Siseko

BACKGROUND

Hi Siseko how are you?

Good thanks Munya and you?

Good thank you Sir. Thank you for agreeing to this interview, your feedback is definitely valuable and will be greatly appreciated as you have been selected to provide the insights into my research topic. It is Friday 2nd October and the time is 14:51. So basically the title of the research is exploring data driven decision making in uncertainty and as you can imagine, it is inspired by the year 2020 where the entire world has actually been hit by the Corona virus pandemic. As a result of the pandemic it is believed that a lot of the world and life as we know it, has actually been plunged into a lot of uncertainty. Therefore the main objective of this research is to explore and understand whether data driven decision making as a technique, can be applied to offer value to organisations in times of uncertainty. And this is you know, typically opposed to the traditional sort of decision making approaches which are highly favoured in terms of uncertainty, in particular the heuristics. I have sent you the consent form, it will show what the sub objectives are as well, and as a qualitative study it is exploratory in nature and hence the semi structured interview that we are about to engage in right now.

You are encouraged to speak freely and take comfort in knowing that whilst you provide very useful information, your identity will be kept anonymous. You are welcome to withdraw at any time without any prejudice and I we will be using a third party to transcribe these interviews for us, but we will ensure that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained through the use of an NDA. My supervisor is Dr Charlene Lew, her details will be on the consent form as well and please note I will be recording this interview on audio only. So if you have any concerns please feel free to chat to her or myself. You are welcome to withdraw, and we would like you to sign the consent form as soon as you can.

Sure, go for it!

So to kickstart the interview, I would like to please ask you to give me a bit of information on yourself as well as your organisation and your role. So the key question here is what is your current role, what are your responsibilities, level within the organisation, company industry and sector – but we can go through all of these as we go.

So what is your current role and responsibilities?

So my current role is principal consultant, other consultancies would call that the engagement manager, I am part of the management team for the company I work for, and my role is pretty much split into two, so on the one hand it is business development – which means going out to interact with potential clients and existing clients, understanding their needs and building close relations with them, and then contracts with them in terms of consulting work that they may need assistance with.

The second part of my role then would be to deliver whatever the solutions are that we would be engaging the client on. That would be then putting a team together, managing the team and making sure the deliverables are done to the satisfaction of our clients. So I a managing a number of clients.

Alright.

I have a suite of clients and multiple projects that I am running for those clients.

Company age and size?

Company started in 1994

Wow!

We celebrated 25 years last year.

Congratulations!

Thank you! (laughs) Yeah, a South African company, size…

You can use turnover or staff complement, whichever information you have available.

Ja, okay, well in terms of employees at the moment we are sitting at about 75 consultants in the business. Those will be perms. We then have a network of geez, there are a lot in terms of contractors that we can draw upon depending on the demand or need from the business.

Okay, would you say +- 250, as far as the network of contractors?

No, it is a lot, probably well above 100.

Great. Thank you so much for that. So this study isn't really focused on people that are in financial services, so any manager really that does make decisions or has decision making in their roles and responsibilities, which indicatively from principal consultant to engagement manager perspective you definitely have under your list of responsibilities. And uncertainty in terms of the literature and how we have sort of come up with this mostly relates to constant change, it relates to how to predict scenarios, there are elements of ambiguity, conflicting, unavailable or unreliable information in most instances. So in simple terms these are the unknown unknowns.

Ja.

So the first question really is how has COVID 19 contributed to the use of data in your decision making, if at all? So please feel free, any examples or instances that you can recall, please do.

Sure. So the question is how has COVID 19…

Siseko

…Contributed to the use of data in your decision making, if at all?

Ja, so COVID 19 has obviously been one of those events that have been disruptive from a business point of view, but in our line of work we generally use a lot of data in our day to day operations, and also you know the level of data obviously depends on the type of decisions we would be making. So you know if we are making strategic decisions you are looking at much longer time frames and say five to ten years' time horizon, and if we are talking a particular industry we would use a lot of data to really get an understanding of what are some of the mega trends that are happening within that industry, we would also be looking at how stable is this industry. A lot of the industries that we get involved in, the rate of change is quite rapid, so we are talking about volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environments, right? So we try and understand what is happening because if you are going to use data for projecting into the future, and the future by definition is unknown, and uncertain, you know if it is a stable environment then you can rely on historical data to make those projections, because the assumption there is that the future is going to be similar to the past.

