ESOMAR

Mutatis Mutandis –
The Business Value of Insights

New ways of business and marketing require
new ways to insights: from data, research and
insights to foresight and full-sight.

By Niels Schillewaert, PhD
ESOMAR President ex-officio
Managing Partner and co-founder InSites Consulting

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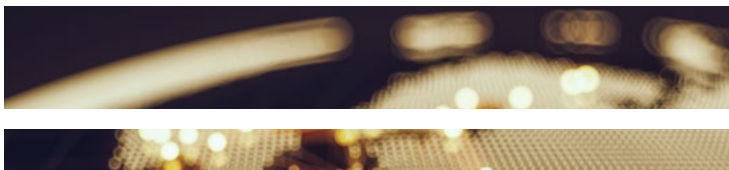Managing Partner and co-founder InSites Consulting

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I. Aim

ESOMAR's primary mission for the past 70+ years has been to safeguard and promote the interests of the insights and data analytics profession. In recent times we have been paying a lot more attention to the constituency of "end-clients" (brand-owners) or "users and buyers" of market research and insights as it is these constituents who are the core drivers of the entire industry. As market research and insights departments are no longer the sole generator of market and commercial data, many companies are seeking ways to cope with this change, this data explosion, and how to leverage it to contribute to business performance.

This topic is equally important to end-clients as well as those business partners serving them. Against this background ESOMAR has been involved with a variety of thought leadership projects showcasing the business relevance of insights, which first started in 2015 with our partnership with the Insights 2020 programme (which provided clear evidence of the business benefits accruing from customer-centricity).

Specifically, this work builds on the 2019 paper "How to demonstrate the value of investing in customer insight", based on 25 depth interviews with the head of corporate insights from a wide selection of global brand owners.

II. Approach

The current findings are based on four modules: (1) a literature study, (2) 12 roundtable discussions with corporate insights professional held at ESOMAR conferences in 2016-2017, (3) eleven additional expert interviews [1] and (4) an online survey among a global sample of 198 end-clients [2].

Topics of the interview and survey related to the performance of insights functions (e.g. impact on business performance, helps selling more …), characteristics of the insights function (e.g. order taker, access to the C-suite …), performance on and importance of capabilities (e.g. data analytics, storytelling, …), status of operations, innovation and leadership as well clients' expectations of technology (e.g. time efficiencies or richer consumer data …).

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[1] Tetra Pak, Shell, New Balance, Orange, McDonald's, Here, Mondelez, KLM, Philips, Hilton, Diageo.
[2] Sample profile: ESOMAR members (43%) or attendees of conferences of the past 2 years (57%) - 13% response rate during a 2-week data-collection period in August 2019. 61% of participants are female. Responses from 45 countries with the US (13%), UK (8%), Netherlands (8%), Switzerland (7%), France (5%), Philippines (5%) and Singapore (4%) making up 50% of the sample.

III. Insights under pressure

With shifting sources of competitive advantage, urbanization leading to new mindsets, behaviors and economies, advanced tech-connected living opening up whole new channels of communication and languages, it is very clear that the world around us is changing fast and that change will never be as slow again as it was today! These changes create disruptions and uncertainties in many categories. Digital native companies benefit from them though. These companies thrive in a world of behavioral data and their ongoing decision making is built on (real-time) data, analytics and insights. Traditional companies try to follow this operating model and look for versatile primary data collection and agile yet truthful decision making, but as we know, teaching "new tricks" to an "old dog" can be very challenging! However, the good news in all of this is that "customer insight" is the number 1 capability to develop and assist in this process, according to the C-suite [3].

The "less good" news is that many insights departments are often perceived as underwhelming. They remain order takers or are perceived as stuffy librarians, when actually they are being asked to be a strategic business partner.

Market researchers are no longer the exclusive collector of customer data. Marketeers and brand owners have alternatives with DIY-tools at their fingertips and they are drinking from a firehose of big transactional, behavioral and social media data. The digital disruption from within corporations now means that the sales, digital and IT, CRM functions all generate data and often connect with tens of thousands of people per day while conventional research sometimes scrambles to recruit 1,000 consumers in a week. While both approaches have their own place and value, it is clear that data driven marketing and self-service technology rely much more on the former, and thus reduce the perceived need for "market research as we know it" among business stakeholders.
The flip side of this coin however, is that companies that are perceived as being "data and analytically rich" are not always companies that are "insights rich and sound". In fact, previous studies have shown that the ability of translating data and analytics into understandable and actioned-upon insights, is the key to success [4].

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[3] Barton et al. (2016), Why Companies Can't Turn Customer Insights into Growth, BCG, Cambiar, Yale.
[4] van den Driest F. et al. (2016), Building an Insights Engine, HBR (September)

IV. The performance of insights departments

Against this backdrop we wanted to understand the performance of insights functions and its drivers. Here, we define the performance of a customer insights function as the extent to which it significantly contributes to the business, e.g. in terms of business transformation, influencing business strategy, improving customer experience, products and services as well as selling more. Participants in our survey self-rated the performance of their insights function on these dimensions using a 10-point scale (see table 1).

How would you evaluate the performance of the 'insights' function within your organization?	Average	Top 2
has a direct impact on our business performance	7,66	32%
helps sell more	7,44	29%
drives improvement in our customer experience, service or products	8,23	43%
directly influences our business strategy	8,04	45%
helps our business transform	7,84	34%

Table [1] - Performance of the insights function

The self-rated performance is quite high with over 40% indicating that they believe they directly influence the business strategy and drive improvement in customer experience, service or products. While the direct impact on business performance and being crucial to selling more is lower, the average score on a 10-point scale is still above 7,4 with a median of 8.

