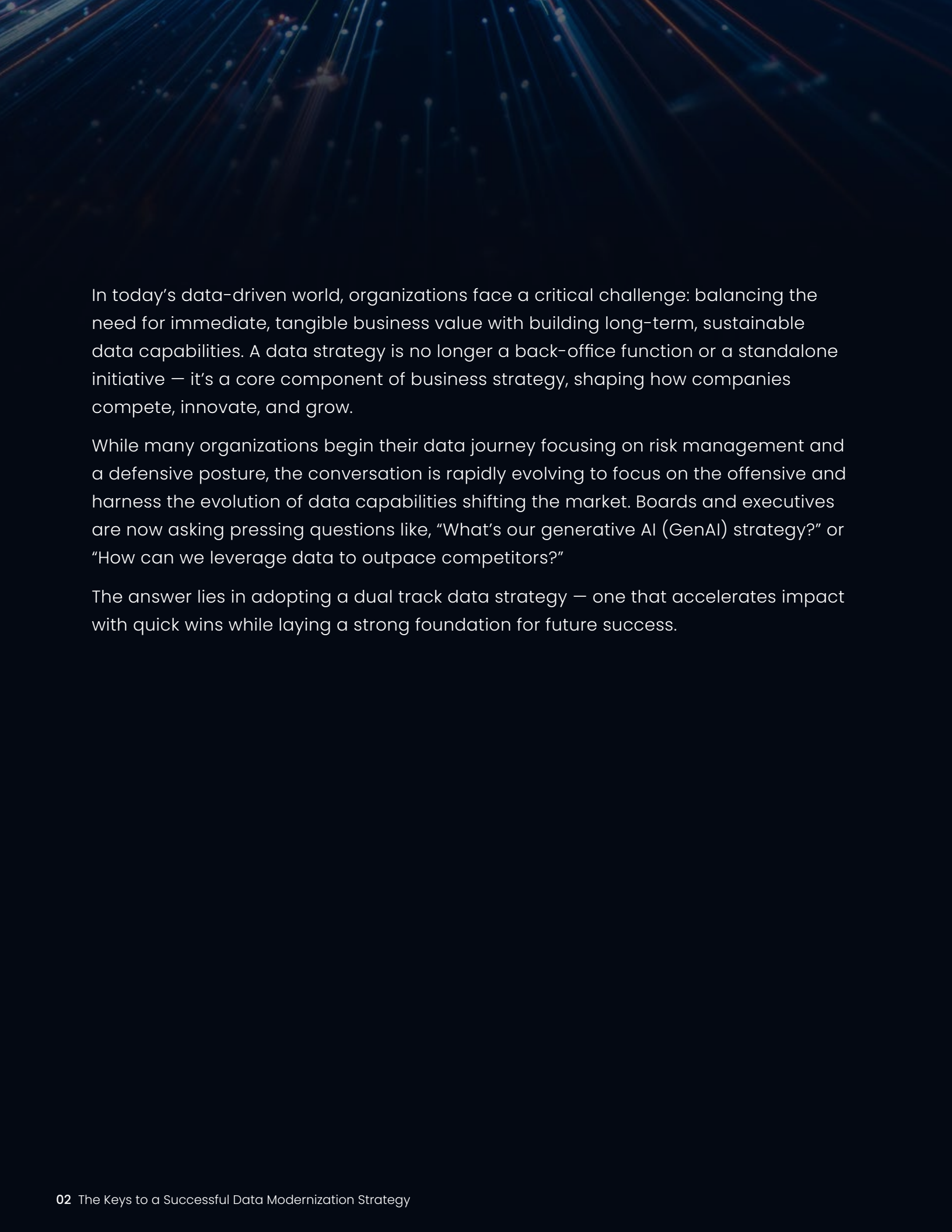


AHEAD

PLAY TO WIN:

The Keys to a Successful *Data Modernization Strategy*





In today's data-driven world, organizations face a critical challenge: balancing the need for immediate, tangible business value with building long-term, sustainable data capabilities. A data strategy is no longer a back-office function or a standalone initiative — it's a core component of business strategy, shaping how companies compete, innovate, and grow.

While many organizations begin their data journey focusing on risk management and a defensive posture, the conversation is rapidly evolving to focus on the offensive and harness the evolution of data capabilities shifting the market. Boards and executives are now asking pressing questions like, "What's our generative AI (GenAI) strategy?" or "How can we leverage data to outpace competitors?"