Okay.

What we know is that because most industries, that the rate of change is increasing and accelerating, the future does not necessarily reflect what has happened in the past. And so from a strategic thinking point of view we use the data to understand what has happened previously and then looking forward, we then work on having various scenarios – scenario 1 could be the future is similar to the past; scenario b, c, and d, would be different from scenario a and from each other, and would not reflect what has happened in the past. And in that instance then you are looking at strategic decision making from the perspective of what would be the impact on this business and this industry should one of these scenarios take place. What are the decisions we need to take today to ensure that our business is sustainable into the future irrespective of which one of these four scenarios will take place. So that is how we would use data from a strategic thinking point of view.

Okay.

So now I was going to say then there is another level of analysis which is if you are looking at shorter time frames and you are looking at say operational efficiency and how do I improve efficiency of processes in the short term, we will then endeavour to inform what is the current situation, let's say for example you are looking at your total turnaround times for a particular process – you would use your data in terms of your value adding processes etc, quantify how long things take, where are the opportunities for optimisation, and if we optimise, these will be the benefits that would accrue to the business. So I am just trying to illustrate that different levels of data and different levels of strategic thinking and in all types of disciplines, be it strategic or tactical or operational – and there would be different implications as well, the data that you use.

Correct. So I think somewhat you have actually answered the next question so from a bit of context, the reason why the first question obviously asks how it has contributed to the use of data, the next one was to explain what data driven decision making is, and

you have just referred to the use of data to support a decision making process. And my next question was really going to be how and when do you rely on data when making decisions in uncertainty. So let's hone in on uncertainty, you can elect whether it is a strategical or tactical decision, and I think the 'how' part is the election of whether it is the strategic or tactical and the reliance part is really on… so it is definitely going to be multiple sources of data, do you rely on absolutely anything that comes your way or do you have specific data that you guys look for within your organisation for a specific something, a specific decision that has to be made. So whatever you can unearth there. And this is in the context of uncertainty you know?

Okay, 100%, and you know in the previous question I spoke that a change that is accelerating, I spoke about the fact that most industries are actually quite volatile and uncertain and complex, and yes, we would actively look for multiple data sources, because one of the issues is obviously the integrity of the data you know? In the instance where you are not actually collecting the data yourself, so for example I spoke about if you're looking at operational issues, we would actually go out and collect the data ourselves, we go out and take measurements in terms of the machines and how they perform and track them over time etc.

Wow.

So that data is quite reliable from our point of view.

Because you have collected it yourselves.

We have collected it ourselves and we have made sure the integrity is maintained.

Quality controls have been met as well.

Correct, quality controls have been put in place, etc. Now in the case of say your more strategic questions, where you are relying on secondary data primarily, using various sources, so you may use, I don't know, STATS SA for instance, other econometric data sources, what we try and do there is actively look for data that would contradict what we have or what is generally available.

Well done!

Because if you just rely on one data source I mean that is *a* point of view, so we actively look for data that would contradict, and if it doesn't contradict and it agrees, we always try to triangulate, from at least three different independent sources. And if those tend to agree then we have some level of comfort that okay, that is potentially what the data is telling us. But if it doesn't agree then we need to investigate further.

Okay. Go on.

I was just going to go on and say just around the data as well, so we are in consulting so a lot of customers would say to us 'can you show us benchmarking exercises that have been

done in other countries?' And yes we can, but what we always say to our customers is well you have to be cognisant of the context with which that data was obtained.

Context is key.

Context matters. So if you looking at labour productivity in Germany vs SA, there is completely different context – different work ethic, different cultures in Germany vs SA. So it is very difficult to compare the two and you always have to consider what is the context within which that data was obtained.

Linked also is again, coming back to okay, I want to use data to inform future decisions which are by definition unknown and uncertain. One of the questions we always ask ourselves is when this historical data was gathered or collected, what were the conditions when it was collected and how were those conditions likely to change with time. Because if I am going to rely on this data to make projections I need to know are the future conditions going to be the same as the historical conditions – in which case if they are, I can have comfort that that data will inform me – but if the future is completely different from the past then that data could be misleading or at worst, be ... I want to say obsolete.

