

Think data-first: A better way to find, use, manage, and exchange data

Create your single source of truth and turn data into real-time actionable insights for smarter decision-making



For years, business transformations started by moving workloads and applications to the cloud. This was a given. Adopting a cloud-first approach enabled organizations to operate elastically and efficiently—helping them move faster, automate functions, scale resources to meet needs, and strengthen their overall discipline.

The creation of cloud—or at least cloud-like—environments is still top of mind for many. But many transformation discussions are now evolving to consider what happens to a previously underutilized resource: data. Data-driven insights can generate value in many ways. By adopting a data-first approach, organizations are finding they can make better decisions around operational models, improve customer experience, and drive more revenue to the bottom line.

Few would argue against placing a strong emphasis on data. Studies show 83% of CEOs want their organizations to be more data driven.¹ But simply doing more with data and making data a defining element in the overall corporate strategy are two different things.

Defining data-first

So, what is a data-first approach? While IT scholars define the term differently, an innovative approach includes a strategy that orients every aspect of the organization to facilitate the best use of data. Data is no longer an afterthought, a commodity that's useful but hard to fit inside what were traditionally inflexible architectures, infrastructures, and operating models. Now, savvy organizations know that to succeed, they need the insights data generates, and they're making sure they apply the right resources to cultivate, manage, and analyze that data.

¹ ["What do data-driven companies have in common?", tableau.com, July 2021](https://tableau.com)

Are the two approaches—cloud-first and data-first—compatible with each other? And, if an organization prioritizes doing more with data, how does it need to revise its overall operating model to make it work? These are questions businesses are wrestling with as they push to compete more effectively in the future.

Data is everywhere. It's inside applications, databases, core systems, mobile devices, the public cloud, private cloud, and out on the edge. It's being pulled in from third-party resources and it's constantly in flux, moving from one spot to another. This flow requires organizations to approach data in a holistic, systematic way. Real-time data means that real-time data analytics becomes more important. Businesses must create environments where they can control data flow, make it more readily available, and protect and utilize it where, when, and how it's needed.

This requires diligence and innovative thinking. It's not a matter of just bringing in a new person to stamp a data-first strategy. One tool won't cover all the new tasks that are required and new processes can steer the data-first vehicle in the right direction but won't carry it to the end of the journey.

Ultimately, data will need to be approached as less of a resource to be mined and more of a defining element in a company's overall business model.

Breaking down data silos

An organization's success depends on its overall maturity across strategic capability domains—including governance, innovation, people, security, operations, DevOps, applications, and data. But data is more than just a component in a company's business model. For a

model to advance in today's data-focused markets, it must be a catalyst for innovative thinking that forces a change in the domains.

For example, consider governance. Since data provides nuanced levels of value to different parts of the organization, its ownership and stewardship need to evolve to allow for more collaboration. Data-first thinking involves efforts to do more than just protect data and regulate it. Governance policies need to promote and enable the strategic sharing of data with partners, customers, members of supply chains, and, in certain cases, the public. If governance is too strict, organizations will miss opportunities. If it's too lax, they'll expose themselves to greater risk. Sharing data in a controlled, fit-for-purpose fashion based on its context becomes a much more realistic opportunity.

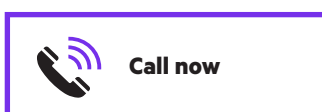
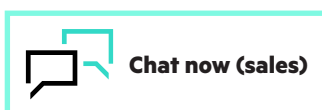
Breaking down silos that keep data from being shared opens new opportunities that were previously closed. If a product development team is not privy to users' negative reviews of past iterations, it will miss the chance to add innovative features or enter entirely new markets. Organizations can also unearth information on competitors' business practices, market strengths, and user preferences, which can influence mergers and acquisition tactics and other business decisions.

Data should guide workforce decisions as well. For a data-first strategy to work, employees themselves need to be empowered. Are developers able to access documentation that helps them build better software? Are line-of-business managers and product marketing leaders making decisions based on the same high-quality, up-to-date datasets? Are the right tools for data access available to those who need it, where they need it?

Looking across these domains unearths a long list of questions organizations should answer as they move to a data-first approach:

1. How siloed is the organization's data?
2. What does the technology stack look like?
3. How is the organization handling the processes for how data is consumed?

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4. Is the current data strategy a drag on innovation?
5. Are applications leveraging data effectively?
6. How is data used to drive innovation?
7. Is innovation a goal or a hurdle?
8. Is the approach effectively defined so data can be used to drive insights and allow the organization to experiment more rapidly?
9. Is data structured so it can be consumed and help accelerate experimentation and innovation? And how is it structured to support application development?

At its core, the development of a data-first strategy starts with a basic question—Does data give you a competitive advantage? Based on the answer to this question, an organization can develop strategies to optimize how data can help it compete.

Can an organization rely too much on data-first thinking? Possibly, if it hasn't tied the data-first elements of its business strategy to its business objectives and embedded them in the operating model. For example, an organization may set a goal to become transparent—to always make as much data available to all stakeholders everywhere. That is a data-first initiative and it's laudable. But if the company is a low-price leader with a conservative market strategy, spending heavily to realign all its data-sharing practices might not make strong business sense. This also applies to cloud-first thinking. Any technical strategy that puts technology first must also be connected to strategic goals and validated against them.

The backbone of business transformation

Back to the notion of cloud-first versus data-first—they are, in fact, compatible. They're separate but complementary functions that both serve the interests of business transformation.

A cloud-first approach is less about where to put information and more about making sure systems and applications operate in an agile manner. Information can be anywhere—in the cloud, in the data center, or out on the edge—but it must flow in and out of an environment that acts like a cloud. Data-first extends the concept to take that newfound flexibility and use it more strategically.

Once an organization successfully adopts a cloud-first model, it can shift its focus to letting data be the primary business driver, which enables it to drive toward its ultimate transformational goal—positive business outcomes.

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