Mkhululi

BACKGROUND

Good morning Mkhululi, how are you this morning?

Very well Munya, how are you doing?

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. 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.

Happy, I will send it to you as soon as we are done.

Thank you sir. 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?

Okay, so my role is a banker, I am a banker in the financial services sector in SA. I look after a portfolio of clients within the sector so that talks to your banking clients, that includes insurance companies and mostly asset managers in SA. That is my role and responsibilities.

Okay. Level in the organisation?

So are you talking about hierarchy, from the CEO?

Ja. Something like that. Would you say you are in senior management, at EXCO level?

No, I am not at EXCO, I would love to be. It is close to senior, so it is senior management in terms of portfolio perspective; I am a custodian of clients, and then within that there are sub teams, and I become the custodian of that portfolio.

Great. I know you work for Nedbank, so I can get some information on the company size from turnover and staff complement, that information is publicly available, as well as the age. So ja.

So to set the scene: Uncertainty relates to constant change, hard to predict scenarios and ambiguous, conflicting, unavailable or unreliable information. Right? In simple terms these are unknown unknowns. So from a uncertainty perspective, I would say COVID-19 definitely expresses a lot of uncertainty that we have experienced, and unless someone has got some magic crystal ball to say 'this is what is going to happen tomorrow' I suppose a lot of us are pretty much in the same boat.

So the very first question is how has COVID 19 contributed to the use of data in your decision making, if at all?

So data is something that we have come to rely on in my business, certainly, because the type of business we are in is basically more of human interaction. So now what this has required of us is that without the human interaction, we have had now to rely on data to enhance, to understand much more, what is happening within ourselves and outside of ourselves. So ja, we have started the use of data big time.

Okay, and then from a literature perspective, data driven decision making refers to the use of data to support the decision making process. So how and when do you rely on data when making decisions in uncertainty? So let's stay with the context we are in right now, very uncertain, and the question is how and when do you rely on data when making decisions?

So I relied on data before, so let me use an example. So I basically want to target a new bank client, I rely on data – this is pre- - so before meeting the client I rely on data to understand the C suite that is running that business right, and then use that information to customise my pitch that I will use when engaging with them. Now previously data usage was I would say minimal, because once I get to understand the business, once I get for example to understand an asset manager, get to understand their portfolio, or the executives or the portfolio managers, I would then go into the meeting and then the physical interaction would soften the blow or make it easier to move on to the next level. But then now, after doing that, I still need to understand or rely on the virtual interaction right? So the virtual interaction is different from the physical one, so pre- I still use data but more of it now because I rely on it to guide me during a virtual interaction. I am then post-, afterwards, is to say from the interactions we have had with the clients, what type of improvements or activity it did bring. So that is the monitoring and evaluation part of it. So there is pre-, during and post- where I rely on data much more than I would have before.

Okay. I like the monitoring and evaluation perspective, I am don't know if it is safe for me to say it is the first time it has come up. Maybe it has come up in a different way but certainly there has to be a sort of assessment of the decision that you made.

Exactly.

So in other conversations, and I don't want to bias you in any way, in other interviews that I had there was a sort of comment made around this: if we were to look at COVID-19 and the data driven decisions that we have made during COVID-19 because we are still in them, there currently is no hindsight. I don't know what your take on that is?

So I am different, there is hindsight for me. So the business that I am in is continuous, it requires constant… and that is why I brought up the idea of monitoring and evaluation. So the business I am in is a live business – let me use that word – it is a live business that requires me to check the rear view mirror as I go along. And the reason for that is because in banking you can't… let's use an example: in a lending example, I can't lend money and then off we go. I have to lend money, I have to monitor the business, check the solvency of the business. So it is a continuous thing for me and that is why monitoring and evaluation is critical because I do it every day. So each time I interact I am picking up from where we left off yesterday. So the trading transaction, how are we looking today, how are our lines looking, what exposures do we have, how much of it have you used, how much additional do you need? So it is a constant thing. So that is why my response is different, I would say I am different from what you have been getting. For me it is a live thing.

It is a live thing.

And it is quite critical to monitor as we go along.

And I suppose in periods of uncertainty, to your point, the monitoring and evaluation is heightened quite a bit because we need to keep checking whether the decision that was made based on the data at the time, was actually sound or not.