Okay. Very, very valuable insights. And there was a question I want to come back and ask but let me ask the next question and then I will come back.

Cool.

So you have made mention of the triangulation, you have made mention of sourcing the data yourselves, fully understanding the aspects of context, and okay…. So let me ask the question now: what are some of the challenges or obstacles you experience when making data driven decisions in times of uncertainty – and let's use the context of uncertainty. So I don't want to keep harping on about COVID, I mean you can give me another sort of scenario where you had uncertainty in the mix and you still had to make a decision, you actually had to use data to support your decision making and you know what were the challenges there?

Ja, so Munya I think the biggest challenge – and if you are talking about a crisis environment like we have had with COVID for instance – the biggest issue from my experience is access to real time data, that is it.

I need to write that down.

So let's take the example of the impact of let's say level five of the lockdown, it was a little bit more extreme but we can say even level 4, two months later; we want to understand as a business what has been the economic impact so far, then tell us what is likely to happen in month 2, 3, 4, 5 etc. Now unfortunately the way the data is structured is that we only get what happened in quarter 2 towards the end of quarter 3!

Exactly! Exactly!

So by that time you have had to make decisions where you actually don't have the data, and here and now you need to rely on experience you know, in terms of I need to make decisions about my business in the absence of data. So the biggest issue I would say is yeah, that access to real time data.

Okay, let me throw something at you to keep the conversation going: as far as quality of data or relevance of data? Because let's use Q2 and Q3, right? Even if you were to get information at the end of Q3, what if it is irrelevant or not reliable quality data? Have you guys experienced that as a real challenge or obstacle?

Ja, look as I said it is an issue, that is why we always triangulate. So we always have different sources of data that would validate or invalidate one piece of data. So yes, ..

And I think I like what you said now, and you mentioned it earlier, and that is why I wanted to bring it in: I think a lot of it is to get information that really invalidates or validates, and most instances would you say we mostly look for information that validates instead of invalidates? Because you know, the latter definitely does give a lot of value, especially from a decision making perspective.

I think there is a lot of bias that comes into it as well, because if you are looking for data that is going to substantiate a point of view that you already have…

Correct.

… you would tend to look for data that validates what you have. And you ignore that invalidates. But if you are trying to make an objective decision then you … that is why I mentioned earlier that we actively look for data that either validates or invalidates – because we are trying to make objective decisions at the end of the day. And you know in our line of business we are advising clients on what they should do to improve their business performance. So we have to be objective and to let the data speak for itself and not allow bias to skew the view one way or another.

Absolutely. And keep going on the objectivity, the question that comes there is so granted, there will be some challenge and some obstacle when you know you need to use data to support your decision making, but there surely is quite a bit of benefit that comes with using data, and in particular data driven decision making as a technique, because like you were saying now, there is the benefit of making objective decisions, especially when advice is being sought.

Ja.

Any other benefits you can think of right now?

Ja, so I mean if you are looking at it from an operational point of view I mean you want to know for example, how well is your business performing? So you want to have leading indicators that will inform you hopefully in real time that actually we are not performing optimally and if we continue as is, we are unlikely to reach our targets right? So you can

then correct. So those are the benefits I think in terms of using data to make decisions, on a day to day basis, provided it is good quality data that you can rely on.

And I think what you just said there subtly is you know, from we are not going to achieve our objectives, I think it also allows timeous rectification or remedy of issues.

Yes, it allows you to correct instead of having to wait till the end of the quarter to realise that actually you have missed your target, and you can do something about it sooner.

Okay. So you work for a highly commendable consulting firm and I think from my interaction with you, definitely come with quite a bit of experience and wonderful insights in terms of your learning and experience as you are busy consulting with your clients.

Thank you

What do you think can be done to enhance the use of data driven decision making as a technique – be it at an individual level or at an organisational level. So I think in your specific case I think your career, your specific role currently and responsibilities, require you to do so. But for the organisation at large, what can be done to actually enhance this?

I think in the industry there is a growing acceptance that data is a big part of everyday life in general, and more so in business. So you would see that most companies now would have a chief data officer being part of the exec team and that is a very strong signal to the rest of the organisation that actually data is a big part of our business; without it we cant make necessarily sound decisions. And so I think the trend as I see it is an acceptance of data as a business tool to drive things.