For the remainder of this paper, we calculated a composite sum score of these 5 components to reflect "insights performance". Subsequently, we divided them into low (bottom 20%) and high (top 20%) performers in order to understand the drivers of insights performance [5].

V. Coping with change and gaining business value

So how do insights departments at the client-side deal with the changing environment and maximize their performance? In 4 ways by (1) (re)organizing for impact and future business growth, (2) developing talent, capabilities and skills, (3) implementing smart and adaptive research operations and (4) developing innovative capabilities.

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[5] Composite sum score average = 39, median 40 and range between 12 and 50, Cronbach's a =.85

1. Reorganizing the organizational role for impact and future business growth.
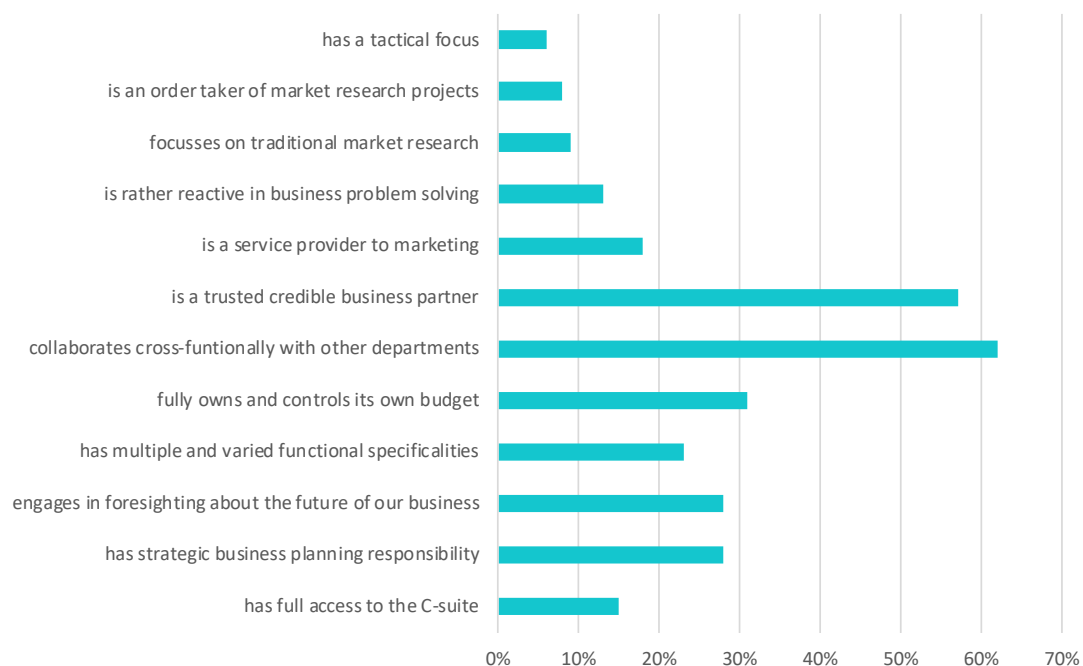
In order to cope with the business pressure, insights departments are reorganizing for the future and it seems progress is being made in the positioning of insights functions within organizations. The stigma and perception that insight functions are primarily reactive order takers, seems to be past us with approximately only 1 in 10 insight departments still being seen as an order taker of conventional market research with a tactical focus (see figure 1). The insights functions in our sample seem to have no problem working cross-functionally and have attained the self-perceived image of being a credible and trusted business partner – which points to progress compared to other studies where the majority of insight departments were struggling to achieve this status [6].

However, there is still significant growth potential in terms of upscaling the insights function into the C-suite and upskilling into strategic business planning and foresighting. Only about 1 in 4 fulfills a true strategic role in future proofing the business and has the wide variety of functional specialties to do so; 1 in 3 fully owns and controls a budget and only 15% indicate they have full C-suite access.

Indeed, several insights departments (are trying to) gain an independent place in the organizational design. Independent from the commercial marketing function to operate in full objectivity and serve business stakeholders cross-functionally. There is another reason why insight functions should gain independence and that is the employee turnover in marketing jobs. With low tenures in marketing it is hard to establish long term, tangible effects of market insights and build credibility at the C-level – yet our function is often the collective wisdom of the company [7].

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[6] Barton et al. (2016), Why Companies Can't Turn Customer Insights into Growth, BCG, Cambiar, Yale.
van den Driest F. et al. (2016), Building an Insights Engine, HBR (September)
[7] E.g. the average CMO stays in place on average 3,7 years and that is less than half as long as the average CEO and more than 25% shorter than the average CFO. Burggraeve C. (2019), Marketing Is Finance Is Business, Gatekeeper Press.

Companies like Pepsico, Diageo and Unilever have developed a "purpose" for their insight function, linked to the overall brand or company purpose [8]. They all make the insights department explicitly accountable for business outcomes and impact. These departments actually evolve from a research provider into a strategy and business planning unit that runs on data, analytics, insights as well as foresighting. Broadening the scope to strategy and future proofing the business based on consumer and market intelligence is the ultimate route to customer centricity and allows insights departments to engage in senior and C-suite conversations.