100%. That is exactly it. And you don't want to leave it for later, because if you leave it for later… I mean you wouldn't want me to use your money or mis-invest your money at the bank, right? You wouldn't want that, me telling you that you can't get your salary because… So that is why it has to be live, as we go along

And continuous. Ja. Alright. So there is pre- and post- as you have mentioned, and you mentioned how it is particularly critical now in periods of uncertainty, so that you don't want to leave something for later. What are the sort of challenges or obstacles that you experience when making use of data to support decisions in times of uncertainty? Contextual to your earlier statement around the pre- and the post- as well as it is live. So you know, please shed some light you may have there.

Ja, so it is quite interesting because what COVID did, like I said, we were using data right, so if I was coming to approach your business or you as the CFO of your business, I would use data to get me into the room. So what gets me into the room is data. Right? Because if I don't use data you will pick it up from the first interaction that 'this guy knows nothing

about me.' Right? But now the challenge is what you then talking about, the pre- and the post- right? So what COVID then did was it brought this surge of data requirements. So let me use percentages, if I required 45% of data to get me into the room, all of a sudden I required 100%. Okay? So now the challenge is how do we augment the data that we have, how do we get the systems up to speed to make sure that we have all the data for all the interactions. So this sudden data requirement where we moved from a nice to have to it is a must that you have this type of data, to not only get you into the room but to sustain the conversation and also do the monitoring and evaluation as you go along. That data requirement from 30 or 45% shooting all the way up to 100% and completely relying on that was a big challenge hey? It was a big challenge.

Okay, what has been your experience from a continuous and alive sort of set up that you currently have in terms of getting real time data so to say? What are your challenges?

Real time data.

If any you know?

Ja, so the challenges are there and as we go along we mend. But I think the critical thing, certainly from our perspective is the FI Team within the bank, we were quick to identify that we were going to need this data, the data requirements that we have. So earlier on we brought the subject into the fore, to our tech guys, and it has been continuous. The challenge is improving it and that sort of thing, but I think where we are now, if I look back and say October, lockdown was in March, we have managed to sustain our clients from then to now, and grow it. So ja, there has been challenges, but I think it was more of the attitude from the tech teams who were able to pivot and make sure they meet our requirements.

And be proactive as well with … I don't want to put words in your mouth… from the pivoting perspective would you say there is also been proactive making multiple credible sources of data available to you guys as and when you need, or not?

Certainly. Certainly. So what we then did was we then looked at a portfolio of the service providers that we use for data – because remember here the thing is speed to market, how quickly are you able to get a solution out. And so that augmentation and consolidation of various sources so that you have a true picture, and an accurate picture for that matter, which is quite critical, was quite key. So you are right, ja.

And then tell me whether you have experienced this. So I like how you mentioned quick to market, have you experienced a scenario where you have these portfolios of sources of data in terms of information that you constantly rely on because they have all along been credible. Now in times of uncertainty, have you experienced a scenario where you have got supposedly credible sources of data with conflicting information?

Ja, so remember … so there have been instances where you have got… you have to decide which one is the true version of the truth. And that is where experience comes in right, to say I know that the CFO of this business is Munya, I know the CEO of this business is Mkhululi, but this information that is being uploaded here is probably a week outdated or

two weeks outdated or whatever, right? So yes, there has been those instances, which is why I said we have been … what's the word… we have been agile about it right, so we have been cleaning up as we go along, but it is better than not having it – let me put it that way.

Okay.

Ja.

So despite the challenges that I think are inherent in data driven decision making, what in your experience have been the benefits of data driven decision making in times of uncertainty? So if you want to focus on the period of March to date, or you want to focus on other periods where there was a lot of uncertainty, what sort of benefits did you gain from relying on data or using data to support your decision making process?

So bankers are quite interesting people, it is about numbers. So while my team, we balance between the numbers and client-centricity. So we look at it from both perspectives or both views. So where data has come in handy has certainly been on the internal side, whether it is fact based, why are we targeting this sector, what are our reasons, why this specific client, what are our reasons, why, why for this tenure, why not this tenure? And so those kind of decisions – data has been useful in that because our internal decision making is speeded up and then enhances our customer-centric approach. So it is quite.. had we not had data our internal decision making would have been slower, therefore impacting our customer-centric approach. It would have been much slower without data. So certainly I sit in a space where it is both. And I know when to apply the data internally and on the outside as well.