Is there a difference between a chief data officer and a chief information officer?

Yes, yes. Ja. They tend to be different. In my experience the chief information officer is usually more of a technology role, so it is almost an IT type position, whereas data I mean is obviously digital these days hopefully! We do a lot of work on the digitisation piece actually in our consultancy, because there is quite a lot of analogue data out there. But yeah, they are closely related because then how do we…

… get the data without the information.

Without the technology. You know the whole internet of things and…

IOT, yeah. On that same breath, from a signalling perspective, so you have mentioned there is definitely a growing acceptance of data as an every day or integral part of day to day sort of decisions that are made. But do you think one key element is the investment also matches the signalling? I mean from a big data/analytic point of view or capability, is such a thing something that would enhance the use would you think?

In terms of increasing the investments in data?

Correct. Would an increased investment in data analytic capabilities for example, enhance the use of actual data driven decision making?

I think it would, absolutely, I think it would. And I think that companies that are lagging behind are at serious risk of actually losing their business if they don't actively invest in technologies that will enable them to get real time data. So yes, it does require massive investments, and I am seeing the trend also being more positive on that front as well; I think more companies are investing in data. They are investing in digital technologies which by nature generates a lot of data. So the investments are there, the challenges that businesses have is well they have access to so much data they don't know actually how to use it. I will make an example: so I consulted two years ago to one of the banks, and they had a massive, massive customer service centre, it was a call centre, and I think there were over 4000 or 5000 people working the call centres – they had two, one in Pretoria and one in Johannesburg. And this company, this bank, has a lot of voice data from customers who have been calling in over the years. So how can we harness or extract insights out of that massive data base that we have that will help us to improve our business, help us to improve customer experience, help us to innovate new products and services, etc? So the challenge I am seeing is not so much a lack of investment or access to the data, but now we have the data how do I then make sense of the data and use it to generate business insights?

Hey, that's absolutely wonderful. I actually heard this week, and I don't know how popular this saying is, that data is the data, what is important is the insights you get from the data.

Absolutely.

Okay, and any thoughts about culture and how that can enhance?

Yeah, I mean the culture will definitely play a massive role. Of course you know with data it can go either way in terms of it can be positive or negative you know? So if your employees get the sense that the data is used to punish them (laughs) from a performance point of view, as opposed to 'well actually we use this data to improve our service quality to customers which will improve our competitiveness etc,' you know – the mind set then from a culture point of view could be positive or negative. And I think certainly the clients that I consult to are more on the positive side to say 'Actually we need help from our colleagues or our employees, to the data, and we are using this data to improve the service quality to our customers.' So yes, it plays a big role. I think in addition to that is because data is so readily available now, I think one of the issues is companies have not necessarily started looking for employees – I am talking more generally now right – so if you have a CDO he will have his team you know, the data scientists, etc. But I think what is required now in every role, whether you are in HR, IT, operations, finance, whatever, you have to have some level of competency in terms of data analytics. What I am saying is from a culture point of view I think we are not necessarily making data analysis so ubiquitous within the business that every role within the business is able to make sense of the data, analyse it etc, and generate insights. Because data is important in all aspects of the business, not just on the operational side or front office, but HR, finance, etc.

Amazing insights, thank you so much. From my end I have basically covered everything, I don't know if you have something else you would want to add? We still have time?

I think Munya we have covered everything that I would have wanted to talk about. Fascinating topic, I think yeah, it is also one that is very important for the times that we live in, so I am sure you are learning a lot through this process.

Indeed, indeed! I definitely am, and you know it has been quite a lot of different perspective, but convergence to a similar thing, especially when it comes to what can be done to enhance all of this. So I think we will definitely come up with something and I think with all of these experiences something really positive can come out of it if it is implemented.

Perfect man. No, it's a pleasure.

Thank you so much sir. If at any point you would like a copy of the recording I can make that available to you, but I want to also just remind you to if you can make some time and sign that consent form and send it back.

Definitely, I have already done so, I will email it to you straight away.

Thank you sir, appreciate it!

Have a wonderful restful weekend and we will chat soon.

Thank you, thank you so much.

ENDS.