"Foresighting was not in our remit, because we were in the here and now, but it allows for more senior conversations which in turn endorses our insights function again."
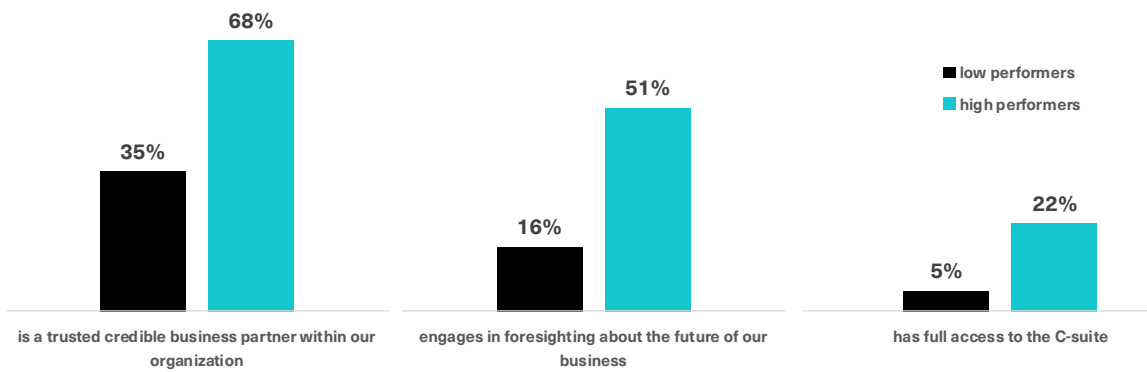*[James Johnstone, Shell]*

The key in establishing the position of an indispensable business partner is to proactively take leadership and become an actual part of each business solution in itself, thus creating and further reinforcing inclusion. When "insights" is attached to the actual business challenge, the solution becomes business ready. The ultimate achievement is when solving a business problem by "engaging insights" becomes a natural thing to do rather than a last-minute mandatory chore.

"We used to be one data input in making business decisions. We stayed very much in our box and we were not a strategic partner in consulting. Over the last years, we are increasingly expected to become a much more active participant from a strategic perspective. This implies being more involved in the process leading up to what and when research needs to happen, as well as being part of interpreting the results, putting together the actual business case and directing the work" [Anonymous quote from our survey]

This begs the question though if more established and advanced insights departments are also doing better in the end and how. The role characteristics that drive the performance of insights departments the most are the fact that insights functions engage in foresighting and the future of the business (51% of high performers do while only 16% of low performers do), being a trusted and credible business partner (68% of high performers versus 35% low performers) and having full access to the C-suite (22% among high and 5% among low performing insights departments).
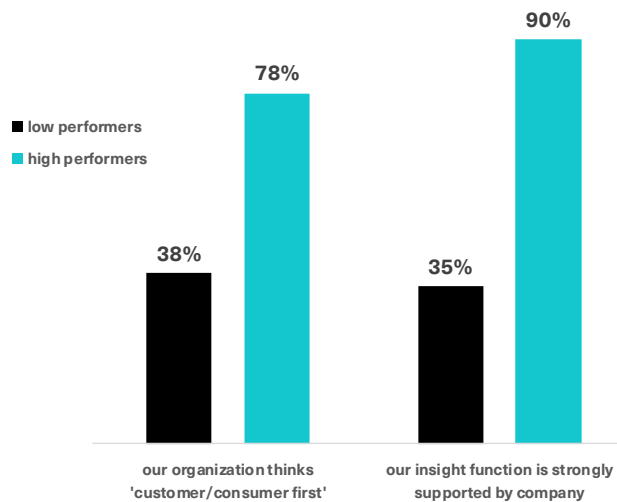
[8] Gans S. and T. Warner (2017), Transforming insights to deliver a new source of competitive advantage, presentation at the ESOMAR Congress 2017 – available on ESOMAR's Resource Library ANA.
Geoghegan A. (2017), Re-imagining the Client-side, ESOMAR Congress 2017.
van den Driest F. et al. (2016), Building an Insights Engine, HBR (September)

68%

51%

35%

16%

■ low performers
■ high performers

22%

5%

is a trusted credible business partner within our organization

engages in foresighting about the future of our business

has full access to the C-suite

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"Credibility within the organization. The organization believes in and trusts your capability to generate valid and transformative insights and that their use has made significant, positive transformation in business performance" [Anonymous quote from our survey]

We did not find that owning or controlling a proper budget has a significant impact on insights performance. Similarly, we also did not find a relationship between collaborating cross-functionally with other departments and insights performance. Given the fact that over 6 in 10 insight functions are currently cross-functionally involved, this may point to the fact that it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for superior performance of insights departments or that high performers drive their efforts independently.

90%

78%

■ low performers
■ high performers

38%

35%

our organization thinks 'customer/consumer first'

our insight function is strongly supported by company

Our numbers do show, however, that adopting a role for impact doesn't just come from the "bottom" or from within the insights function in itself. Customer insights functions are much more successful if there is leadership support and an organizational culture that puts consumers or customers first. Among high performing insight functions, 90% indicate they are strongly supported by their company leadership, while only 35% of low performers senior leadership support. Similarly, a company culture of consumer centricity also helps: 78% of the high performers indicate their organization thinks customers / consumers first, against 38% among low performers.

"It is a huge operation and takes time, but it all really started by getting our new CEO, who recognized the need to have a strong insights function. Historically, it had been a reporting function rather than influential and infusing itself into the business. Our global consumer and business insights lead – who had operational as well as financial understanding – then really evolved the function to one that has a seat at the table and commits to lead. In addition, our strategic velocity plan puts being "customer obsessed" forward as one of our cultural pillars. Altogether, this gives our insights function more permission to insert itself into more strategic conversations." [Anonymous quote from our survey]

While this may be argued to be a "chicken or egg" debate (i.e. good insights teams will always find management support, and bad ones won't), this does clearly underline that proactivity, solid (fact-checked) data and contextually translated business guidance are key components of a strategic partner role.

The insights function that will endure is one that has the credibility and takes leadership in shaping the future of a company's business through valid and transformative insights that drives business performance - repeatedly.

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2. Development of talent, capabilities and skills

In order to take organizational leadership, there is a need for explicit talent management and investments in customer insights, both in terms of broadening the skills of insights executives as well as scaling these insighting skills across organizations.