The answer lies in adopting a dual track data strategy — one that accelerates impact with quick wins while laying a strong foundation for future success.

Accelerate Impact with a Dual Track Data Strategy

Data's appearance on C-suite radars and board meeting agendas has primarily been through the lens of risk, with a focus on mitigating security breaches and privacy noncompliance. But increasingly, boards are asking executives how current and future data initiatives (including AI) will correspond to profit and competitive advantages.

Data teams might feel pressure to respond by creating immediate activity. But while quick wins might dazzle and impress with useful proof points, they may not achieve large year-over-year returns. Teams could also choose to take a more measured approach to scan their environments and develop a robust plan. Strategic roadmaps may imply strong valid business cases but run the risk of fizzling in the face of competing priorities and shifting technology trends.

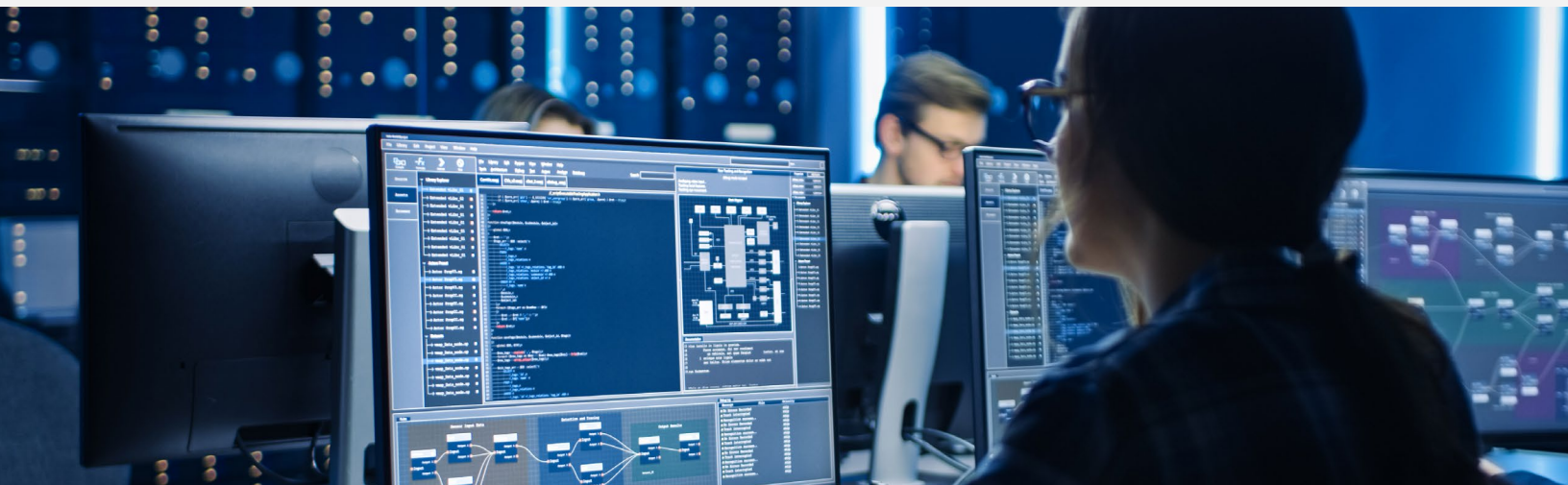
Even so, neither approach is necessarily wrong. In both cases, value creation from data demands investment, resources, and organizational change.

Balancing the natural desire to show tangible outcomes quickly with the discipline of building a data capability through smart incremental investments in the data and AI space is key. This is all possible through a dual track data strategy.

Elements of a Dual Track Data Strategy

Successful data strategy planning and execution now require both a rapid accelerator approach as well as a more foundational strategy to run in parallel. When done well, this dual track approach is more than the sum of the parts: the quick wins from the accelerator inform the development of foundational data strategy, and foundational strategy aligns quick wins to support long term objectives.

