

“Data driven business transformation”

Caroline Carruthers, Partner and Chief Data Officer, Carruthers and Jackson

“You wouldn’t hire ten people and tell them, ‘I know I’ve hired you but I don’t really know what I want you to do yet, so could you just hang about for six months while I figure it out?’ You wouldn’t use your people asset in that way, so why do that with your data?”

Self-confessed data cheerleader Caroline Carruthers presented a session with the same title as her most recent book, *Data Driven Business Transformation*. Wearing a T-shirt sporting the slogan DATA NERD, she began by busting a commonly-held myth: “We assume that senior people in our organisations ‘get’ data, but that is not the case. Just because they are great at finance doesn’t mean they know how to leverage this asset.”

Because of this, too many leaders wrongly “park” data with the IT department, and fail to properly investigate what it can do for their organisation.

“Data is a core asset to your organisation, so why would you not think about how you use it?,” Caroline queried. “It doesn’t do us any good until we start leveraging it, thinking about how it can underpin the rest of the organisation.

“The only thing limiting our capability with data is our imagination. But we’ve got confused about the discipline of looking after it. Techies like yourselves have been sold a pup. People have assumed that you’re dealing with it, when realistically a lot of it sits with the business. If technology was going to fix the data problem, it would have fixed it by now.”

Caroline recalled how in the 1980s, the phrase of the moment was “IT-driven” – organisations were desperate to become “IT-driven” and spent oodles of money buying fancy technology, even if it wasn’t always aligned with their core purpose. “We didn’t think hard enough about what we were spending it on,” she admitted. “I don’t want data to go down the same road.

“I am hearing the term ‘data-driven organisation’ more and more. But unless you are Google or Airbnb or Uber, you don’t want to be a data-driven organisation. You want to be a data-enabled one.”

Individuals are data hoarders, Carruthers said – every employee keeps huge amounts of data but doesn’t do anything with it. “But it is overloading your organisation.

“We cram our organisations so full of data that we don’t know what the value is of it. To use a body analogy, if you have clogged your arteries so full of this fatty data that nothing works any more, you’re not using your organisation to its best ability.”

She said people tend not to give priority to the problem because they believe that the cost of data isn’t that high.

“But the cost of data isn’t how many petabytes you’ve got stuck in storage, its every single decision that you don’t make properly because you didn’t have access to that data. The cost of data is every repeated process because somebody didn’t realise it had already been done. That’s the cost of your data, not how much it’s costing in IT terms.”

Caroline said the first step to fixing the problem is recognising you have a problem, and the second is understanding what data is of value to you. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to that question, as

all organisations hold different information. “The third step – and there’s no way round this – is to put the work in,” said Carruthers. “It doesn’t magically disappear on its own. You have to change what goes into the machine so you can change what comes out.”

It will also take a lot of work to unpick the problem you’ve already got, “because we all have a legacy problem, whether it’s data, IT, attitude, behaviour,” she said. “And last but not least, once you’ve fixed it, you need to put the mechanisms in place to make sure it stays that way.”