



The 9 biggest mistakes companies make when implementing data governance

(and how to avoid them all)



Introduction

Hi, my name is Nicola Askham. I am The Data Governance Coach and I support companies with implementing their data governance initiative so they can sustain it on an on-going basis.

I have over 12 years of experience in helping major organisations successfully implement data governance initiatives using my unique methodology. In this report I am going to share some of the common mistakes I see companies making, and share my insight so you can avoid these mistakes in the first place.

Before I get started, I would like to ensure that we are both on the same page. There is a lot of confusion around the term 'data governance', as people use it in different contexts. The term is universal these days, which causes much confusion as few people understand what data governance is all about.

If you Google search 'Data Governance', you will find a myriad of definitions that are either incredibly confusing, or are so boring that they send you to sleep. As I like to keep things simple and business focused, the best description I can use is:

"Proactively managing your data to support your business."

To get the benefits of data governance, you don't actually need to minutely control every single piece of data. It's actually not about the data itself - it's all about how the data is managed by the business, and applying the correct level of control that is appropriate to its intended use.

So, now we have agreed a definition of what data governance is, I think it might be useful to clarify what it is not.

- It is not about data protection, which is sometimes referred to as data privacy, or data security.
- It is not about data retention, which is a separate data management discipline.
- It is not about records management, which is very firmly focused on paper records.
- It is definitely not about big brother!

I hope the information in this guide helps you to implement successful data governance, or if your data governance initiative is faltering, helps you to find a way forward.

Nicola Askham

The Data Governance Coach



Mistake #1 - Initiative is IT-led

The mistake

The key to data governance success is getting stakeholders to take ownership of their data and take the lead in data governance initiatives. When I perform a data governance health check for companies that are running into trouble, it is fairly common for IT to be leading the data governance initiative. This is always for the best of intentions. Even though IT does not own the data, they understand the implications of not managing data properly, and therefore they are often the first people in any organisation to realise that proper data governance is needed.

Businesses often leave IT to deal with data governance because they confuse the infrastructure with the data. If you work for an organisation that still believes that IT owns the data, then assigning IT to run the data governance initiative may seem logical. However, an IT-led data governance initiative can be fraught with problems. True data governance will only really happen once the business has taken ownership of their data, and an IT-led project makes that more difficult.

The consequences

In my experience, IT-led initiatives are too focused on tools that do things like cleansing data. This is understandable, as companies tend to get their advice from IT vendors who are in the business of selling tools. The problem is that unless a business changes the way that data is captured at the point of entry, the quality of the data will never improve.

How to avoid it

One way or another the business needs to recognise the necessity to take ownership of their data and take charge of the data governance initiative. This is often easier said than done, and may require an independent expert from outside the organisation to act as a catalyst. An external person can facilitate the discussions at senior level between the various parts of the business. This will help the business to understand the benefits, and increase their desire to take ownership of the initiative. This is of course the ideal scenario, but at the very least, the business will need to take ownership of the policies and procedures relating to how the data is created and managed by the business.



Mistake #2 - Not understanding the maturity of the organisation

The mistake

This mistake is about not understanding the maturity of the organisation in terms of data management, and more specifically, data governance. It really does come down to the basic question: are you ready for data governance?

Sometimes an organisation is just not ready to implement a data governance initiative. Even if the organisation is ready, it may not be mature enough to implement anything more than baby steps towards their end goal.

The bottom line is that until your organisation is capable of thinking about data in the right way, a full-scale data governance initiative is likely to fail because the necessary communication and education will either confuse or fall on deaf ears.

The consequences

You need to know your starting point so that you can plot your journey. If you don't understand how mature your organisation is in terms of data governance, you risk trying to introduce something that your organisation isn't ready for or doesn't need.

When there is a lack of clarity about the maturity towards data governance within your organisation, it is a fairly safe bet that communications will be adversely affected. Your communications relating to the initiative should send out the right message, to the right people, at the right time. If the maturity is unclear, then communicating a message that hits the spot is going to be difficult, and you risk receiving negative reactions from the people who are critical to the ultimate success of your initiative.

How to avoid it

The obvious first step is to assess your current level of maturity in terms of data governance. This need not be a costly exercise as there are plenty of free resources available.

The second way to avoid this mistake is to be clear about what you hope to achieve with data governance. If you are clear of your objectives, it makes it easier to work out what stakeholders need to hear in order to welcome data governance. Once you've defined why your organisation is doing data governance, including how stakeholders will benefit from it, I recommend that you create a strategy document. This will ensure that everybody involved in your initiative clearly understands what the initiative is trying to achieve, and how it will positively impact their part of the organisation, which will undoubtedly spark interest in the communications.