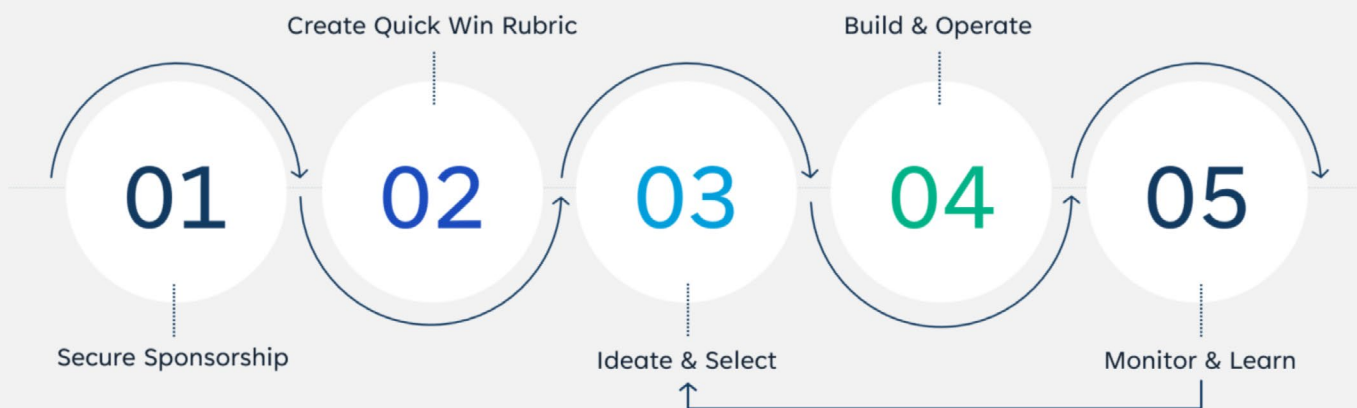
We'll explore the rapid accelerator and foundational data strategy approaches in turn, then unite them into a dual track data strategy within a business strategy and execution system.



RAPID ACCELERATOR FOR QUICK WINS

This approach is designed to be lean and lite touch. First, start with a strong executive sponsor that will appropriate funding and influence resource allocations along the way. Second, identify and empower the key stakeholders who will govern and develop the rubric by which “quick wins” are defined and measured. Third, facilitate and manage the ideation, prioritization, and selection of data projects meeting the criteria of a quick win. Fourth, build and operate one or a small number of data projects using high caliber staff – not just who is available – that will demonstrate the value and quality aspirations of future high impact data projects. Fifth, set in motion a monitoring and learning capability from these projects to allow continuous improvement and accelerate the impact of the quick-win projects.

Rapid Accelerator Process for Quick Win Data Projects



The rapid accelerator process bears resemblance to the classic Plan, Do, Check, Act model of the Lean Management methodology, and R&D innovation processes in general. This suggests a laboratory-style operating model, where project teams are supported and provided the resources needed to generate quick wins, however small or incremental, to meet the criteria of the quick win rubric. It also encourages dissemination of key learnings.

DRAWBACKS TO A SOLE FOCUS ON THE QUICK WIN APPROACH

Intuitively, while an accumulation of quick wins may create organizational momentum and build support, they don't necessarily meet an organization's financial hurdles or other business case requirements, individually or collectively. In addition, they can potentially create operational problems and technical debt.

This might manifest in various ways. For example, it could become prohibitive to scale enterprise data capabilities beyond a string of one-off departmental quick wins because they each have their own underlying purpose-built platform components or design principles, effectively becoming incompatible architecturally and driving up support costs overall. In a similar vein, managing separate data pipelines across all quick wins, each with their own data preparation logic, storage repositories, and exception handling procedures can quickly create data silos that business managers then must navigate and prioritize. This potentially makes managers less productive due to context switching among disjointed tools, or worse, creates inconsistent data and insights, leading to conflicting decisions and friction among personnel. This can then lead to reputational harm for the data and development teams that build and support the data projects.

Any and all consequences arise because the quick wins aren't purposefully aligned, strategically or from an end-to-end business process perspective.



A ROADMAP FOR FOUNDATIONAL DATA STRATEGY

On the other end of our spectrum is a foundational data strategy approach: building a comprehensive roadmap. This typically involves a structured current state assessment, visioning, gap analysis, and roadmap development to implement data enablement capabilities over a longer planning horizon.

A useful example of a data enablement investment is the implementation of a modern data platform. This is a set of capabilities that can be customized for each organization. For our general purpose here, it consists of a platform and related tooling to enable data ingestion, observability, data governance, and data sharing and self-service.

Modern Data Platform Capabilities



Ingestion

Manages acquisition, integration, & transformation of data.



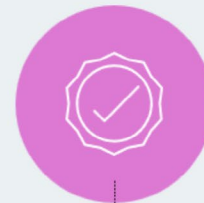
Observability

Provides comprehensive monitoring, reporting, and key performance insights into the data platform's health and performance.



