ribbons of past races or locked into endless debate about which silks to wear to the winner's circle.

The saddest aspect of the last two groups is that they don't realize just how far behind they are, and what the opportunity cost of their ineptitude and indecision has been. Even if they decided tomorrow to embark down the architected business intelligence path it would take them at least four to nine months to build a truly architected solution (despite what the two-week-wonder vendors will tell them). Most organizations assume that at the end of the four to nine month build period, their businesses will be magically transformed and all will be sweetness and light. Unfortunately, they will be faced with three to nine months of cultural uptake of the new technology, evolutionary culture change to embrace the new capabilities, and slow, gradual change management processes to realize the entirely new range of outcomes enabled by the BI system.

The sobering fact is, the last two groups are two-plus years behind their competition. While the technologists in these organizations are focused only on the build phases of the project, and the business is focused solely on the promises of rich new capabilities they expect to reap on day one of utilization, no one is noticing that it is a 1.5 mile race, not the ¾ mile sprint they are expecting.

Just as we saw lack of Y2K compliance drive consolidation in banking and financial services, we shall soon see the stragglers in the business intelligence race swept from the stables. High time for you to ensure that your organization is quick out of the gate, and a strong runner to the end.

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