Mistake #3 - Data governance as a project

The mistake

This common mistake is easily made because it seems logical to treat the implementation of data governance like any other project. Getting stakeholder involvement is essential to successfully implementing a data governance initiative and getting their buy-in. However, this is not something that can be simplified to a list of tasks.

Once you get stakeholder buy-in, you are then faced with the even bigger challenge of changing attitudes, behaviours, and even the culture towards data management. I hope you can see that this is going to take something a bit more sophisticated than conventional project management.

The consequences

When a data governance initiative is led as a project, it appears that progress is being made as tasks get completed. However, nothing substantial will change until the people change.

In order to change behaviours, attitudes, and culture, you must win hearts and minds. This is almost always overlooked when the success of the initiative is measured by deliverables ticked off a checklist.

Without getting the stakeholders on-board, you will struggle to integrate your data governance framework so that it becomes business-as-usual. Without stakeholder buy-in, the organisation will eventually resort back to their old ways of data management.

In short, the whole initiative will have been a complete waste of time and money, and subsequent attempts to re-implement data governance will be resisted by stakeholders as they will assume that it's a waste of time.

How to avoid it

The secret is to implement the initiative as a change programme with different work streams. Some will tackle the hard tasks, whilst others will handle the behavioural aspects. This means that you will probably need a team of people with different skill sets. For example, you will need a good facilitator who you will probably find outside the organisation. You will need soft skill trainers and people who are experts in communication and influence. It is unlikely that all of these skills will reside in one person. You will also need a leader who is a good co-ordinator.

Your change programme should outline the transition from the current situation to data governance being business-as-usual. You should also apply best practice in terms of organisational change management and allocate a realistic time frame.

As a final note, please do not underestimate the importance of soft skills when implementing data governance. Communication and influence are critical to the successful implementation of a data governance framework.



Mistake #4 - Misalignment with strategy

The mistake

Misalignment with strategy is a fairly common mistake, especially if the business is not fully engaged with the data governance initiative. The corporate strategic objectives will drive the day-to-day management of the business. Unless stakeholders see how data governance will help them achieve their strategic objectives, it is unlikely to be of any relevance when it comes to getting their buy-in and ultimately using their influence to drive culture change.

The consequences

If you cannot show how your initiative is going to help your organisation achieve its overall strategy, then you risk your stakeholders deeming it a waste of time. If this happens, they will likely do what they can to get your initiative cancelled or side-lined. They will always focus their attention on matters that they consider to be important in achieving their strategic objectives, and will resist anything that they consider as irrelevant.

If you experience major stakeholder resistance and the general perception that the data governance initiative is not adding any true value, then ultimately, there is a severe risk that your initiative may lose funding. Sadly, this is not an exaggeration and I have seen this happen all too often. I learnt this lesson the hard way in my early days of implementing data governance.

How to avoid it

The key to avoiding this mistake is to be clear on why you are implementing the data governance initiative and how it can help the organisation achieve its strategic objectives. It is critical to be able to articulate this clearly to ensure on-going funding and support for the initiative.

It helps to have a clear outcome in terms of business change and you need to be able to communicate this clearly and succinctly to the rest of the business. They will want to know how the initiative will help them reach their departmental objectives and how much effort is required. Understanding where your organisation sits in terms of the data governance maturity model will help you to identify what you should expect to be able to achieve.

Once you have identified why you want data governance and where you are heading, you will be in a better place to plan your route in terms of how you are going to get there, along with milestones so that you can measure your progress.



Mistake #5 - Not understanding the data landscape

The mistake

You need to have a high-level understanding of how you hold and manage data within your organisation. It does not need to be overly detailed, and provided you begin with a broad understanding, you can then add detail as and when it makes sense to do so. Failure to do this, however, will mean that you are always seeking to address symptoms of a lack of data governance, rather than getting to the underlying root causes of the data problems.

The consequences

If you don't understand the relationships between the data and the systems, then if data held on the systems change, even if they are made for the right reasons, it can have a negative impact.

You will be addressing the symptoms relating to your data problems rather than actually getting to the root cause. There will also be consequences downstream when you make small changes in one specific area, since nobody will understand what the data is used for and how it is used, which can lead to a number of unexpected repercussions. This in turn can cause your data governance initiative to develop a bad reputation.

How to avoid it

The obvious way to avoid this mistake is to define your data landscape before you start. You can implement this in phases so that you start out with a high level overview of the data landscape of your organisation. You should also undertake some form of impact analysis before you make any changes.

Always remember that implementing a data governance framework is too significant to tackle at once, and it's too big for you to understand everything. The key is to identify certain phases, prioritise them and look into them in more detail as you work through the phase.

If you start by defining the highest conceptual levels and work down to define the detail, you can work on the important aspects instead of trying to document everything in one go. Sometimes documentation isn't needed so this saves you wasting valuable time.

