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## Why Do Data Warehouse Projects Fail?

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Sanjeev Gupta

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A large number of data warehouse projects don't live up to their potential. Data warehouse technology has been around for a long time. It is mature and founded on strong principles. The approaches are well-structured, cover a wide variety of situations and have worked well for a fairly large number of projects. Additionally, project management processes, tools and technologies are mature and well established. So the question arises, why do DW projects fail?

The answer lies in the founding perceptions of a DW project. Do we treat these projects as development projects, or should they be treated as a work of art? However, if treated as a creation, it brings forth the zeal and the passion required for it to take shape. Let me list some prerequisites that need to be kept in mind for the successful execution of highly complex DW projects.

### Tips for Success

- DW initiatives take a lot of effort, have high costs and are tough on patience. They require sustained commitment from a large number of stakeholders within the organization for a long time. And for that, these DW initiatives must serve a bigger cause. Determining the right business goal – a goal that people will like to be identified with – is a must.
- From meaningful business goals should flow meaningful requirements. Requirements define the scope, provide the focus and aligns DW initiatives into a project.
- DW attempts to integrate diverse perceptions about business, and therein carries the seeds of failure. These projects need to be structured for shared understanding. Design them as expeditions – an expedition makes every member of the team a leader, thereby motivating every team member to step beyond normal communication and proactively look for solutions. Honor the grain by recognizing the sanctity and primacy of transactions. Transactions are business; they don't exist to produce data. Understand/capture their nuances and their context. While trying to unify globally, don't step on peculiarities locally; accommodate them. It's possible and desirable.
- Joining dispersed silos is not integration. Data becomes visible and is accessible across silos, but still does not make sense. How do we achieve a shared meaning? Is shared meaning/definition about business viable? Is it worth the effort and the cost? There are also issues about data cleanliness, correctness, completeness and changes in definitions/meaning over time.
- The important point to remember while designing the data warehouse is that all the wishes and desires must not cloud the specific need for which the data warehouse is being designed. Hence, it is important that we retain focus throughout the design phase and keep the scope manageable at all times. This is the mantra to make dreams work and that includes DW dreams. Small, manageable steps with low risks will keep things simple, safe, reachable, visible and provide built-in motivation mechanisms.
- There are two constants in any DW projects, complexity and data volume. How do we handle them in a consistent, repeatable manner? The solution is to build a strong conceptual framework.
- Ever checked the pack of a mountaineer? You will find the route chart for the summit, provisions to reach the next camp and tools. The lesson here is to remain supple, phase it correctly, maintain a global perspective, cater for immediate need, use the right tools, and use them properly. Any other approach can be fatal. Creating a DW is no simpler; follow the analogy and scale the summit.
- Simplicity is the key to and out-come of success. The design and development of a DW requires that complexity from the organization is consolidated and neutralized. Therein lies the beauty of a DW initiative – it serves two strategic functions. One, it integrates the enterprise, and two, it reduces the inherent complexity prevalent within the organization by sensitizing stakeholders about it. Such sensitivity also acts as deterrence against introduction of additional complexity, a collateral benefit.

The science, process and tool are the hygiene factors. They are well established, necessary and presumed. This article looks beyond them and stirs the soul of DW initiatives. Here's to a successful implementation.

Sanjeev Gupta is practice manager – Business Intelligence at SYSTIME. In his current role, he is responsible for driving various business initiatives and formulating strategy for the growth of Business Intelligence practice. Sanjeev has 24 years of rich and varied experience in the IT industry and project management. Prior to joining SYSTIME, he served in the Indian Army. He can be reached at [sgupta@systime.net](mailto:sgupta@systime.net).

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