The Power of Exploration

Introduction

Consider these two information requests:

A. Tell me who the board level executives of Acme Ltd are
B. Tell me everything that we know about the board level executives of Acme Ltd so that we can better influence the buying decisions of that business.

Which of these two requests, if fulfilled, provides more valuable information? Most people would agree that a good response to Request B would provide more useful, actionable information than simply a list of senior executives.

Now, think about how you would use a computer to help you respond to these information requests.

- Request A is very nicely suited to the way that computer software and, in particular goal-directed search, works. You ask a precise question and you get a precise answer (so long as the information is available).
- Request B (which delivers the valuable information) is more problematic because "everything we know" is a very broad request. If you hold a lot of information about Acme Limited in your database then searching against that company name is likely to return a long list of disconnected results. In order to get any sense of the "everything we know" you have to go through the whole of that list.

This approach is a bit like doing a jigsaw puzzle by taking all the pieces, lining them up vertically, then trying to work out how they fit together to make the big picture just by looking at them.

In reality, the way that people do jigsaws is by picking the pieces up, trying things out, seeing what works and learning. This process of exploration and discovery is the most natural and powerful of human activities.

The irony is that most search software has been developed as a **substitute** for human-led exploration – it goes off and finds things for you. What is really needed in today's knowledge intensive world is software that **facilitates** this process of exploration and helps you to answer the important questions.

Exploration software

So what would this sort of "exploration" software look like? It would probably need to do the following:

- Make visible the connections between related items of information. Using the jigsaw analogy this would be like knowing that piece A belongs next to piece G or that piece B has pieces F and K between it and piece J. All of a sudden the jigsaw becomes a lot easier.

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- Make it easy to try stuff out: allow people to place any item of interest on the screen and explore its context by finding and following the above connections in any direction and as extensively as is useful.

- Make it possible to see the wood from the trees: there will always be a lot of irrelevant "noise" within today's complex information so the ability to let people filter out that noise and explore what is important to them would be critical.

- Make it easy to save and share your exploration: by going through the process of exploration a person will have potentially created a valuable knowledge asset (unlike a simple goal directed search which has little lasting value). It should be possible to easily preserve and share that knowledge.

Exploration in business

Enterprises spend vast amounts of money managing their information. They integrate, match, clean or put data in warehouses often as part of bigger IT projects such as CRM, ECM, ERP or MDM.

One of the main reasons that organisations make this investment is control. By having relevant, accurate information accessible to the right people at the right time the organisation is able to effectively manage business as usual processes.

Unfortunately, just improving business as usual processes is now not enough to secure a competitive advantage. If a business is not continuously exploring new opportunities and new ways of doing business it will be completely outpaced by a smarter competitor.

This need to change is well understood by most businesses and the response to this challenge is often to commission projects run by either internal teams or, often, external consultants. Either way, what these teams normally do is to explore options and produce reports that recommend changes and courses of action.

The problem with this approach is that you are relying on the fact that you have asked the right question when you commission this report.

To go back to the jigsaw analogy, it's a bit like asking a team to put together a jigsaw of an animal. They go out find all the pieces and put them together; the result is a beautifully put together picture of a sheep, the problem is you wanted a horse. This is why so many reports and recommendations remain on the shelf.

The other downfall of this approach is that it largely ignores the fact that the people best qualified to identify new opportunities are often those who are doing the business as usual work. The good news is that these people are working away within the business – they exist and they are a huge potential asset.

The other good news is that most businesses have the information that they need to allow virtually any employee to explore new possibilities. After all, they are likely to have spent a considerable sum of money sorting out their enterprise information to ensure it is relevant, accurate and accessible.

So if you have the right information and the right people to release the power of exploration and discovery within an organisation why do businesses still rely on projects and reports?

Partly because this approach appears safe and controlled and the idea of giving large parts of your workforce the remit to explore and see what they find seems both risky and potentially chaotic.

But it's also partly because telling a person to go and explore data is easy but actually providing them with the means to do so is altogether more difficult. The reality is that the software tools and applications that are currently available to users within most organisations do not make human exploration an easy thing to do. So the cost of exploration soon seems to outweigh the potential benefits of discovery.

Exploration in business

So what areas of a business derive real, measurable benefit from the ability to explore their information? Here are some examples:

Anybody in research and development. If R&D isn't about exploration then it's hard to understand what it is about. The challenge in the R&D area is that there is less money to do more in less time. Also, there is more information to explore and understand than ever before. Rather than having specialist data mining and reporting applications used by a minority, the secret is to have easy to use data exploration at the fingertips of the majority – after all, you hire bright, expensive people for a reason.

Anybody in sales and marketing. Are monthly sales reports and statistics really enough? Do they answer the "tell me everything we know so that we can sell more" question? Don't they just tell you what has happened rather than let you explore future possibilities? Shouldn't sales people be able to explore the vast amount of data that you hold about your customers in order to understand those customers better and spot non-obvious opportunities?

Anybody involved in product or business strategy. These people might be used to commissioning reports but with their knowledge and experience of the business they are well positioned to explore operational, customer and market information in order to make discoveries that might change the direction of the business. The secret is to provide an efficient and fast way of doing this that doesn't absorb too much of their valuable time.

Anybody involved in compliance and risk management. How do you know that you have done enough to manage risk? We know from experience (think Enron and other corporate disas-

ters) that the big crises and the organised fraud are unlikely to show up on your regular monthly risk reporting. It is by giving your staff in risk management the ability to explore data that you will uncover the anomalies that indicate all is not right.

Summary

Putting the power of exploration at the fingertips of the right people within an organisation will have a substantial impact on its overall performance. New opportunities will be more easily identified and emerging risks will be more easily uncovered and managed.

The raw materials of effective exploration are:

- Good data – most businesses have invested large amounts of money in managing their information so that it is accurate, relevant and accessible
- Skilled people – knowledge based organisations go to great lengths to hire the smartest and most able staff
- The right exploration tools – this is the missing ingredient. Organisations rely far too heavily on goal directed search and various forms of reporting to explore their information. This leads to a very limited approach to exploration and discovery because:
  - goal directed search is not suited to answering open, explorative questions
  - reports tend to created by small groups of people and don't tap into the exploration power available to an organisation across its workforce.

Intetek Visual Search

Intetek Visual Search is designed to fulfil this need for intuitive, easy to use applications that deliver the power of exploration to anybody's desktop.

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