I highly recommend that you look into using conceptual data models, both as a way of documenting your data landscape, and for communicating and selling data governance to your business.



Mistake #6 - Failure to embed framework

The mistake

Another common mistake that I often see is the failure to embed the data governance framework. This is linked to mistake #3 of managing data governance as a project. Unless you effectively integrate your data governance framework into your organisation, any benefits will be short lived. If the data governance framework doesn't become integral to your business, the business will slowly but surely revert back to old behaviours.

The consequences

If the data governance framework is not embedded in your organisation, you are unlikely to achieve long-term change in the way that people manage their data. While you may get a few quick wins, without the data governance framework to support the change, it may take many attempts to get the change to stick.

Organisations often make multiple attempts to embed the data framework into their organisation, which is not only annoying for stakeholders, but it also hinders success. As you make further attempts, it becomes more difficult to achieve stakeholder co-operation as they will begin to assume that the initiative is just a waste of time.

How to avoid it

Roles and responsibilities are a key part of your data governance framework. If nobody takes responsibility for embedding the framework, the chances are that nobody will do it! Ensure your roles and responsibilities are properly defined and you have found suitable people for each of these roles.

There is no point in defining roles and responsibilities and then finding people to fill the roles if you don't actually explain to them what you want them to do and how they should do it. It sounds very obvious but make sure to document your processes and provide adequate instruction so that everyone knows what they should be doing.

Implementation is the hardest part of any data governance initiative. It is relatively easy to sit and document your framework, to draft your roles and responsibilities, and draw up nice looking process maps. However, you really need to get out there and make it happen. This is generally where data governance initiatives encounter the real issues.

You will also most likely need central support to ensure that your data governance framework works. This may be allocated to one individual who you may refer to as data governance manager, or perhaps even a whole team.



Mistake #7 - Attempting the big bang approach

The mistake

I will own up and raise my hand here. I have tried the big bang approach and I still have the scars to remind me that it is a bad idea! By the big bang approach I mean attempting one major initiative to implement everything to do with your data governance framework.

If you are a business user trying to get on with your day-to-day job, how would you feel if everything relating to your job changed massively in one go? Trust me, it's not a good feeling and it's more than a little stressful. This method is unlikely to bring long-term success.

The consequences

The result of the big bang approach is that the initiative will most likely be too big to get started in the first place. Or, business users will be too focused on their day job so by loading too many tasks on their plate, you will find yourself fighting the other priorities on their agenda. In short, it will be an uphill struggle to get people to allocate the time to get started.

The big bang approach quickly turns data governance into a major project that undoubtedly requires a lot of time and resources. By making it sound scarier than it is, this may hinder your attempts to get the resources and funding you need to achieve the higher-level strategic objectives. Remember, you should not be doing data governance because someone told you it's a good idea. You should be doing data governance to help your organisation achieve its strategic objectives.

How to avoid it

You can avoid this mistake by taking a structured approach when it comes to implementation. Take a step back and follow a methodical approach when working out why you are doing data governance and what you want it to achieve for the organisation. You can then attempt to implement your initiative in manageable chunks.

Never underestimate the amount of time that this is going to take. Once you have effectively articulated your data governance strategy and aligned it to your own organisational strategy, you are in a really good position to define your phases, which should be related to the priorities of your organisation.



Mistake #8 - Tick-box approach for compliance

The mistake

If the pressure to implement data governance comes from a regulator, then it is very tempting for organisations to look at satisfying the absolute minimum required to keep the regulator happy. This is a big mistake, as in the long run, these organisations end up doing more work than if they properly implemented data governance in the first place. They also miss out on all the business benefits that come from improving their data management practices.

The consequences

The tick-box approach to data governance is normally task-focused and completely ignores the people involved. They issue a checklist of things that need to be accomplished and issue threats if the tasks are not completed. As a result, people go through the motions because they have to and they see no real benefit to their day-to-day job.

As a consequence, it's going to be hard to embed your data governance framework within your organisation and you will always be chasing people to make sure that they have complied with the regulations.

Regulators are notorious for moving the goal posts, so if you have not embedded data governance into your organisation, every time they change the regulations and update the checklist you will probably move back to square one, which means implementing the new checklist.

How to avoid it

From the outset, look at leveraging the regulatory requirement as your driver but don't limit the scope of the initiative to just doing the bare minimum. Think about how you can satisfy the regulation and get some business benefit too.

If you adopt the principal of good data governance, then you should be able to comply with anything they come up with, and it will just become a bi-product of what you're already doing. At worst, you will have to make minor tweaks rather than having to start from scratch.

Get the basic data governance framework in place and outline the scope to all data owners at the same time. This doesn't just involve the data owners who are required to meet the regulation - start by getting the whole organisation behind the data governance initiative. Get them accustomed to the idea and emphasise the business benefits they can expect if they embrace the change.



