Data changemakers: Geoff Hudson-Searle, serial business advisor, C-suite executive and non-executive director

7 October 2019

by Guy Bradshaw on 7th October 2019

Geoff is a serial business advisor, C-suite executive and non-executive director to growth-phase tech companies. He is rated by Agilience as a Top 250 Harvard Business School authority covering strategic management and management consulting.

VIQTOR DAVIS: Could start just by giving me a little bit of background about yourself and how you've ended up working with data?

Geoff: Sure. I started my career in banking back in the 1980s. After five years in banking I moved into more international roles, helping large Fortune 100 companies around the world. I've done a lot of work with brands, customers, technology and lifetime value, particularly as a C-suite executive and non-executive director to growth-phase tech companies.

For the last eleven years I've been working primarily with SMEs, helping them with the data challenges they face. I've probably worked with around 300 companies over the last decade, helping them with their development and growth strategies and getting them prepared for the next step in terms of product development, product launch, investment rounds, investor readiness and strategy.

My focus these days is primarily on business strategy, management support, developing strategic partnerships and enabling executive boardroom support. I am a serial business advisor with my own business IBEM, with offices in London and the US, I sit on the board of a technology company called Push Technology. Beyond that, I'm a published author and thought leader, lecturing at business forums, conferences and universities.

Throughout my career I've always been involved with data. Data has always been around, it's just the challenges that have changed. First the challenge was automation, then it was innovation and now it's productisation. Today it really is a big data world. There's data on every device and the volume and speed of that data means that more than ever organisations need to have a strategy to help them get value from their data.

VIQTOR DAVIS: What drives you and your interest in data? Are you a technical person, a businessperson or something else?

Geoff: I'm particularly interested in issues around the ethics of data use and how that dovetails into the overall moral values of how we operate in business. I think I am a businessperson but the difference between me and perhaps many other people is that I can look at something from embryonic perspective and imagine how that will develop over time. I can look at utopia and I can visualise what that's going to look like and, more importantly, how the commercial execution of that particular idea is going to take place. I see the full perspective.

VIQTOR DAVIS: What are the main issues you see, as far as data ethics is concerned?

Geoff: I think we've got a massive problem in data right now around this very subject. I'm very passionate about it. There are issues around machine learning and artificial intelligence, for example. If a robot can make decisions, then it can make bad decisions as well as good ones. This then leads to a question around who is ultimately responsible for those decisions.

I was with the ICO in the House of Commons last year and we were having exactly this discussion. How do you audit a decision-making algorithm if a person in the organisation has decided to override the system from a no to a yes? Who then is actually accountable if things go wrong?

This is a common scenario in financial services. For example, a customer applies for a loan and the loan is initially denied based on a risk set of diagnostics or analytics determined by an automated algorithm. Perhaps the algorithm says no, but the bank manager overturns this decision because of the customer's long-standing relationship with the bank. Who is then responsible if the customer ends up defaulting on the loan? Is it the algorithm or is it the manager that overturned the decision? That's a very grey area at the moment.

I think we've still got an awful lot of work to do when it comes to data ethics, and the pressure is going to grow as data speeds up. We've got 5G and 6G coming down the stream. If you've got real-time connected devices, then both consumers and organisations are going to be on data overload and the question is how is this going to work as the speed of information speeds up? More importantly, who's responsible for it?

I believe very strongly that as individuals we should own our data and that it shouldn't be exploited by the big guys – the Googles, the Facebooks, the Amazons. It should be owned by the individual and we should be able to say where it goes and when it goes. There should be a monetary value attached to it, that's my view.

VIQTOR DAVIS: What's the route to making that reality then, how could that be implemented?

Geoff: I'm very interested to see what's going to happen with California with e-privacy in 2020 [the California Consumer Privacy Act (CPPA) is set to take effect on 1 January 2020 with enforcement beginning on 1 July 2020]. As I understand it, there's another five states that have now joined California on this mission, and they are being more aggressive than

we have been with either GDPR or with PECR II.

Most companies haven't yet prepared themselves for what could be an onslaught for businesses of all sizes. I say that because it's not just the large businesses that I think the ICO wants to make example of – all kinds of businesses will be affected.

The only way any of this works is if the government takes a stand on leadership and brings steering committees together with large corporates and SMEs, working together to achieve the objective. It's not going to happen if there is a divide between government and business and commerce. It's just not going to work. At the moment the government is producing reams of regulation which nobody really understands. Nobody really knows then how to apply that to their business, which makes them compliant and in line with regulatory law.

This is a huge issue and it's not going to be fixed overnight, that's for sure.

VIQTOR DAVIS: Is there an issue with greater consumer awareness of data and privacy issues at the same time as organisations are collecting ever greater quantities of data?

Geoff: I'd get every consumer in the world to watch *The Great Hack* on Netflix, to just get some insight to the real world because people are generally oblivious to what really goes on with their data, preferring to ignore it, sweep under the carpet and hope it will go away. These things never go away. They just get worse.

The point is that all of our data is being exploited more or less continually. The average person would probably be horrified by the volume of data they're giving out about themselves every single day, but the fact is that if you're active on the web, you shop online, and you do things based on convenience, then those data points are everywhere and everyone can use them at the moment. It has to change.

