

IT, biz analytics functions should split

By Liao Yun Qing

Summary: *Singaporean organizations cite lack of multi-skilled staff able to work in both arenas and easier management as reasons for division between IT and analytics departments.*

SINGAPORE--Local companies are treating their IT and business analytics departments as two separate entities due to a lack of workers who are competent in both arenas, at least until more IT professionals are equipped, noted IT chiefs.

Alice Tan, IT director of Watson's Personal Care Stores Singapore, recounted that in her previous company, the retail company Robinsons, IT and business analytics were treated as different functions. This is because while it tried to merge both departments, this created difficulties in recruiting people who had skills to function in both departments.

It is difficult for someone with IT skills to also be able to extract useful information from data sets, for instance, Tan explained. She was speaking at the Fuji Xerox Docuworld 2012 conference here on Wednesday.

Similarly, Alvin Ong, CIO of Integrated Health Information Systems (IHIS), said the conventional IT department is usually considered to be technologically focused, while the business analytics unit will concentrate on analyzing the organization's data.

The division of both units is most likely due to easier management of employees and the different skillsets needed in each department, he said.

Taking 'baby steps' in analytics

Both executives went on to highlight how business analytics is being harnessed in the healthcare and retail sectors.

Ong cited Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, which is under the IHIS umbrella, as an example. The hospital adopted business analytics but is still taking "baby steps" in terms of utilizing the technology. Currently, it is using the tool to obtain "actionable insights" from collated data for administrators and doctors to aid their decision-making process, he noted.

One example is geospatial analytics, which maps where its patients live. Based on this information, the hospital will be able to plan future medical services and cater them according to patient demographics, he explained.

The hospital also has plans to use analytics for predictive purposes, the CIO revealed. This could mean using analytics to predict foot traffic at the hospital at different timings in order to provision enough manpower to attend to patients' and visitors' needs.

Watson's Tan also highlighted the importance of predictive analytics for the retail sector. She said most retailers are now using descriptive analytics, and one common use is to find out what customers bought during marketing campaigns.



However, she said companies should be looking at the data of previous campaigns to decide on the kinds of marketing campaigns to organize instead. The IT director did acknowledge that harnessing predictive analytics is more difficult as business users will need to ask relevant questions of the data in order to get the right insights.

Partnerships key in driving analytics use

Glen Francis, vice president and head of group IT at Global Logistics Properties, who also attended the conference on Wednesday, called on companies to work with other industries to realize the potential benefits of analytics.

He identified car maker Volvo as an example, as they provided information derived from internal analytics tools to partnering insurers so the latter can provide lower premium to select car owners.

Ong also noted that Khoo Teck Puat Hospital is collaborating with the Singapore Management University (SMU) to equip students to work in the healthcare industry in another form of cross-industry partnership.

Hospital staff will teach courses at the university in areas including business data analytics, intelligent systems for planning, scheduling, and decision support, and information security privacy.