



Data Governance An Implementation Reality Check

Abstract

Giving data governance recommendations is easy but implementing them is altogether a different ball game. Organizations do realize the importance and value of data governance initiatives but when it comes to funding and prioritization of such initiatives, it always takes a lower priority. Over a period, governance becomes the root cause of a handful of the organizational issues and it is then when the organizations start to prioritize DG and bring in experts to set things right.



"Are these experts providing what the organization needs?"

"Is the problem of data governance solved when the expert leaves?"

"If not, what is it that is lurking and needs to be addressed?"

This article tries to throw light on the expectations of these organizations, what they get from the experts and how much of the recommendation can be converted or is converted to reality.

Where does it all start?

When the word 'asset' represents everything except 'data' to business; like investments in

technology, infrastructure and man power, the problem of data governance (DG) usually begins. Business must understand that the backbone of its organization is 'data' and their competitiveness is determined by how data is handled internally across functions.

The problem of DG becomes critical as the organization grows in the absence of any formal oversight (i.e., a governance committee). Silos of technology will seep in and lead to disruption of the enterprise architecture, followed by processes. In due course, data will be processed by the consumers of data. The impact of this is huge as users can now manipulate and publish data. The ripple effect of this can be felt on processes like change management as this will now be conducted locally at the user's machine rather than going through a formal change process.

In-house DG team

The DG team is either dormant or virtual in most cases and often exists at either Level-1 (Lowest) or Level-2 in terms of maturity. The primary reason for this lack of maturity is the team's unfamiliarity to DG processes beyond establishment of naming standards, documentation of processes, identification of roles & responsibilities and a few other basic steps.

Even if the team is capable of setting up a DG practice, the business is not flexible enough to empower it sufficiently to establish a successful governance practice. In some cases, people identified to participate in the DG committee were already engaged in other business priorities such as, a program manager who is already tasked with multiple high-priority corporate development initiatives. This masks the true purpose of a DG team and makes it virtual.

The Problem

The in-house teams did not have a well defined approach towards setting up DG; those who had, missed to define the metrics and those who managed to define the metrics, did not know how to take it forward. According to the Quality Axiom,

 "What cannot be defined cannot be measured;
What cannot be measured cannot be improved, and
What cannot be improved will eventually deteriorate"

This is very much true in DG also. In DG, it is not enough to define metrics and measure results. Organizations need to be able to control and monitor them, too. The problem lies in setting up the infrastructure and control mechanisms capable of continuous monitoring. To solve this, a specialist is called for.

The catch:

The recommendations provided by the specialist often look very promising and implementable. The catch lies in what the organization expects, what it gets and how much of that can be converted to reality.

The first part, "Expectations of the organization" relates to the assessment of the existing state of DG and getting recommendations to solve their DG problem. The second part, "What the organization gets," is where the mismatch happens. Most of the maturity models used by specialists, measure DG along the following five dimensions:

- Enterprise architecture
- Data lifecycle
- Data quality and controls
- Data security
- Oversight (funding, ownership, etc.)

The recommendations provided by these specialists traditionally pivot around these categories, but on a closer look, each of these dimensions have two components:

- a. Soft component (Level 1) - the easily implementable ones and
- b. Hard component (Level 2 & 3) - something which requires funding, effort and time to build