With talent management we refer to managing and positioning "insights as a career". It implies explicitly attracting, developing as well as retaining high level talent. Many people who work in an insights function today, ended up there "by accident". While this does not imply that we do not have any talent (on the contrary!), it would even be better if people proactively chose our profession. Catching people young, while they are still open and providing a perspective of an attractive, diversified and systemic growth path is key. Branding insights as a career and attracting the very best talent, will have the long-term effect that the importance of insights spreads as executives move into new roles in the business.

While everyone acknowledges talent is hard to find, attract and develop, many insight functions are actively working on their skills. They do this in 2 ways: (1) enhance the skills of individuals and (2) diversify capabilities and create multi-functional roles within a team. Almost half of our sample (48%) indicated they are upskilling their executives and are encouraging them to develop different specialties and/or broaden their experiences. 42% indicated they are developing different roles in their insight teams (e.g. people focusing on conducting projects, production, analyzing data, communicating results and consulting). Both forms of skill and capability enhancement are important for a better performance of the insight function, but our data and interviews also indicate that developing multi-functional roles within one team is easier to realize in larger insight teams.

"I am a believer in the strength of teams, in the power of collective wisdom. For a while, everybody has been focusing on trying to find and attract the unicorn, the unique talent able to combine advanced analytics with business knowledge. If we use all those efforts instead for developing our talents we will discover that we already have a "unicorn" in our companies...it is not an individual, it is the power of a passionate team, learning and growing together."
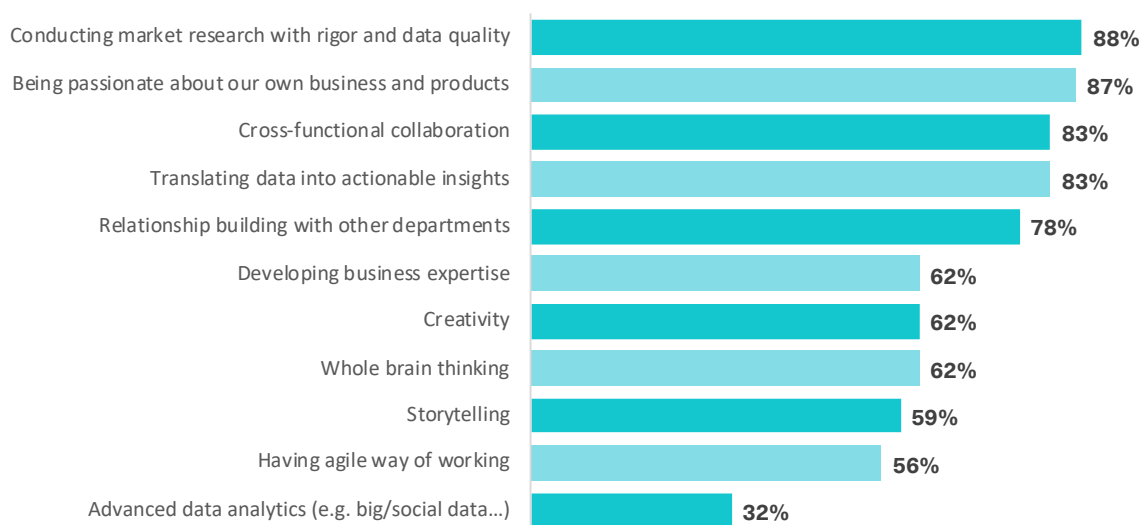*[Begonia Fafian, Coca-Cola]*

"From a talent management point of view we need to evolve to have more well-rounded people with insights as a core fundamental part of their skillset." [Charles Wilson, New Balance]

So which capabilities are, and should, insight teams be developing?

The "power" lies is having a mix of business and action skills. Managerial and business skills are all about developing business acumen and expertise. Insights and analytics professionals need to speak the language of the business and the C-suite and tie everything they do to the (financial) business objectives. Business savviness and being prepared to have boardroom conversations is essential. "Action skills" refer to generating impact and thus doing more than just the "research work". We need to expand our capabilities beyond the expected functional skills of project management, research and analysis, into communicating, persuading, facilitating, creating and leading. The basic table stakes for insight professionals in this is that the delivery and communication of insights need to be relevant and appealing for business stakeholders. In a way, just like marketers, insights executives need to "speak more Wall Street"[9] .

This can be achieved by delivering multi-media streams of tiny insights as well as make stakeholders part of the insights initiative. The ability to craft and deliver configurable insights is what matters most. What we need for that is whole brain thinking, creativity and storytelling [10]. Whole brain thinking requires the capability of combining science and analytics of what the data says (left brain) with the art of coming up with creative recommendations (right brain) that resonate both internally as well as externally. Storytelling and consultative skills bring data to life and turn it into consumer stories that increase business impact. Stories are data with a soul, and all in all data driven stories are the ones that are most powerful.

How well does your insight function perform on the following capabilities? Top 2

Capability	%
Conducting market research with rigor and data quality	88%
Being passionate about our own business and products	87%
Cross-functional collaboration	83%
Translating data into actionable insights	83%
Relationship building with other departments	78%
Developing business expertise	62%
Creativity	62%
Whole brain thinking	62%
Storytelling	59%
Having agile way of working	56%
Advanced data analytics (e.g. big/social data...)	32%

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[9] Burggraeve C. (2019), Marketing Is Finance Is Business, Gatekeeper Press.
[10] van den Driest F. et al. (2016), Building an Insights Engine, HBR (September)

Of the 11 capabilities tested in our survey, insights professionals rate their own performance highest on core research and interpersonal management capabilities. More specifically, insight departments report they perform well in "conducting market research with rigor and data quality", "developing passion about their own business and products", "cross-functional collaboration", "translating data into actionable insights" and "relationship building with other departments". All these capabilities are highly graded with over 80% rating these capabilities at least a 4 on a 5-point scale. It is notable that this is significantly higher than their assessment of their action skills (e.g. creativity, storytelling, whole brain thinking) and business acumen (e.g. developing business expertise, an agile way of working). The performance on these capabilities is mediocre and is scored as "high" by 55% to 62% of our sample.

