

CEP Magazine – September 2022 Driving decisions with data, Part 1

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Albert Einstein has been quoted as saying, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.” Whether Einstein actually said this or not, he certainly embodied the sentiment by recognizing the value of using data to drive decisions. In fact, recent *Forbes* and TechJury studies have estimated that more data was created in a single minute in 2021 than the data created during Einstein’s entire life.^[1] How can all that data be put to use? The knowledgeable data professional should consider this fact to be the key to deeper understanding. The question then becomes: Should data be driving our decision-making? To that point, in a 2018 survey of more than a thousand US companies, 91% of them said that data-driven decision-making was important to their business, while only 57% said they actually used data to make decisions in their business.^[2] This represents a significant disconnect between position and practice.

The next obvious question: Why such a disconnect? The following story should provide an adequate illustration. Deep in the halls of Building 7 of the Rochester Institute of Technology, there exists a structure called the Escherian Stairwell. Designed by Filipino architect Rafael Nelson Aboganda in 1968, this architectural marvel has been impressing students for decades. While not many know about it, those fortunate few who have seen and experienced it testify to an unforgettable experience.^[3] Imagine a staircase that loops back on itself, one in which an individual would walk up one flight of stairs, turn a 90-degree corner around the wall, walk up another flight of stairs, but wind up exactly where they started! There is a fascinating YouTube video in which a couple of Rochester faculty members demonstrate the phenomenon to the utter amazement of several students. Their shocked reactions, along with the passion of the filmmakers is priceless.^[4]

Here’s another fact that I find to be priceless: the way the people at the Rochester Institute of Technology were able to pull off such an elaborate hoax, complete with scholarly articles on the internet, tons of fake reference materials, and a pretty convincing video on YouTube. The point? The visual data the viewers are seeing is attempting to convince them of something they know good and well is physically impossible. This is a very clever use of manipulative fake data. As much as I wanted to believe this riveting phenomenon while watching the video, my intuition was saying, “No, this cannot be possible.”

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