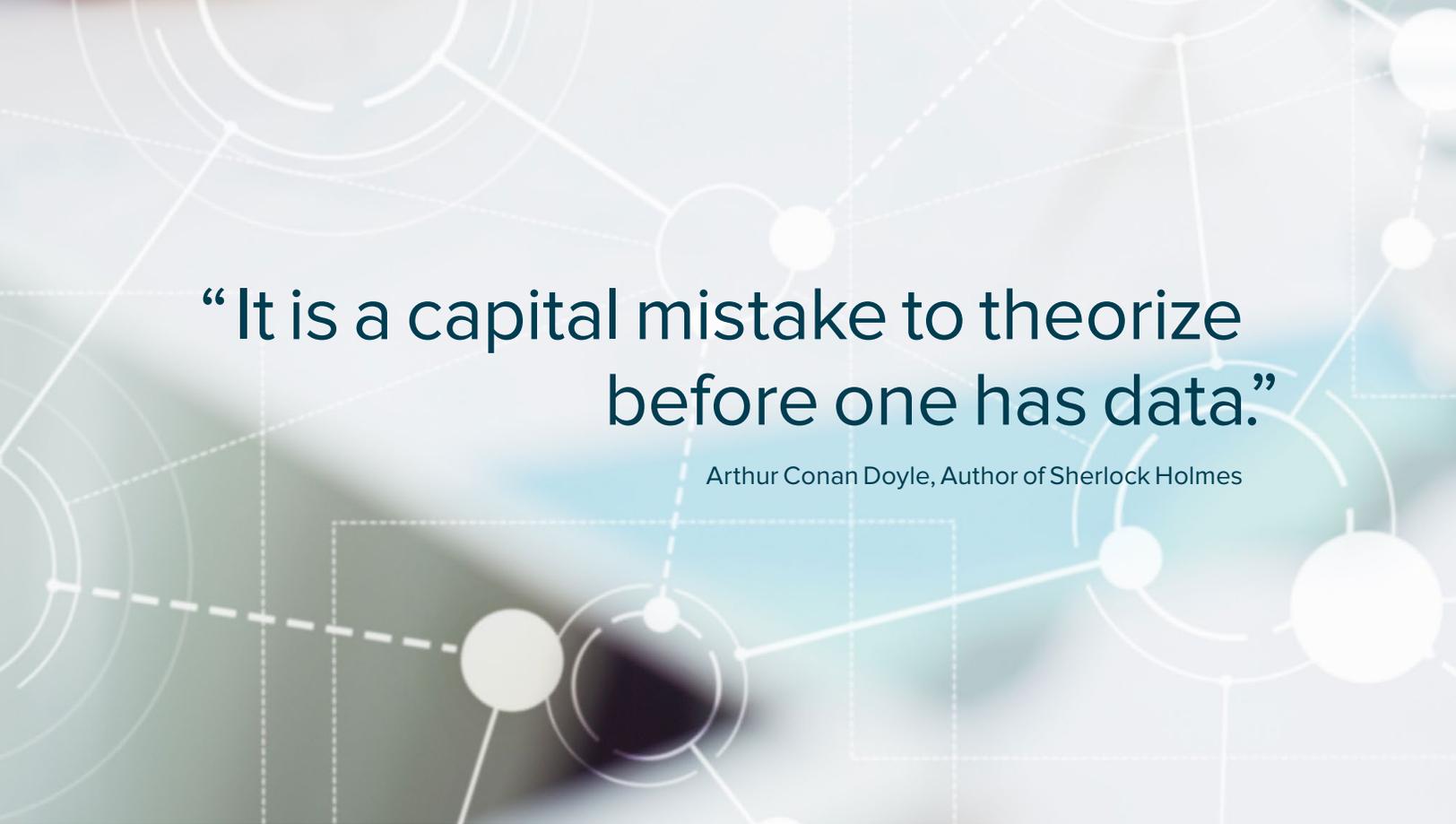


# How to Convert Data into Intelligence

THREE LESSONS  
TO DISCOVERING  
REAL INSIGHT

CORRIGAN  
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“It is a capital mistake to theorize  
before one has data.”