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"Our challenge is to upskill ourselves (digital media understanding, social media analytics, strategic planning understanding, design thinking/LEAN startup methods, etc.) and become THE neutral cross-functional partner that understands customer attitudes and behaviors best, period!" [Anonymous quote from our survey].

When asked to rank the capabilities in a top 3, "the ability to translate data into actionable insights" is considered the utmost important capability of all. 51% ranks it as the "number one" capability and 82% in the top 3. This is a logical and good thing as understanding human behavior is what insight professionals have always been good at.

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"Understanding and translating numerous data (i.e. research studies) into forward actions that are strategic and value adding to the company. With having many sources of data (both collected via traditional research and digital platforms), I feel that the insights specialists are overwhelmed with the amount of findings they need to interpret/analyze. They spend too many hours on this and lesser time on thinking about recommendations that would really be strategic and would be making an impact to the organization" [Anonymous quote from our survey].

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"Lack of technical skills (data science and scientific, logical process). Too much right-brain thinking, less left-brain thinking." [Anonymous quote from our survey].

Advanced data analytics is the capability that insight departments are most struggling with. Performance on advanced data analytics is rated as the lowest of all capabilities studied with only 1 in 3 insight departments indicating they perform well. Interestingly, one of the reasons for this is that insights professionals do not consider it to be an important capability for performing well. Out of the eleven capabilities considered, advanced data analytics ranks as the second least important of all with only 13% of the insight professionals ranking it in their top 3 of most important capabilities.

But there is a hidden danger here as the highest leverage for insights performance can be found in having the competence of advanced data analytics. 59% of high performing insights departments indicate they do data analytics very well (at least 4 on 5-point scale) against only 22% among low performers. This triangle of low performance, low perceived importance and actual high importance for performance, points to the very recognizable and important antithesis related to data analytics. There is a need and feeling that insights and research must be conducted with rigor and quality, but data analytics is hard to do well for insight professionals (due to e.g. data integration, data quality, translation into actionable insights …) yet it is a very important capability – if not the most important one – to develop in order to generate a holistic consumer understanding. Advanced data analytics is something insight functions do need to develop urgently and proactively, as it is also what is being talked about at and to the C-suite, by non-insights (service) professionals – it is what currently offers a seat at the table.
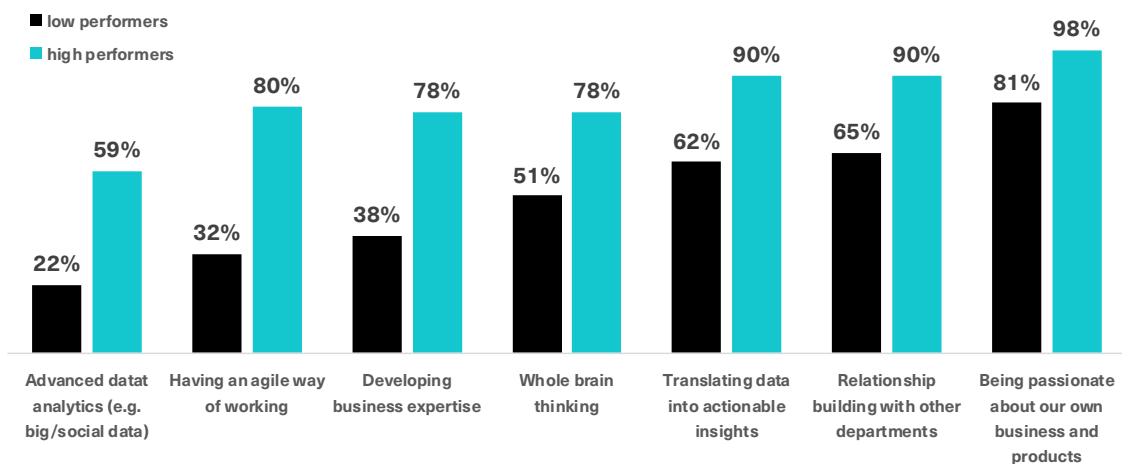
(There is an additional peril here, which is an assumption that data analytics provided by non-insights professionals is automatically correct; this is NOT the case. While this is not a topic covered by this particular study, ESOMAR does have other studies that clearly document and guide companies on the need for data rigour and data ethcis).

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"The transformation of leveraging much more existing and real time digital consumer / user data for insight creation. The current market researchers are not specialized in this, we need to build new capabilities in data science with strong story tellers to develop this into actionable insights to make this happen." [Anonymous quote from our survey].

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"Integrating multiple data sources - we sit on a mountain of data (different sources, different types e.g. quantitative/qualitative, different samples and approaches) but cannot always manage to find the time and put all the pieces together into a big picture."
[Anonymous quote from our survey].

Chart legend:
- low performers (black)
- high performers (teal)

Capability	low performers	high performers
Advanced datat analytics (e.g. big/social data)	22%	59%
Having an agile way of working	32%	80%
Developing business expertise	38%	78%
Whole brain thinking	51%	78%
Translating data into actionable insights	62%	90%
Relationship building with other departments	65%	90%
Being passionate about our own business and products	81%	98%

Next to advanced data analytics there are other capabilities that significantly leverage insights performance. "Having an agile way of working", "developing business expertise", "whole brain thinking", "translating data into actionable insights", "being passionate about the business" and "relationship building with other departments" are also significantly related to the performance of the insight function. This mix in performance drivers of research, interpersonal, action and management skills, supports that fact indeed there is a clear need for skill enhancement.

