It's Not Just the Tech

The People Behind
Data Success or Failure

April 2025

Smart Tech, Human Flaws

Over time, the tools and techniques used to analyze and extract value from data have evolved dramatically. What began with simple analytical methods progressed into the Big Data boom, followed by a wave of excitement over machine learning and deep learning, and has now arrived at the current fascination with artificial intelligence.

Despite this rapid technological evolution, one stubborn issue remains unchanged: **the high rate at which data initiatives fail**. A wide array of studies—from academic research to industry reports—make it clear that **even as organizations become more sophisticated and professionals more capable, a significant proportion of data and AI projects still don't deliver, often costing companies dearly.**

Many articles and papers attempt to diagnose why these efforts fall short, pointing to inflated expectations, technical and organizational obstacles, compliance limitations, talent shortages, and poor data quality (the latter being explored further in a later section). But beneath these surface-level explanations lies a deeper, often overlooked pattern: **the human element.**

When we examine some of the most common pitfalls—**overconfidence in technical solutions, gaps in expertise, reluctance to embrace new systems, or the absence of clear direction**—it becomes obvious that these are primarily human-centered issues.

And yet, most organizations remain fixated on the technological side, **neglecting the interpersonal and behavioral dimensions that heavily shape a project's outcome.**

This blind spot may stem from the fact that a nuanced understanding of human behavior, grounded in psychology and organizational science, rarely features in the training of data professionals or business leaders.

Most companies are not structurally equipped to factor in psychological insights as part of their strategic execution. Nonetheless, research consistently highlights how deeply human dynamics influence whether data-driven projects succeed or unravel.
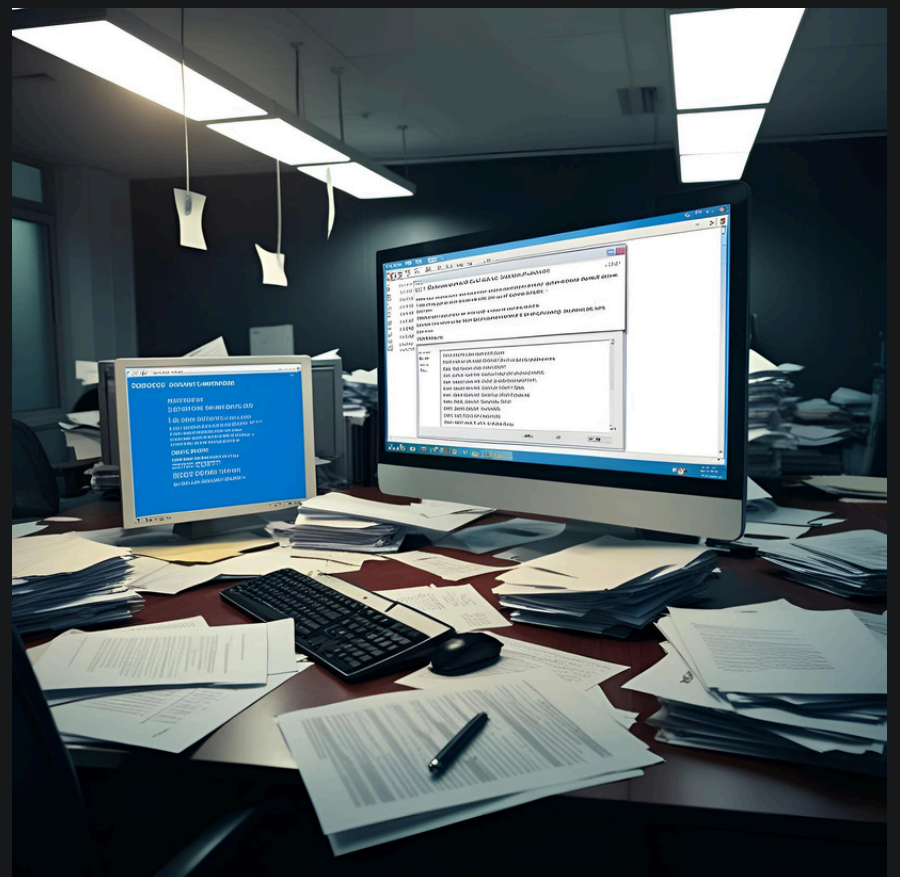
Organizational DNA: Culture as the Engine of Data Transformation

Think of culture as the invisible script that guides human interaction. It's not something we're born with, but rather something we pick up through constant exposure to others — habits, beliefs, unwritten rules.

