

1to1 Magazine

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People: Elizabeth Glagowski

## Are You a Data Rock Star?

### Today's standout data professionals need special qualities and skills to take on the growing data landscape.

Data management is becoming increasingly important as companies collect more customer data than ever and integrate it with other data across the organization. They want to act on customer insight and business intelligence to build relationships, improve operations, and drive growth. This requires a special person to own or manage it, with skills that go above and beyond the typical data manager. What does this "data rock star" look like?

"A data rock star is someone who can communicate the linkage between a company's information and its business value," says Jill Dyche, a partner with Baseline Consulting and coauthor of *Customer Data Integration: Reaching a Single Version of the Truth*. "It's someone who has multiple answers to the following question: 'Why should the business invest in managing data?'"

Elissa Fink, vice president of marketing at Tableau Software, agrees, playing up the rock and roll connection. "Great rock stars are typically great musicians, but they're also great at engaging audiences," she says. "What we've noticed is that a data rock star is similar: someone who is not only effective at analyzing data and teasing the stories out of data, but knows how to get other people interested and excited, as well."

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of computer network, systems, and database administrators is projected to grow 30 percent by 2018 to 1,247,800 -- much faster than the national average for all occupations. Of those data professionals, the stand out "rock stars" will be the ones who have the expertise necessary to align the technical aspects with a company's business challenges.

"A data rock star is an individual who has a skill set that bridges the ability to mine and analyze the data with the ability to interpret and assist in providing input into business decisions," says Guy Cierzan, vice president of Denali Marketing, a loyalty marketing agency. "They have a strong ability to have a high-level view [of the business challenges]. They can start up there and work backwards to attack the data. In analysis, they are helpful in establishing the types of strategies to allow a company to compete and offer a differentiated approach."

In addition, data rock stars can add some muscle behind business decisions. "People who are fact-oriented will help their companies move faster," says Fink. "When all you've got is

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opinions, it takes a long time to make a decision. But add some facts to the conversation and see how much faster decisions get made. The focus changes."

For Great River Energy, an energy wholesaler serving 28 member cooperatives in Minnesota and Wisconsin, the consultative and fact-based approach to data management is essential to any data initiative. "It is a required component in all campaigns," says Holly Blake, manager of the member services department. "Every statement of work must have forecasting, weekly reports, annual reports, and insight and recommendations as part of the program." She works with Denali Marketing on the company's data efforts, and has seen results based on the partnership between data experts and the business side.

Blake has the difficult task of promoting energy efficiency and conservation, which basically encourages customers to buy less from the company. She scours results from marketing efforts to make sure they have an impact. For example, Great River created a campaign around holiday time to promote the switch from incandescent holiday lights to LED holiday lights. "Last year we used a coupon good where any GE LED holiday lights were sold," she says. "The promo performed pretty well, but we knew we could do better. Based on some new retailer data and consultative insight [from the campaign data collected] we are expanding our strategy to include an instant markdown with a large retailer -- expanding the brand choices for our members -- and a coupon so that other retail stores in our service territories have an opportunity to participate. Forecasting is showing that we will more than double last year's performance," she says. It was the insight that the team extracted out of the data that drove the changes, she says. "They create the story from the data."

### **A day in the life of a data rock star**

Michelle Hutson, director of application services for staffing firm Allegis Group, knows firsthand about the benefit of employing data rock stars. "The biggest key for us is to have someone who understands the business side more than the IT side," she says. "Organizational knowledge has been the lynchpin." She says that her department, which provides internal IT and database support to the company, combines expertise in data modeling, forecasting, predictive analytics, and reporting with recommendations and suggestions about how to use the data. For example, reports now show how the business units use the data and how it integrates with enterprise systems to show a holistic view of customers. Also, the reports tie sales to specific campaigns or marketing initiatives based on the analysis. "We are more consultative to the business," she says. "We are speaking to them in their terms, and we are now suggesting things instead of waiting for the departments to come to us with tasks."

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Hutson says that she looks for employees who can bring organizational knowledge to the table. "I'll send you to some data modeling classes," she says. "It's harder to do the other way around."

Like musical rock stars who bring a new perspective to music, data rock stars flip the traditional education and experience of a data professional, adds Cierzan. "There are more non-traditional backgrounds [among them]," he says. "Current data professionals have traditional math, statistics, and hard science educations, with training on the business side after. In the future, data rock stars will be coming out of business or marketing organizations and supplement that with scientific experience."

As a result, titles within the data professional space may evolve, as well. Cierzan sees growth in data titles reflecting customer intelligence and insight. Baseline's Dyche says titles can run the gamut from Data Czar to Chief Data Officer to Chief Data Steward, depending on the level of strategic responsibility data professionals have at a company.

And just like musical rock stars have backing bands and behind-the-scenes crew members, not everyone needs to be a data rock star. "You don't need an entire IT department with the full spectrum of skills," Cierzan says. A team that combines those who have specialized data skills with business-savvy data rock stars will make a winning combination.

While companies are using data more than ever, the employment of actual data rock stars to manage it is not very common, Dyche says. "[Data] is not seen as a business enabler in its own right," she says. "Thus the data experts in an organization still remain in either IT (they're the systems experts who understand the data as output) or in mid-level business jobs (they're the subject matter experts who use data to do their workaday jobs). That we haven't invested in data like we should implies that we haven't invested in building the necessary skill sets."

That is beginning to change, says Fink of Tableau. "The good news is that people in general have become more data savvy, more curious, and more fact-oriented," she says. "While organizations do benefit from specialty data rock stars, they benefit as much or more when they hire people who are in general more data-oriented."

Rock on.