In association with

The global information access opportunity

Making a business case for investment in modern file data management

Good file data management isn't just about access and protection...

...It's about enabling the business to do more, and do it safely

Every organization must digitally evolve and create business advantage. But you can only do that by breaking open your data silos, so you can make more and better use of all your file data, improving your overall data maturity and ultimately becoming data-driven.

Among other things, this means treating data as an enterprise asset, and finding ways to make data, information and insights available to anyone who needs them, for example by implementing a global file system.

The problem comes when the 'owners' of data silos are reluctant to open up because they perceive risk, whether it is technical, cultural, psychological or compliance-related. This may seem like bad news, but it doesn't have to be.

The opportunity here is to deal with multiple challenges at once by making the right choices - "to kill two birds with one stone", as the saying goes. The fact is that while almost every organization faces data management issues, compliance challenges, cybersecurity risks and more, these are typically approached as separate problems.

What if they could be converged and addressed as one? Seen from this angle, it becomes clear that modern data management and governance can not only result in greater data access and maturity - with all the business value and growth opportunities that that brings - but it can also translate to better cybersecurity and compliance control.

And that's vital at a time when organizations and their IT departments can no longer afford to implement point solutions that don't also add value in a wider context.
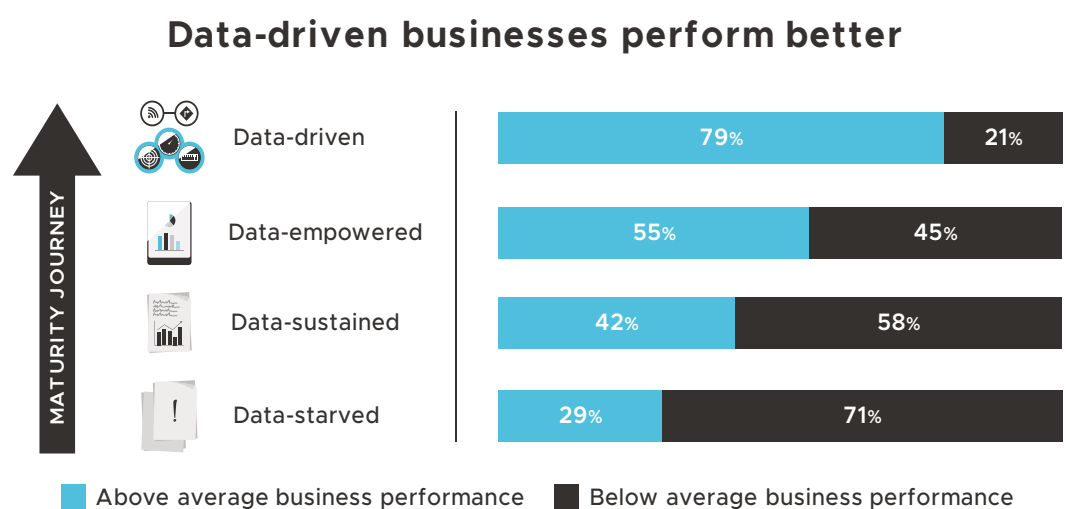
Making the case for investment in data infrastructure

CIOs know that enterprises can see big business benefits from better data management, and they know where improvement is needed. A project of this kind can even be cost-neutral, if funding can be redirected from "business as usual". The big hurdles are likely to be committing to the changes it requires, and investing the staff time needed to establish the new infrastructure and migrate data.

This work is easier to justify, though, when we recognize that data management infrastructure that broadens, democratizes and secures file access can also be leveraged in other valuable ways. A notable example is the reduction of cyber-risk. Inherent security is especially important for file services, as these are targeted by a number of highly disruptive threats, such as ransomware.

Business performance improves with data maturity

For context, our research[1] shows a strong correlation between data maturity, which assesses how well information is managed, protected and exploited, and business performance, measured using a range of financial and non-financial KPIs.

Data-driven businesses perform better

MATURITY JOURNEY	Above average business performance	Below average business performance
Data-driven	79%	21%
Data-empowered	55%	45%
Data-sustained	42%	58%
Data-starved	29%	71%

This relationship is unlikely to be a coincidence - it's easy to understand how faster access to more and better data enables innovation, flexibility and responsiveness, as well as efficiency and increased satisfaction among both employees and customers.

To explain further, we identify four levels of data maturity:

Data-starved	Relatively chaotic approach to handling data, leading to poor business visibility and higher data-related risk
Data-sustained	Respectable level of basic competence, but patchy and often backward-looking business visibility
Data-empowered	Good on-demand availability of consistent, complete, up-to-date and forward looking business insights
Data-driven	Continuous and often real-time insights, delivered proactively and in context across the entire business

Fortunately, only a small proportion of organizations falls into the first category. Unfortunately, only a similarly small proportion falls into the fourth category - and of course this is the one that digital transformation aims to achieve.

1. *The road to becoming a data-driven business, Freeform Dynamics, Nov 2020*

Bust the silos, and make data an enterprise asset

For an organization to become data-driven and achieve a high level of data maturity, it needs to treat its data as an enterprise asset. Among other things, this means opening up its data silos so the data within can be used to generate insights, which can then be made available to anyone who needs them, wherever they may be.