All of this goes hand in glove with marketing insights. Insights functions need to build a brand and develop an identity that stands for being assertive, taking ownership and being provocative. Traditional researchers have tended to be poor marketers of their own "product". While our industry is an attractive one, critical to business development and growth, and in size terms ($value) on a par with the recorded music and online gaming industry, we are perceived as old-fashioned and boring. But why is it that no-one minds working in data science or being termed a data geek, while it is simply a rebranding of how to use information to improve and understand the customers and consumers? Isn't that what we called market research?
At Philips, for example, the insights function is redefining its role in the persona of an inspirer, explorer or navigator, to show its value and re-assert its expertise [11].

Long-lasting insights functions build versatile skills, speak the language of the C-Suite and embrace the inner loop of data analytics. Therefore, insight departments need to be more assertive, take ownership, build belief, show impact and repeat this!

[11] Quinn-de Jong A. (2018), The Mutation of Research, presented at ESOMAR World Congress

3. Implementing smart and adaptive research operations.

To address the changed processes that come with "agile business management" and new ways of decision-making, the most frontrunning insight executives are talking (and taking) a stance of "help me, help you". Rather than fight the democratization of data collection tools and the abundance of data, many practitioners feel one cannot as well as should not win that fight, but rather be a quality enabler than a controller.

"In developing credibility the approach of 'help me help you' works well. I love seeing our team succeed, I want us all to do well. The consumers will never get to know who I am personally, but they will know their favorite pair of sneakers. The insights professional can provide guidance to say what trusted secondary sources are, ways to ask unbiased question and reliable answers … to provide guardrails. Decisions are going to be made whether you are there or not. Our role is to add value so that are making smarter decisions and always have the consumer in mind as we make those decisions." [Charles Wilson, New Balance]

Insight professionals must be pragmatic and manage the risk for decision making and the business. Fully "controlling" and getting involved in all research studies and data projects simply cannot be done. The reality is that there are insight projects which will be executed faster, at lower cost, with DIY-tools - but the danger is it may be done along mediocre quality standards. So, data quality and provenance are important, but it should also be fit-for-purpose.

We have found that insights professionals do not want to slow down business decision-making and processes but do want to safeguard executives from confirmation bias and making decisions based on bad data. They have several coping mechanisms to handle this friction. Many mitigate risk by dividing projects into 'high' to 'low' business criticality and only (want to) get involved in projects with a 'high' stake. For other, more tactical projects it is important to provide guardrails and quality labels for anyone outside of an insight function who performs research. It is better to educate other stakeholders and, next to the tools, democratize the insight skillset throughout the organization, such that all executives become better at turning data into actionable insights and business results.

There is an explicit need for reconciling rigor and provenance of the data and analytics especially when it concerns behavioral and social data. The key question is always "what does one want to use it for?". While used as a concrete option by stakeholders, insight professionals have a lot of skepticism about 'social media listening' and feel it is their task to educate about the caveats internally. Many clients feel 'social media listening' is oversold and not a true reflection of reality because there is a lack of profiling information and many conversations are not public or even digital. For social media analytics to create added value, it is important to look for what people say on these channels that they do not say through other data collection methods. In that sense, it is particularly relevant for monitoring and crisis communication, assessing product launches and product reviews or as an exploratory starting point in a bigger method design.

We observe end-clients are developing smart operations for, within and outside of the insight function with the goal of having things run smoothly. We observe 3 main developments here: (a)

implementing agile research methods which provide consumer access at our fingertips, e.g. insight communities, consumer connects, video surveys, chat applications ..., (b) internalization of research capabilities (e.g. Booking.com who has developed full in-house research capabilities and (c) automation of repetitive and evaluative quantitative research.

	Completely agree		Completely disagree
INTERNALIZATION	29%	25%	46%
AUTOMATION	7%	27%	66%
AGILE RESEARCH METHODS	42%	29%	30%
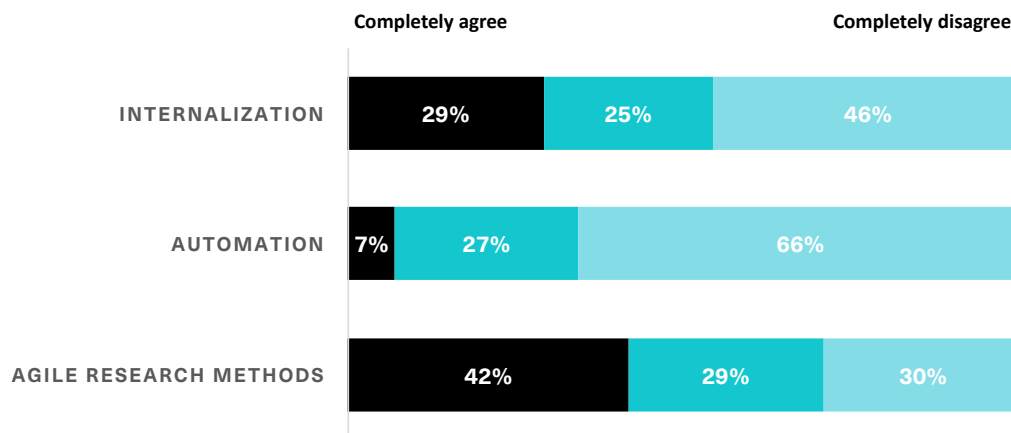
Our research indicates that many companies have made progress in developing agile research methods, that about 1 in 3 are conducting a considerable amount in-house and that automation is still in its infancy.