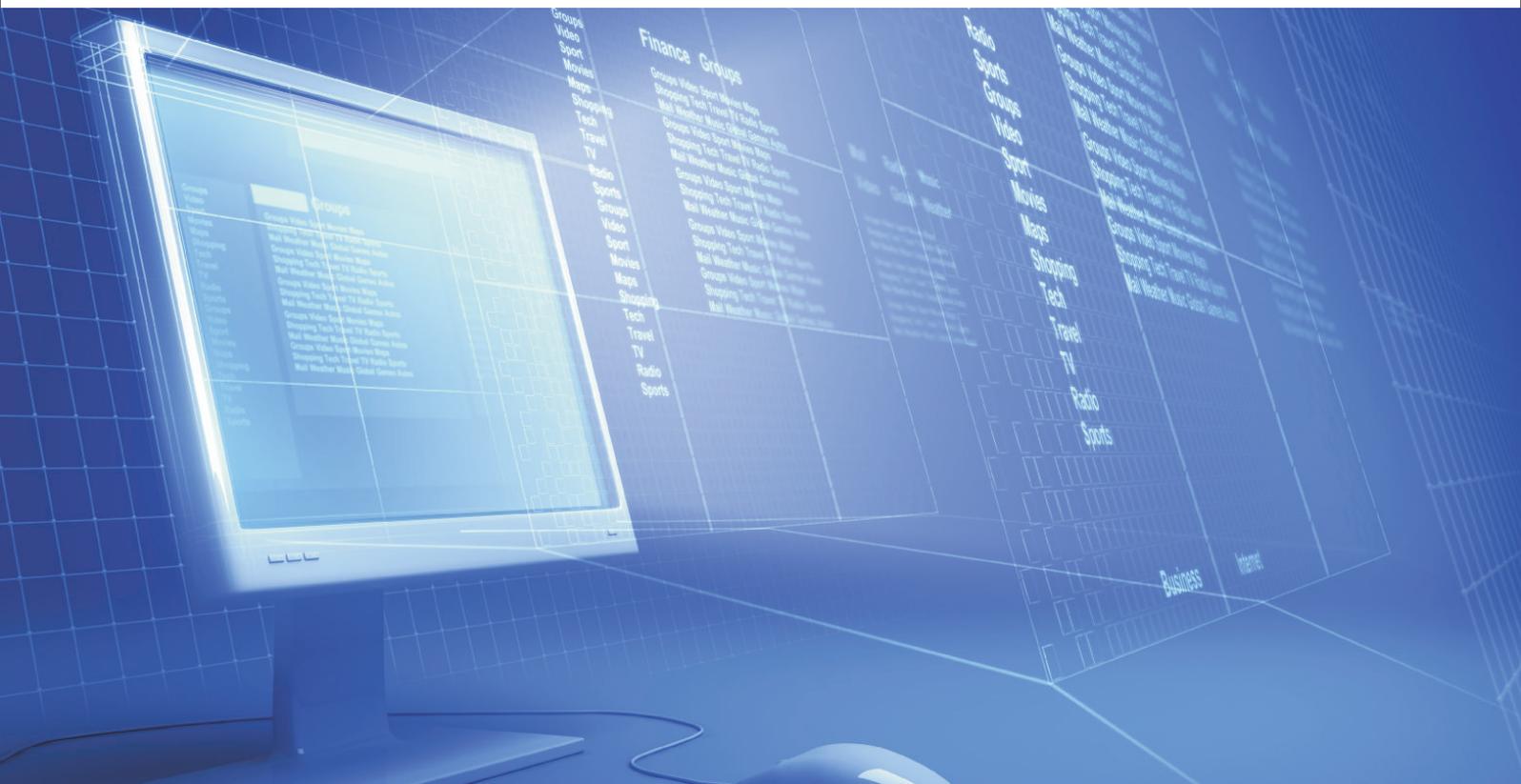
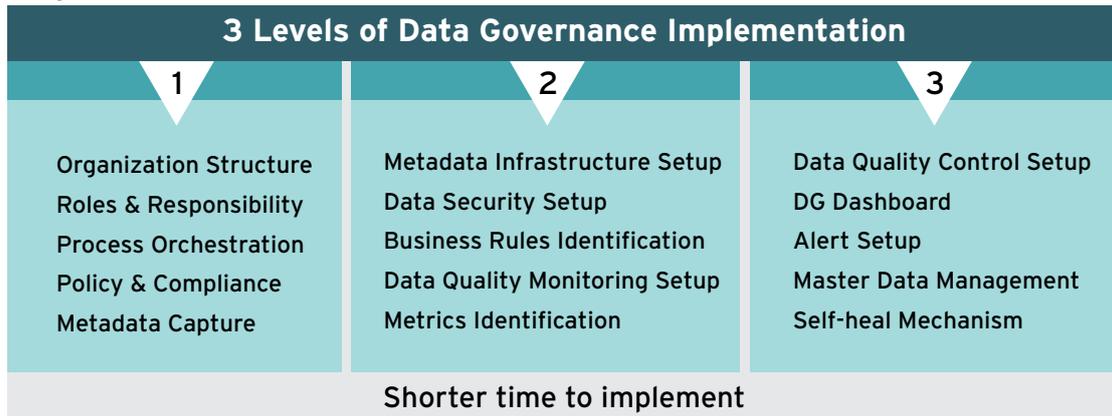


Figure. 1



No matter how well the recommendations are categorized and sub categorized, these two components always exist. The soft components involving policy/process changes, re-Organisation, etc. are relatively easy to set up. However, the hard components that involve infrastructure, database, dashboards, etc. either get ignored or are partially implemented. It is this hard component that defines, "How many of the expert recommendations can be converted to reality?"

The 3-level approach (Figure 1) works well when the organization is serious, has the required funding, resources and wants to setup DG in a short time frame.

Reality check:

Implementing DG is not as simple as buying a product off the shelf and installing. Even specialists sometimes turn down requests for implementing these hard components because of inadequate Enterprise Information Management (EIM) maturity. EIM architecture involves data sourcing, integration, storage and dissemination. Setting up the DG will be difficult if only one of these components is weak. It is analogous to constructing a sky-scraper on a weak foundation.

Normally the specialists quote a price that involves setting up foundation elements such as changing the ETL infrastructure, setting up metadata, fixing master data, etc. to setup DG. The business, instead of considering the cost of getting these foundation elements up and running as separate investments, sees this expenditure as

part of DG investment cost and fails to get the required funding. If a two-year roadmap is proposed and every time funding is requested, the only reason quoted is DG, why would the sponsor approve the investment? A visible DG component cannot be shown during the initial phases and hence the business will lose its trust in the initiative. This can be termed as failure at Level-2 stage.

DG initiatives can result in power shifts and can be very difficult for senior managers and those in the organization who have been enjoying process authority. This aversion to change/give up power paves the way for something termed as a failure at Level-1 stage. This is an organization culture issue that needs to be addressed to move further.

Conclusion

To enable a mature DG setup, organizations need to step back and take a look at their existing architecture, get the foundational elements in place, and finally push hard to implement the necessary hard and soft DG components. The cost of implementing these foundational elements should not be considered as a part of DG initiative, because doing so will only result in undercutting the priority and interest in this critical undertaking.

Data governance has to be an evolving process in an organization. A big bang overnight implementation of DG might not be always advisable unless the foundational components are in place.

About the Author

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