But as mentioned earlier, all too often and for all sorts of reasons, people within the organization are unable or unwilling to open up their data stores. In addition, more data sets will come along as new offices open, software platforms are adopted, or via mergers and acquisitions.

Not only does having multiple scattered data silos leave you potentially data-starved, it's also a business risk. It makes them harder to manage, govern and protect, and results in inconsistent knowledge and accountability, fragmented policies, and inadequate visibility.

Definition

A data-driven business exploits data and analytics at every level to achieve both strategic and real-time operational advantage.

Advanced tools and technology are employed to make data and analytics an intrinsic and/or embedded part of activities from strategy and planning in the boardroom, through decision-making on the front line, to powering digital engagement with customers, partners and suppliers.

This is an opportunity for file data infrastructure that also addresses security and governance. For example, if it provides centrally co-ordinated and policy-driven security, access and protection, it can be used to both manage cyber-risk and safely enable the democratization of enterprise data.

The aim is to employ risk management to win both business advantage and better security, It is about positioning infrastructure as an enabler, not a blocker. But to do that, it also has to be flexible enough to start gradually and absorb data stores as they become available. Let's look at one such route: implementing a global file system.

Empowering users via global file systems

When users have to make business decisions or real-time operational adjustments, or meet legal requirements by preparing compliance reports for auditors and regulators, they need up-to-date, consistent and reliable information.

And yet users within most organizations can experience problems and delays when looking for the information they need. Which of several file

Common challenges experienced by users

Some information just isn't there	The data is some-where but getting to it is difficult
Finding and collating data across different sources can be difficult	Too much superfluous information
Too much time spent manually looking for exceptions	Information is not available quickly enough to act on

versions is the most current? Does a colleague have key data stored locally on their laptop? Will they break any company policies or compliance rules if they use the data in the way they plan to?

The challenge, therefore, is to enable authorized users to find accurate data in a timely fashion, while also ensuring that their access to it is effectively governed. This in turn means that organizations require comprehensive data visibility, especially into their valuable file-based data. One potential solution is to build a single global file system - an information infrastructure that addresses these challenges by acting as a central system of record for the organization.

Risk management and business value: pulling it all together

This should be a good time for IT practitioners to be engaging proactively with line-of-business executives on IT projects that offer strategic business advantage. Our research suggests that the business-side perception of IT's value has never been higher. So when it comes to defining the need for a better, more secure, information infrastructure, and for business transformation and user empowerment - via a global file system, for example - the opportunity is there.

But having established that the right infrastructure upgrade should provide the business with the freedom, flexibility and confidence to address problems and pursue its goals, how are you going to implement it? Even if the project appears cost-neutral, it will probably still require additional skills and expertise from a vendor or other partner. Incidentally, it will be important here to ensure the project moves at the pace of your business, not that of the service partner.

It also means committing to change and driving adoption, and this is an area where IT planners may need to get creative. For example, by highlighting specific business opportunities or challenges that the project addresses, or legitimate links or bridges to budget lines or discretionary funds in other areas of the organization. The aim of this bridging is to draw additional stakeholders into supporting and funding the project, by showing how it can also address **their** specific needs and challenges.

Cost & risk management (Optimising/extending)	Tactical requirements (Problem solving)	Business Strategic (Game-changing)
Operational efficiency and cost savings	NAS refresh, app/data replatforming	Business/digital/process transformation
Ransomware and cyber protection	Cloud project(s) and app/data migrations	Drive to becoming data/information driven
Inclusive data protection (no orphans)	Ad hoc user access demands & requests	Empowering users to decide and act
Prevention of data fragmentation	New offices, regions, partners, suppliers	Empowering users to collaborate/innovate
Data location control and visibility	New and/or changing regulation	Real-time analytics/business management
Vendor lock-in, switching/migration cost	Support for DevOps/delivery teams	From local store to enterprise resource

Some examples of other specific needs, opportunities and challenges also addressed by data management

In conclusion

Like any information infrastructure project, this is unlikely to be easy. There will be organizational politics, almost inevitably someone will take offence, and yes, you will probably have to knock some heads together - but if you are serious about turning good intentions into tangible results, it needs to be done.

The biggest challenges are likely to be people-related, so make sure you have those conversations early on. In particular, it's easy for the board to say 'data-driven', but are they prepared to back you on the infrastructure, culture and mindset shifts it requires?

The good news is that, with the availability of modern global file systems and other ways to break open those data silos, at least you don't have to worry about the technology side as much as you might have done a few years ago.

About Freeform Dynamics

Freeform Dynamics is an IT industry analyst firm. Through our research and insights, we help busy IT and business professionals get up to speed on the latest technology developments and make better-informed investment decisions.

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About Nasuni

Nasuni Corporation is a leading file data services company that helps organizations create a secure, file data cloud for digital transformation, global growth and information insight. The Nasuni File Data Platform is a cloud-native suite of services that simplifies file data infrastructure, enhances file data protection and ensures fast file access globally at the lowest cost. Organizations worldwide rely on Nasuni to easily access and share file data globally from the office, home or on the road.

For more information please vist: www.nasuni.com