But automation and digitization will for sure dominate the immediate future within the insights realm. Pepsico for example has developed its own proprietary digital insights and intelligence platform, called "Ada". The automation platform not only generates time and cost gains, it also allows Pepsico getting smarter over time and unlock meta-insights by means of machine learning [12]. Other end-clients, such as Nestle and Unilever, are also expanding their insights scope to "where the data" is, e.g. by relying on self-generated data from customer contact or care centres. As consumers have become more outspoken and assertive, these open communication channels provide a wealth of information for companies to mine from. These inflowing data are not only complaints, but often free ideas and suggestions which can help solve business problems. Consequently, primary data-collection techniques are now required less, due to such self-generated data.

While conventional primary research methods are generally under pressure as more data is self-generated, we do notice that specific primary research methods such as communities, digital "consumer connects" (e.g. based on messaging and texting) and video surveys are on the rise. But why would a digital native company such as Uber or Twitter in a data abundant world still need primary research? The answer lies in the fact that "data needs a soul". What objective, behavioral or social media data does not do, is fill the blanks and get to the "why". There is a clear need for "thick" or "deep" data which humanizes the data stream. people are only consumers and users of your product or service for a small part of the day. These immersive and versatile primary research methods provide these benefits and deliver on the holy trinity of delivering "better, faster, cheaper" as they provide time and efficiency gains for many clients. The upside of these agile methods can

[12] Schardt K. (2018), Revolutionising PepsiCo insights through digital transformation, presented at ESOMAR Client Summit.

also lie outside of the digital or online aspect, as senior management sometimes just wants to talk to people, "touch and feel" them. Research methods that put the consumers at executives' fingertips are in full sync with the current management practices of "agile" and "scrum".

"Conventional researchers are passionate about methods, are perfectionist and adhere to standards from the past. Whilst very much needed, it also withholds them from transforming. They have been stuck in "primary data collection" while it is really about the combination of big and primary data, connect the data and build the architecture as well as use predictive data analytics and machine learning on top to generate thick data. The combination of insights and analytics is powerful! For executives we need to ensure we bring in the voice of the customer as soon as possible. Methods need to fit contemporary consumer behavior, include end-to-end experimentation whilst ensuring data quality and rigor especially when business risk is high."
[Fenny Leautier, Head of Marketing Insights & Analytics Personal Health, Philips]

"We try out new methods and new types of agencies, in the start-up sphere or smaller agencies, innovation / design agencies … not necessarily the traditional ones. The new way of working should lead to transactional learning based on experimentation, test and learn. Our methods need to allow to holistically understand real behavior of people – not just 'ask' them what they think" [Barbara Schandl, Mondelez]

Single most important challenge for the insights profession: "Getting other departments to understand that insighting means connecting many sources of BI and contextualizing them. No single customer, nor single study will give them all the answers they seek. Also, it's not only about large sample sizes." [Anonymous quote from our survey].

Our analysis does indicate there is not one, set way to operate smartly, as the application of internalization, automation or agile methods vary significantly from company to company, and may not generate differences in performance levels. This finding may make sense from a number of perspectives: e.g. freed up time or other resources from automation efforts does not mean they are wisely applied, there are good and bad agencies and agile methods are just a means to an end.

While evaluative and repetitive research is automating fast, business stakeholders are looking for integrated solutions which provide a holistic understanding of consumer journeys with "think data". Agile research methods deliver empathy, such that the data as such matter less.

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4. Developing innovative capabilities.

Clients want and need to experiment with AI, bots, virtual and mixed reality, geolocation or other innovations. The problem is that vetting innovations for clients is hard. First of all, it is not an easy thing to do. Everyone admits technological change is fast, much of the change comes from outside our industry and it is hard to keep up.

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"We are not keeping up the pace of innovation and the power of the data that other industries are leveraging using analytics and derived data." [Anonymous quote from our survey].

But clients are also overwhelmed by the quantity of innovative technologies, but often these technologies underwhelm in their performance and business relevance.

"A term or buzzword does not tell me much. I want to know 'what do we do with it? what problem does it solve?' Real-time, location-based, in-the-moment feedback is what I believe in because that is when and where things happen in our business: those are the moments you want feedback. That makes it relevant. We need to understand the complete picture – the inner and outer loops. It has to be relevant for us as well as our clients. When our clients experience something, they want to provide feedback. If they do, it is relevant for us because we can (immediately) act upon it and we know where in the journey it takes place and in which context." [Anonymous quote from our survey]

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"Finding the balance between hype and real progress is key. Agile is a useless word - better, richer and more actionable insight is the real goal, not agile." [Anonymous quote from our survey].
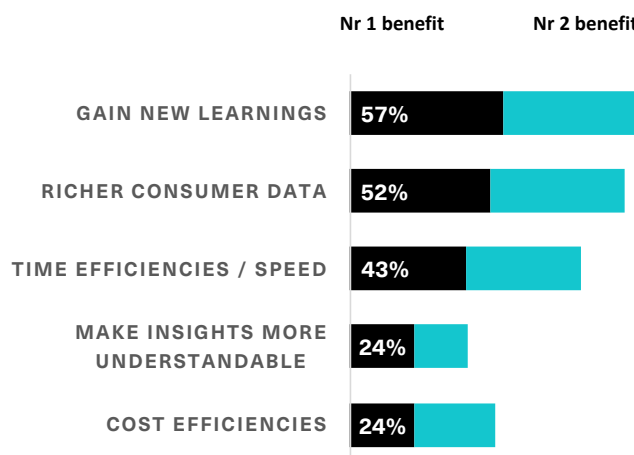
55% of the insight executives in our sample indicated their departments have a practice of experimentation and innovation for insights. A pessimistic view may also point to the fact that still 15% of the insights functions today show no indication they structurally develop innovative capabilities. But innovating is clearly important for improved insights performance: 85% of high performing insights teams have a practice of experimentation and innovation, compared with only 32% among low performers.