It shapes how people adapt to the world around them and, in turn, how they shape that world back. Most of the time, we operate within this cultural framework without even noticing it, yet we're acutely aware when someone steps outside those lines — not because it breaks laws, but because it feels off. This concept doesn't just apply to entire societies; it plays out in organizations, too.

Inside a company, culture becomes the fabric that connects individuals to a shared understanding of "how things are done here." It's the behavioral playbook employees follow — consciously or not — to navigate their roles, and it influences how they respond to challenges, change, and each other. In fact, you could redefine organizational culture as the learned set of expectations and behaviors shaped by collective experience within a specific workplace.

Take remote work, for instance.

After the shockwaves of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies had to decide: stick with remote setups or bring people back in? Some organizations pulled everyone back into offices, claiming that physical proximity boosts accountability and performance.

Others leaned into the flexibility, trusting that their teams could thrive from anywhere.

These decisions weren't just about logistics — they revealed deeper cultural attitudes around trust, control, and productivity.

Whether or not you agree with either approach, this divergence in remote work policy is a clear example of how organizational culture impacts both strategy and behavior.

And the implications go far beyond remote work — they extend into how companies handle innovation, especially when it comes to adopting data and AI technologies.

Data-driven projects live and die by more than technical talent or funding. Culture — often overlooked — can be the tipping point. An organization that prizes innovation, encourages experimentation, and accepts that some initiatives may fail in pursuit of progress is far more likely to succeed with AI. These companies invest in pilots, take calculated risks, and create room for learning.

Their adaptability becomes an advantage.

On the flip side, businesses entrenched in tradition may resist new tools or workflows, not out of ignorance, but due to a culture that prefers stability over disruption. While that may shield them from chaos, it can also mean missing out on opportunities.

Training and development are another cultural marker. Firms that commit to upskilling, reskilling, and lifelong learning empower their workforce to meet technological shifts head-on.

These organizations treat talent as an evolving asset — one that can grow with the company's ambitions.

Others, less invested in education, may find themselves stuck when change arrives, with teams unprepared to pivot.

Collaboration, too, is culturally driven. In environments where cooperation and cross-pollination of ideas are the norm, creativity thrives — not just in AI or analytics, but across the board.

Cultural values shape how departments work together, how ideas are shared, and how momentum builds.

Leadership plays a vital role here. The tone set by executives and managers — whether they encourage innovation or enforce rigid protocols — has a ripple effect.

A forward-thinking leadership team can be the catalyst for change, helping employees embrace new ways of working and thinking.

When people talk about "data culture," what they're really referring to is how well the broader organizational culture supports a data-centric mindset.

And that, at its core, comes down to openness: to new tools, new ways of thinking, and the idea that change doesn't have to be a threat — it can be a springboard.

Plenty of management books and thought leaders offer blueprints for building a data-first company. But none of those blueprints work unless they're adapted to fit the unique cultural DNA of an organization — the values, habits, and leadership style that already exist.

At the end of the day, **culture is powerful — but it's not immutable. People still matter. Employees aren't just products of the system; they're agents within it.**

Their personalities, preferences, and choices all influence whether a data or AI initiative takes root or fizzles out.

That's why understanding the human side — not just the tech — is key to meaningful transformation.

When Data Meets Personality

Meet Paul, Carla, and George—fictional figures whose behaviors may seem all too familiar to anyone navigating the world of data in modern organizations.

Paul holds the title of Chief Data Officer and has a habit of obsessively reviewing dashboards before rollout, often pushing for tiny tweaks that stall launches. His approach, though perhaps well-intentioned, leaves his team feeling drained and unappreciated, especially after pouring so much energy into crafting tools tailored to business needs.

Carla, leading a team of data scientists, repeatedly casts doubt on the accuracy of statistical findings and predictive outputs—despite the clear precision in her team's work. Her critiques often seem less about technical faults and more about discomfort with data that contradicts her viewpoints. Her team can't help but feel that when data challenges her opinions, she pushes back, not because the numbers are flawed, but because her ego feels under threat.