Governance

Ensures that data within the platform is managed securely, consistently, and in compliance with regulatory and organizational requirements.



Data Sharing & Self Service

Enables secure, efficient, and scalable distribution and access to data, both internally within the organization and externally with authorized third parties.

This investment creates multiple capabilities that, in and of themselves, don't generate value. This highlights the brutal fact that data capability investments don't always generate value on their own merit, but rather in incremental strategic combinations of platform investments with value-added use cases.

Simply put, data platforms can be costly, and data and AI programs often risk failure. Failed data initiatives can in turn create residual stigma – "It's just too hard," or "We tried that, and it didn't work," or "There's no return." These become cultural excuses to avoid the 2nd or 3rd attempt, which leads to delays and increases the risk of competitive obsolescence. Avoiding data misfire with a smart strategic approach helps both near-term and long-term.

DRAWBACKS TO A SOLE FOCUS ON THE FOUNDATION STRATEGY APPROACH

The foundational data roadmap allows for incremental data platform investments to be paired strategically with a portfolio of value-added use cases that generate measurable benefits. With enough planning, data teams can accelerate use case execution as platform synergies improve, and improve paybacks with each new use case. Then, once implemented, the platform asset generates additional value in the form of ongoing use cases.

This foundational roadmap approach appeals to our natural sense of alignment, elegant planning, and cost efficiency. But to do it properly takes years.

What if it's just too slow? Don't we still need quick wins?

Embedding a Dual Track Data Strategy in Business Strategy

Organizations don't just need quick wins or a comprehensive roadmap: they need both. Doing either alone carries the risks already discussed. And trying both outside of formal strategic planning processes is risky, since the sponsorship, funding, resource requirements, and cultural buzz created are going to attract executive attention. Better to bring it all into the light or risk getting snuffed out.

This leads us to the tools of the strategy trade: in particular, strategy planning and execution. These tools probably already exist in your organization. And if they don't, asking "Why not?" should support your data efforts anyway, since data requires a strategic outlook that executive leadership will likely welcome and embrace in general. These tools help clarify the path to data initiative approval, funding, and implementation on a level playing field. They also help ensure data projects are aligned to business priorities properly, integrated with business processes productively, and create benefits collectively.

CREATING A (HYPOTHETICAL) DUAL TRACK STRATEGY

We'll illustrate how data and business strategy come together using a hypothetical business and the very real Strategy Management System and the Balanced Scorecard.*

The Strategy Management System*



*From The Execution Premium, by Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton

This system, which applies to all activity in an enterprise or business unit, is described extensively by Kaplan and Norton in The Execution Premium.* Our discussion here is focused on how to implement data strategy within a given strategic business planning framework to drive new sustainable value.

This system raises the bar for data projects in two key ways:

1. Data initiatives must compete on their own merit against all other candidate investments, and
2. Data initiatives must consider people and process both operationally and organizationally.