All of this begs the question what insight functions are seeking as value from technology. In general, technology can bring value on 3 dimensions: (i) automational value (doing the same things more efficiently: quicker and cheaper), (ii) informational effects (doing the same things at a higher quality level) and (iii) transformational value (doing things that are not possible without the technology).

■ low performers
■ high performers

85%

32%

Practice of experimentation and innovation for insights
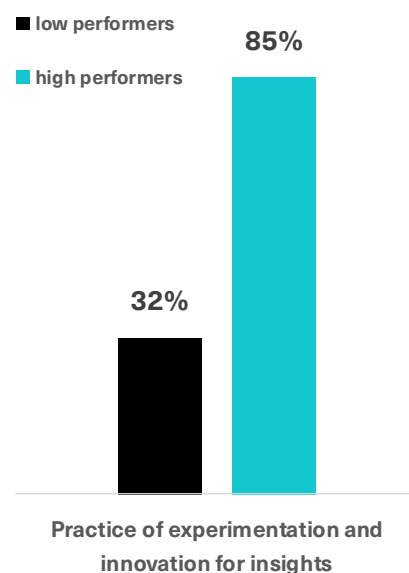
Our survey shows end-clients are primarily seeking transformational insights. 57% indicate that the most important business value of technology they are seeking is to gain new perspectives and learnings one would not obtain without the technology. This value can lay directly in the application of a technology as well as in overlaying behavioral data with traditional data. Secondly, they believe technological innovations should generate richer consumer

What "business value" or "benefit do you seek from technology innovations for insights?

Nr 1 benefit   Nr 2 benefit

GAIN NEW LEARNINGS	57%
RICHER CONSUMER DATA	52%
TIME EFFICIENCIES / SPEED	43%
MAKE INSIGHTS MORE UNDERSTANDABLE	24%
COST EFFICIENCIES	24%

data (52%) and in the third instance, insight professionals are seeking time efficiencies to get results faster (43%). The result of this ranking – the fact insights functions are seeking to gain new perspectives, not possible without the technology - is in line with the fact the highest performing insight functions are those who are pursuing to be a strategic business partner.

"Technology always requires an investment before it generates cost efficiencies, e.g. because of hidden time costs. Take social media analytics for example. There is the dangerous assumption among stakeholders that it is free because the data is there. But if you want real insights from it, it requires analyses time just like real qualitative so in the end it is not cheaper. Therefore, in many areas we do not sell it as a cost saving area. For us, researchers, quality is the most important. Stakeholders also expect market research to be perfect, but when it is using data from new and fancy techniques they are less demanding in terms of rigor and quality. This is the fashion effect – due to the wow-factor they forget about the technicalities."
[Isabelle Herbert Collet, VP Market Research - Orange]

"If you think about combining location technology and combine that data with research data, that adds another layer of information to existing data. Adding technology to existing ways of working is powerful. Once you have figured out how to combine different data sets, it provides endless possibilities: from costs savings to monetizing your data."
[Anonymous quote from our survey]

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"Leveraging emerging new kinds of data/tools for consumer understanding by putting them together with context." [Anonymous quote from our survey].

As end-clients have a need to separate the wheat from the chaff, business partners – e.g. agencies and suppliers – have the task to assist in this by delivering actionable insights and bring innovations that are relevant for the business - not just executional gimmicks. Innovations for insights must always link to business performance (e.g. sales, NPD) and therefore business partners must understand what decisions clients have to make. Based on our findings, the core value lies in those new approaches that integrate claimed and behavioral data which help to connect the "what" and the "why".

"Impact is the name of the game. At the same time technology opens new opportunities for enhancing the knowledge of our own consumers and customers. Our packaging becomes a data channel on its own and creates data, e.g. using QR-codes or other unique markers. This requires a change in mindset, but technology enables us to know more and so we can ask much less – which is interesting for consumers too." [Anonymous quote from our survey]

Admittedly, many innovations take time to mature. It is only now that many neuroscience or implicit techniques are maturing and that it has become clear what these methods add on top off more traditional methods.

Vetting of the right innovations is a challenge as well as a need for end-clients. Suppliers all shout they have the next big thing, but the propositions are often executional or methodological and do not focus on the business relevance for clients. The core focus of innovation should not be on speed but to focus on generating new and breakthrough insights.

VI. Conclusion

The ultimate goal for us all is to build insight capability engines that can paint a true picture of human behavior. Algorithms and data need an overlay with direct consumer input (e.g. contextual observations or opinions) as no algorithm can analyze a human mind completely and consumers cannot process all propositions made to them. While there is a skew nowadays to rely on big data and analytics, which is influenced by forces external to the insights industry or profession, we must avoid creating "data eco-chambers", and we must recognize that real data rigour can only provided by ionsights professionals, not I.T. experts. In all of this, safeguarding the position of the insights function within the corporate organization is the key challenge.

Overall, the good news, no matter what, is that there is a fundamental need to connect with, understand and experience people and human behavior. But new ways of business and marketing require new ways to insights. Insights executives need to evolve from gathering data and generating insights to providing full-sight on consumers and foresight for their business. The challenge of the insights profession lays in turning data and research into insights that are directly relevant and valuable for the business in such a way that it relies on new as well as conventional methods while always remaining actionable, robust and timely!

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"The mission is expanding faster than resources to fulfill the mission"
[Anonymous quote from our survey].

Single most important challenge for the insights profession:
"The speed of change of our stakeholders is sometimes much slower than ours!"
[Anonymous quote from our survey].