Then there's George, a data analyst who avoids adopting the new tech embraced company-wide. Faced with continuous change, he feels depleted, lacking the motivation to learn unfamiliar tools. His resistance is so entrenched that trying to involve him in fresh initiatives is seen as futile—he's viewed as stuck and unmovable.
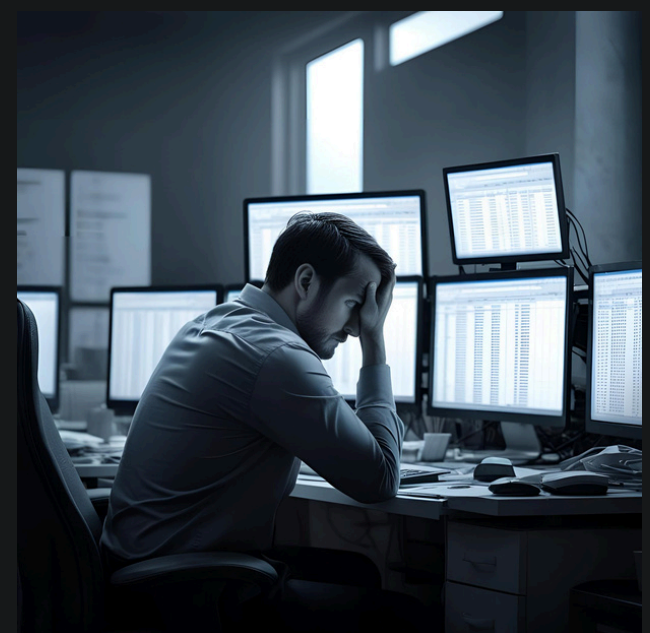
While these three are constructs, the scenarios they represent are anything but imaginary. Anyone immersed in data governance or analytics will recognize the patterns: **the gatekeeper who delays, the critic who resists disconfirmation, the traditionalist who clings to the old ways**. These aren't just random behaviors—they often stem from deeper psychological roots.

To decode these dynamics, we can turn to personality theory. This field helps explain why individuals consistently approach work, relationships, and challenges in particular ways. In data environments, where stress, speed, and ambiguity are the norm, our personality traits often influence how we relate to data, tools, teammates, and authority figures.

Our personality serves as a kind of internal compass, guiding our responses—especially under pressure. Whether someone sees a new dashboard release as an exciting milestone or a stress-inducing risk often comes down to their personality and past experiences.

How we identify with our roles, manage emotional friction, and interpret events is shaped by these underlying traits.

Stressful situations in data work can bring out these tendencies with startling clarity. Think about:

- The tension before a major dashboard goes live
- Presenting analytical outcomes to skeptical executives
- Convincing peers to accept new methodologies
- Revealing data that conflicts with a leader's beliefs
- Encountering flawed predictive models
- Managing technical shortcomings
- Handling sensitive data errors or security incidents
- Each of these moments tests not just skill, but also the personality behind it.

Clinical psychology—especially psychodynamic theory, which has evolved from classical psychoanalysis—proposes twelve core personality traits, each capturing a distinct approach to life's challenges. **Though it might seem a stretch to connect these traits to data projects, the link is more direct than it appears.** Launching a model, challenging legacy assumptions, or defending your work to leadership—all these experiences trigger responses rooted in personality.

In fast-moving data ecosystems, the way individuals engage with innovation or react under scrutiny can often be traced back to these deep-seated traits.

Personality theory, therefore, offers organizations a powerful lens for understanding friction points and improving team dynamics.

These traits are our psychological signatures—relatively fixed ways of interpreting and reacting to the world. If we blend this understanding with probabilistic thinking, we can begin to anticipate behaviors within data teams, leadership, and broader stakeholder groups.

Let's revisit Paul, Carla, and George with this lens.

Paul likely exhibits **obsessive-compulsive** tendencies.

His need for perfection and control causes delays—not out of malice, but because his anxiety spikes when faced with key decisions.

Slowing down gives him a (false) sense of mastery, but it hampers progress.

Carla may align with **narcissistic traits**.

She perceives data presentations as extensions of herself —so when a model tells a story she disagrees with, it feels like a personal slight.

To preserve her self-image, she'll often reject insights that challenge her perspective, regardless of their validity.

George, on the other hand, may embody **depressive traits** —not to be confused with clinical depression, but rather a chronic sense of helplessness.

He underestimates his ability to adapt and doesn't believe new tools will improve his performance. His low self-worth creates a mental block against change, even when innovation could make his work easier and more meaningful.

Roadblocks, delays, rejections.
How often have we encountered these in data-related initiatives?
In many cases, the root cause likely wasn't poor processes or external unknowns.
More often than we realize, the real reason may lie in the personality traits of the colleagues involved.

Ultimately, by recognizing these patterns, organizations can move beyond technical solutions to address the human side of data. Understanding personality isn't just for psychologists—it's a strategic asset in building stronger, more adaptive data teams.