Mistake # 9 - Thinking a tool is the answer

The mistake

A few years ago I wrote a number of LinkedIn blogs and discussions where I said that there are no tools that can help data governance. Things have since moved on and there are now a number of tools on the market that can really help with data governance. The tools out there can be fantastic enablers and facilitators that help you to implement, manage and support data governance so it becomes integral to the business.

However, don't be fooled into thinking that these tools are the answer to implementing good data governance.

The consequences

If the whole data governance initiative centres around a tool, it is unlikely that the business would ever engage because they would be under the mistaken belief that the tool would do all the work for them.

You will still need to get stakeholders engaged in the process because without their buy-in, the whole initiative is likely to fail. The tool won't work unless the whole business is signed up to data governance in the first place. Tools do not relieve them of any responsibility. Instead, tools should be positioned as enablers that make it much easier for people to executive their data governance responsibilities.

Ultimately, it's not the tool that causes a data governance initiative to hit the rocks. The initiative fails when too much attention is focused on the tool, and too little attention is focused on getting stakeholder buy-in and change management.

How to avoid it

The answer is to take a structured approach when implementing data governance. Before you start thinking about potential tools, make sure you fully understand what you are doing and why you are doing it.

For you to get the most from a tool, you should have a clear understanding of what you are going to be using the tool for. Draft your data governance framework first and as part of that exercise, consider whether your organisation is mature enough in terms of understanding data governance. It may in fact be too early to start considering tools.

Do all the things we have already mentioned in order to get the business engaged in the initiative, and if you do decide to employ tools, remember that these tools do not relieve you of any responsibility in terms of achieving organisational change.





What next?

I hope you have found this guide useful and that it helps you to achieve success with your data governance initiative.

There are a few common themes amongst all of the mistakes. When I help companies get their data governance initiatives back on track, the main driver of success is the people.

Data governance ultimately involves changing the way people manage data. However, people are very reluctant to change their ways. To achieve such change requires a motive. It's the old carrot and stick.

In my experience of implementing data governance in different companies, I have never seen the stick approach achieve more than begrudging tick-box compliance. However, when the business understands how they will benefit from data governance, they then take over and run with it themselves.

Critical success factors of data governance come down to the softer skills, such as communication and influence. This is why people who run data governance initiatives often need help in understanding how to get stakeholders on their side and how to implement the necessary organisational change.

The problem with hiring consultants to do this is that when they leave, their skills and experience leave with them. If you hire an individual to support you in implementing your project, ensure that they do so on a skills-transfer basis, so that your organisation can build its own competency. In addition to this, make sure that they have experience in implementing data governance, as well as the people skills.

At first glance, it's not always easy to spot where a data governance initiative is going wrong, so I hope this document provides some insight. I have created a checklist that will enable you to give your data governance initiative a health check, so if you are interested in getting a copy then please feel free to contact me.

You can also contact me if you have any questions relating to this document, or if you would like to discuss your data governance initiative. Email me at nicola@nicolaaskham.com.

I wish you the best of luck and do keep an eye out for the useful data governance tips I will be sending you every couple of weeks.

Nicola Askham

The Data Governance Coach



About Nicola Askham - The Data Governance Coach

Nicola is the leading data governance coach and training provider in the UK. She supports companies with implementing their data governance initiative, so they can sustain it on an on-going basis. She holds a unique level of experience in the Data Governance field, and has experience in training and coaching major organisations to help them implement full data governance frameworks. This coaching approach enables organisations to self-manage the process beyond initial implementation.

Nicola has developed a powerful methodology for implementing data governance based on over 12 years of experience and research into best practices in the field of data management. Her methodology breaks down the data governance initiative into logical steps, which ensures that businesses design and implement a data governance framework that is right for the organisation.

This unique methodology is the central feature of Nicola's coaching and data governance workshops. It ensures that the data governance framework is embedded as business-as-usual, which delivers significant and sustainable benefits.

Nicola has worked in Data Management for over 12 years. She initially worked for a leading UK Bank, and branched into consultancy at the beginning of 2009. Recently, Nicola has spent much of her time working with insurance companies to deliver data governance for Solvency II. She also runs data governance training courses and coaches organisations to help them implement data governance. Nicola is a Director and Committee Member of DAMA UK, she sits on the Expert Panel of Dataqualitypro.com, and regularly writes and presents internationally on data governance best practice.

When Nicola is not training and coaching, she enjoys singing and loves performing on stage in musicals. Nicola is also a "Bake Off" hopeful and enjoys making all manner of cakes, which she occasionally brings along to her training workshops.





Nicola Askham
THE DATA GOVERNANCE COACH