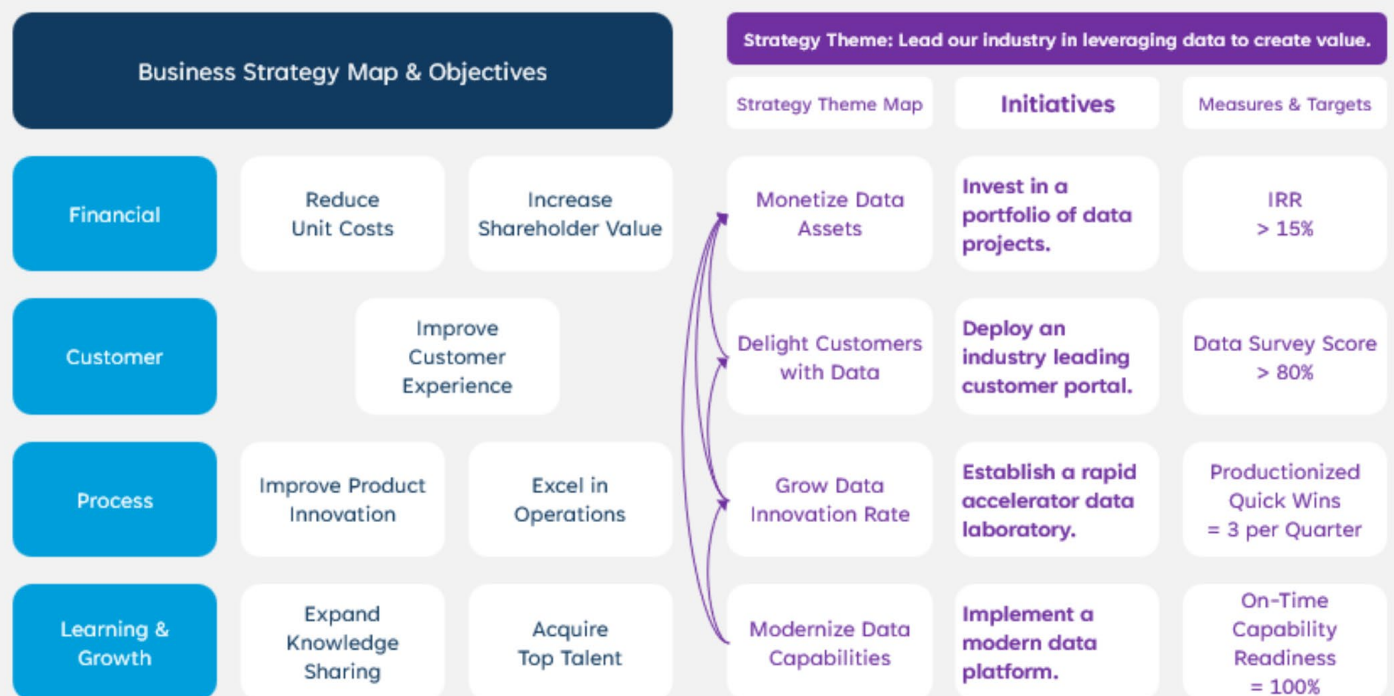
Let's use this system to create a singular data modernization goal for our hypothetical organization: to lead our industry in leveraging data to create value.

To get the organization in alignment towards this goal, we identified these four candidate initiatives:

- Invest in a portfolio of data projects.
- Deploy an industry-leading customer portal.
- Establish a rapid accelerator data laboratory.
- Implement a modern data platform.

For this hypothetical product business, the business strategy map and balanced scorecard for its data-oriented strategy theme would now look something like this...

Data Strategy Balanced Scorecard Aligned to Business Strategy Map & Objectives



As this is our hypothetical business, we can set aside the details of how this was all determined, the significant effort it would have taken to develop, and the organizational politics that must have been involved, and just take it in.

The premise of this tool is that developing people and capabilities is foundational (Learning & Growth), and this enables process improvements (Process), which serve customers (Customer), which creates financial value (Financial). In our case, modernizing data capabilities allows us to grow our data innovation rate, which will delight customers with data, and allow us to monetize our data assets.

There are firm connections among the objectives and their respective initiatives, meaning that they are tightly-paired initiatives to be implemented together. These connections allow a knowledgeable narrator to easily distill the complexity of data strategy for executive decision makers to approve and fund.

Organizations may have several or many strategy themes, with the intent that each theme has its own strategy map, and related supporting initiatives with measures and targets. But the power of this tool is that every strategy theme map is literally aligned with the business strategy map, clearly showing the theme's relationship back to the business strategy, and providing an executive-level view of how to measure success on each individual initiative. This is a clear, concise, executive-level representation of a data strategy formally embedded into business strategy.

Embedding data strategy into the formal strategy planning and execution framework also allows data initiatives to compete for funding on a level playing field with other operational initiatives. Data teams now have the capability to meet the higher bar of competing on impact to the broader organization.

The power of this visual to cut through confusion, limit technical jargon, and avoid failed data efforts cannot be overstated.



Play to Win

Far too many data efforts fail to launch simply because the champions and accountable stakeholders can't make the case in a way that instills confidence in the people holding the purse. And for data efforts that do launch, many fail because they haven't addressed the strategic alignment and interconnectedness between "We need quick wins," and "We need a roadmap." In effect, if they aren't taking the dual track approach, they are taking on more risk.

Strategic planning may seem foreign or distant to some, but it's how to play to win. To accelerate impact with a dual track data strategy, connect with executive sponsors to get a seat at the table in the strategic planning process. Learn the tools of the strategy-planning-and execution-trade, which are only briefly touched on here – or better yet, ask one of the AHEAD data experts that live and breathe these tools.

The best way for transformational data efforts to compete against business-as-usual investments is through the front door of strategic planning. It's time to knock.



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