Conclusions

Viewing your organizational culture through the eyes of an anthropologist—and yourself and your colleagues through the lens of a psychologist—means equipping yourself with powerful tools to boost the chances that your data initiatives will succeed and deliver real impact.

Far too often, these human dimensions are overlooked because they stem from disciplines perceived as distant from the day-to-day realities of working with data.

But understanding people and organizational culture is what lays the groundwork—the fertile soil—for your data-driven efforts to truly take root and thrive.

At FIT Academy, we've placed data professionals at the heart of everything we do.

We've evolved from a traditional training provider into a full-fledged organization dedicated to developing data talents—individuals with above-average expertise capable of driving meaningful, transformative impact within organizations.

We've developed a comprehensive service pathway that begins with identifying data talent and extends all the way to post-training support.

TALENT ENGAGEMENT
We assist companies in effectively engaging their data talents through recruiting, upskilling, or reskilling.

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We design tailored data training programs, ranging from custom solutions to certification-focused pathways.
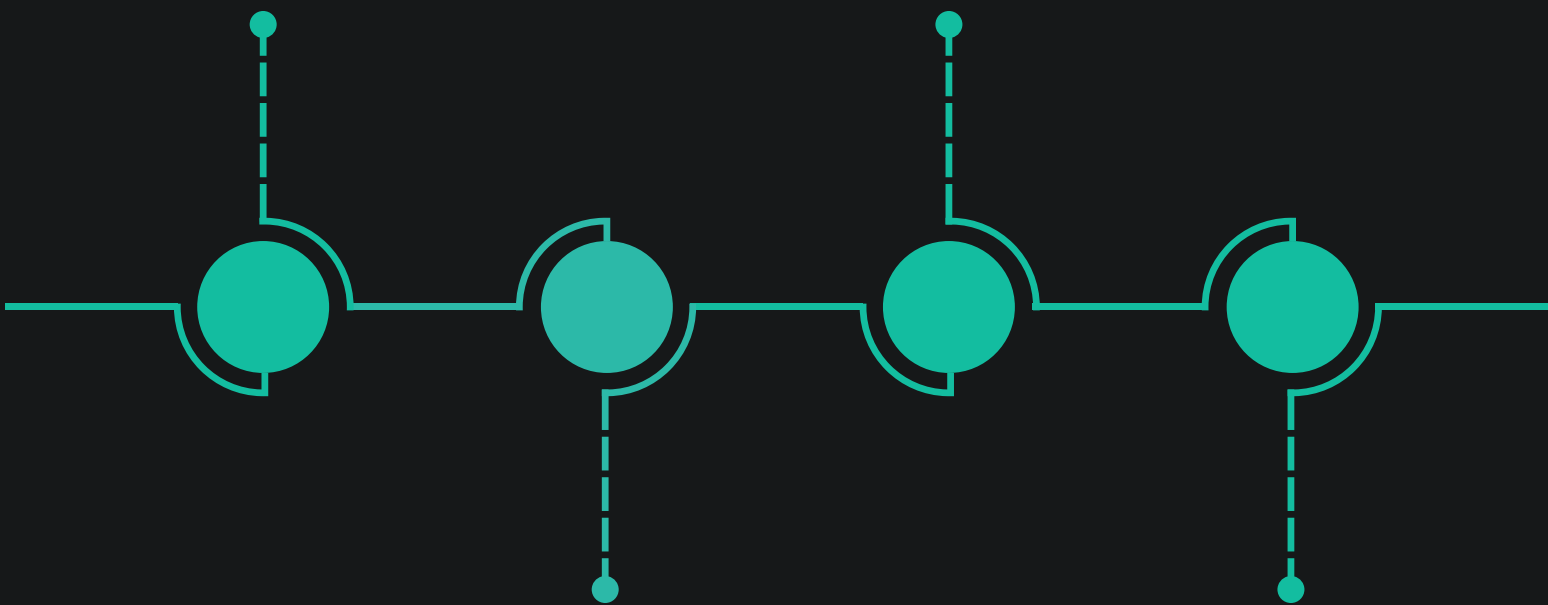
ONBOARDING
We facilitate the swift and seamless integration of new talents.

HUMAN-CENTERED CONSULTING
We empower talents with mentoring and coaching programs to ensure the continuity and growth of their acquired data skills.

PEOPLE
Individual assessment through surveys, observations, and immersive experiences.

Maturity is our proprietary data capability assessment designed to understand the organization's structure, identify data talent, investigate its culture, and develop tailored training and consulting programs.

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