Arthur Conan Doyle, Author of Sherlock Holmes

**IN THE HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY**, clinicians and public health experts use data all the time to diagnose disease, weigh the pros and cons of interventions, and evaluate outcomes. In an effort to better understand customers, healthcare strategists and marketers are increasingly investing in information technology (like CRM); however, too often they lack the skills to sift through data to find nuggets of intelligence. Subsequently, they struggle with how to communicate these findings to help their organization engage in change.

Here are three lessons in how to do it better.

# 1

## Intelligence requires dual competencies.

**The world's best statistician won't uncover a growth opportunity for you if she doesn't understand the healthcare delivery system in which you operate.**

For example, a hospital experiences a continuing five-year decline in outpatient GYN volume, despite population growth in the service area. A generic analyst might hypothesize that if the market is growing, the decline must be caused by a lack of sufficient access and recommend increasing the number of available appointment visits. But an analyst with knowledge of women's health trends would recognize that recent American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)

guidelines decreasing the recommended frequency for doing Pap smears coupled with more women selecting long acting reversible contraception (e.g., the IUD) for their birth control, results in many women no longer needing annual GYN check-ups. Adding more appointment slots for annual visits would be a waste of resources; rather, offering new services or scaling resources to support other areas of the service line would be a more strategic growth choice.

# 2

## The most effective analysts are storytellers

**who know how to translate numbers into messages their audience can understand.**

As a writer would do in sketching out a novel, an analyst needs to provide his audience with the framework in which to make strategic choices. This means he describes the landscape (national and local market trends), provides portraits of the cast (competitor inventory and comparative assessment) and describes the contextual history (volume and financial performance trends) before presenting his audience with data that highlights key points or strategic decisions to be made.

Equally important to the component pieces of the story is how an analyst narrates the story. Here are some good rules of thumb to follow:

- **Visual depictions (graphs, maps, etc.) are more compelling** than a slide full of words or detailed tables alone.
- **Visuals that allow for easier comparison across variables are best.** It is easier to compare three hospitals in a one bar chart than for the eye to compare three separate pie charts.
- **Eliminate extraneous lines in graphs.** I admit this is a personal pet peeve. For example, if you label each column of a bar chart, you don't also need to have the axis line labels. Don't lose your message in clutter.
- **Use your words purposefully.** Make sure the slide title is a descriptive yet concise summary of the key message and use callouts to layer in more detail.

# 3

## Most importantly, always ask yourself “so what?”

**Lots of data is interesting, but a strategic analyst’s key role is to identify the needles in the haystack that require priority action and compellingly tell that story to an organization’s decision makers.**

Here are examples of baseline analytic findings and the types of “so what” questions to ask that help uncover the intelligence underneath:

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**FINDING: A hospital’s cardiac outpatient volume increased.**

- Did the cardiac volume increase at the same rate as the total market population increased? Or did the hospital capture volume previously going to a competitor resulting in the hospital having a higher market share?
- Did the cardiac inpatient volume increase in line with cardiac outpatient volume? Or was the growth in outpatient volume indicative of the industry migration away from inpatient care?
- Was there a cardiac subservice line that drove the growth? If so, what resources are required to sustain that growth in the future?

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**FINDING: There are changes in market share among competitors in the last three years.**

- What strategic levers did the growing competitors deploy? (e.g., new facilities, physician group acquisition, marketing campaign, etc.)
- Are there any indications of possible mergers or acquisitions that may disrupt the market landscape in the future?
- How effective have your organization’s marketing efforts been in this dynamic landscape?

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**FINDING: The health center’s financial performance has declined.**

- Did revenue decline? If so, was the loss driven by a decrease in volume, change in payer mix or decreasing reimbursement?
- How much of the revenue gap could be recuperated by increasing self-pay rates, renegotiating commercial contracts or more actively competing for desirable patient types?
- Have costs increased? What are industry benchmarks for costs? Can a change in staffing mix help decrease costs while maintaining quality?

## The Bottom Line

Most healthcare organizations have spent significant dollars on data. But many more could exponentially benefit on those investments by hiring or building analytic storytellers who have the technical expertise to assess the data, the industry knowledge to understand its ramifications, and a strategic-thinking mindset to communicate this story to the organization's decision makers.

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**ALLISON COOPER** EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT Allison's area of expertise is strategic planning, in particular the analysis of market, financial and competitive trends to help clients clearly understand the present and inspire a vision for their future. She helps her clients grow their business by making smart decisions rooted in both evidence and aspiration. [Read her full bio here.](#)

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