Okay, and then so you mentioned it is fact based, it sounds like you say it eliminates bias?

Correct, yes. So it moves away from the person doing the transaction or the business itself, or who is running the business or the sector, and then it just looks at the facts.

Ja. Do you believe there is an added benefit – and this again is something that came up in other discussions as well, and it is purely from a.. being a fact based sort of approach because I mean the data is the data, so you don't make a decision, you don't use data to make a decision, you use data to support a decision. Right? And I suppose we were saying by having the data available it actually gives you more options so to say? Because I am sure from a scenario perspective I think you are saying why this tenure and not that tenure? And that sort of thing. I think if I hear you correctly, what you are expressing there is actually that there is more insights, especially around scenarios, especially around options because it gives you probabilities. I mean uncertainty in this day and age is the unknown unknowns and how to predict scenarios. So now okay we are saying okay, I have this data, if I do this - this is what is going to happen, or that, or that – right?

Ja, so for me again, differing from what you are finding from your research, so let me just clarify: so on the table where you and I are going to sit around and then we have to make a decision. So what I am saying is we wouldn't make the decision and then get the data to support the decision; my experience is what we would do in my team is that while we are

sitting around that table, there is a seat for data, reserved, right? As part of the decision making, data is also there. So we are making decisions and data contributes in the decision making. That's the point that I just want to highlight. So it is part of the decision making and where it needs cleaning up we do that, but ultimately it is a very critical component in our decision making.

Okay, alright. Elaborate more on that.

So it doesn't come in at the end, to support.

Okay.

It is there, from the beginning.

Coming back to the pre- and the post-, right?

Correct, yes. So 100%. So let's look at it from that perspective. So on the pre- it is involved in the pre-, it doesn't come in at the post- to support what we have done in pre-. It is all the way.

Okay, it is throughout the entire decision making process. So okay, at this point we now need to do this, what does data inform us, it informs 1-2-3-4-5. Okay, sounds good. So we have spoken about challenges, we also have spoken about the benefits that you have gained. Without also putting words in your mouth, it seems like there is real benefits that come from using data to support decisions, so the data driven decision making technique. What do you think can be done to enhance the use of this technique, especially in times of uncertainty, and this could be at an individual level, it could be at an organisational level, please share what can be done to enhance the use?

Ja, so I think that most certainly must be intertwined or be made easily available. So there shouldn't be data points where you have to go to… I mean literally a physical space where you have to go to, to get data, where you can only access it via let's say the web, or you can only access it via the app. It must be agnostic. I should be able to access it anywhere on all my devices, at any time. So for me that intertwining it and embedding it into our lives makes it easier, and then you find that our decision making, very pre-, post- or during, our data is easily available and we can uses it.

So I think you would say then that is both or at individual or really at organisational level? Is there anything you think jumps out specifically for an individual level?

At an individual level I think we just have to embrace data and accept that yes, you have experience but use the tool. Use your experience and use the data, you become a superstar in my view.

And I think what you are saying mimics what I said slightly differently in another interview: I think once people understand the benefit or benefits of data driven decision making then they will actually embrace it and accept it more because there is a definite upside to it.

Ja. Ja.

Sir, as far as the questions I had for this interview I think we have covered pretty much all of them, is there any other question you wanted to flesh out some more or just revisit?

Not really, but I think I am fascinated by your research and I am quite interested to see the outcomes, so ja. I think it would be great if you could share that, I would appreciate that.

Thank you. So all of your insights, I think what you shared here I hope cements what may prove to be a sound sort of value add to businesses, especially in times like this. Where we are now we don't know whether there will be a second wave or not, and I think forewarned is forearmed. So that is really the inspiration of this research. But again, thank you so much for your insights, thank you so much for your time. If you do want a copy of this audio recording or transcription I can make that available for you. But ja, that's it from my side!

Cool! It's a pleasure.

Thank you sir, have a great afternoon further.

You too man.

Thank you, cheers.

Cheers.

Ends.