At the moment everybody is running around asking the questions but not knowing the answers. We've got some huge issues that need to be addressed and it can only happen if senior people in government actually take a stand on this. We haven't even got somebody in the UK government who is ultimately responsible for this kind of data privacy and that's terrible because the whole world is driven by data.

VIQTOR DAVIS: What advice would you give to organisations? What would a sensible organisational strategy be to try and get ahead of the game?

Geoff: This is about dealing with day-to-day activity in your organisation and making staff aware of how they can and can't behave. Organisations also need to have a sensible risk management plans in place. Company directors are now becoming liable for the actions of others in the organisation, which may encourage greater levels of planning and accountability.

However, this is a slow process. It took many, many years just to get risk management onto a board agenda in the first place. Meanwhile, the risks that any one company faces, both externally and internally, are massive. Cybercrime is a huge issue. Privacy is a huge issue.

Ultimately, it's about values, and how those values are reflected in an organisation's culture. Consumers need to be able to trust the organisations that they deal with. Often, it's easier to establish the right kind of culture in smaller organisations. As an organisation grows, once you get over to about 600 employees to a thousand employees, then it becomes much harder to establish values as something that's living and breathing throughout the organisation.

Allowing a culture that allows people to speak freely to each other in a transparent way, working together to achieve that one overall goal – I think that will achieve things. It has to start somewhere, and it seems to me that culture is an incredibly important area in any company. If you get it right the benefits are huge.

Long-range planning is also incredibly important because if you're not planning for these events, then the chances are you're going to fail. Why are we not up-skilling employees? Why are we not bringing training to employees to help and assist them in learning, to help them across these areas? Designing programs that can be effective within the organisation? That, to me, is what all businesses need. Whether they do choose to do that or not, is another thing of course.

Decisions need to be driven by meaningful data. That's what we want at the board level, we want meaningful data. We don't want data that's out of date or that's not connected. We need data that's going to enable us to make informed decisions. Ultimately, however, it's human capital that's important. You can't pass the buck to computerisation and data to actually take that job over and make decisions for you. That's a failure of leadership.

VIQTOR DAVIS: What does the future of data look like? What are the things that are now coming on stream that organisations need to try and get to grips with?

Geoff: That's a huge question. When I look back to the 1990s when I was working with people like Nokia, they didn't have a clue what changes this tsunami of big data was going to bring in our lives and we're in a similar situation now. Back then everyone was trying to understand what interactive might be like. Now we're trying to imagine what our lives will be like with 5G, or with 6G and it's almost impossible to guess.

We have a vast, confusing amount of data with R&D people going in completely different directions. Now, we are just about to embark on 5G and to propel speed. We've got autonomous vehicles. We are going to have smart cities. There's so much going on. This is the most interesting, most challenging period of my whole life working in this environment around all of these challenges, helping and supporting people just to get their heads into a position where they can actually have the vision to go forward in technology.

The key thing, whatever business you're in, is that you've got to be connected and you got to have up-to-date speedy information. You've got to have meaningful data. We currently have an overload of stuff and we need to try and get to the point of having meaningful data which is then attached to a story. If you can get storytelling into data, then I think that opens up some interesting opportunities. We could get to a place where we have better actionable data, enabling us to use data for the right purposes, in the right set of circumstances.

VIQTOR DAVIS: If we could just turn it back to you personally for a moment, are there any particular skills or qualifications or things that you've done in your life to which you can attribute your success?

Geoff: It's been a hell of a ride. If I look at the last 28 years of my life, I never thought in a million years that I would be where I am today in terms of life experience and being able to write about that on a regular basis. I really do care about my writing.

I've written over 500 blogs on most of the subjects we've discussed and more. I'm on my fifth book which is called *Purposeful Discussions* and I'm very excited about that. *Meaningful Conversations,* which was my second book, was a big hit. What I was seeing when I wrote that was technology in its current form alienating people, not allowing human intervention and interaction, leading to a loss of values, loss of relationships, loss of business purpose. Now in *Purposeful Discussions* the importance was to take a much larger step- a deep dive into the subject again, because I think people now need to move away from meaningful into purpose-driven experiences, purpose-driven lives.

I love being able to work with people across borders, dealing with cross-border challenges, dealing with those cultures, dealing with people. I've worked with people at the bottom of the organisation and also the top of the organisation, and all these people have an effect on my life.

I strongly believe that we're all a direct reflection of the experiences that we have had as individuals. The experiences I've had in my life and in my career have been phenomenal. I never stop. I'm 24/7, but I love life and I love what we can learn in today's world, because I think what we can learn here has been a big part of my life and will continue to be so. I'm not stopping yet!

About the author

Guy Bradshaw

Guy is approaching twenty years' experience in the information management arena and has repeatedly delivered innovative and high quality solutions for an array of blue-chip customers. His experience covers the end-to-end life-cycle of information strategy and implementation. Guy has responsibility for the development of long-term relationships with VIQTOR DAVIS UK's customers as their account director...continue reading