Why Do People See Workplace Data So Differently?

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People analytics is one of the most controversial technologies used in organizations today. Data from people at work are analyzed for critical decisions about hiring, firing, and performance appraisal. The promise of people analytics is compelling: more evidence-based people management through neutral and objective data. But is data really neutral? And if different stakeholders hold different beliefs about data itself, what does that mean for how they perceive people analytics?

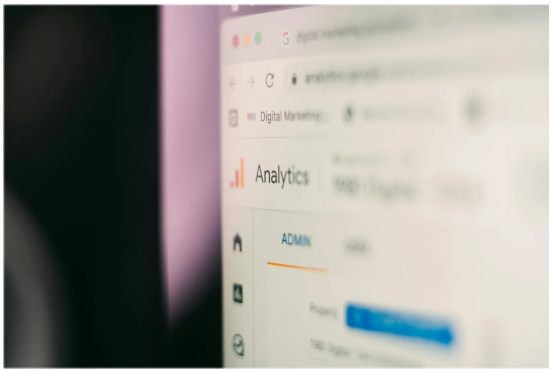
It's Not Just About Managers Versus Employees

It is easy to assume that employees dislike people analytics, while management favors it. After all, management uses people analytics to collect, analyze, and make decisions about employees.

This perception is reinforced by discussions on popular websites such as reddit, where multiple subreddits are dedicated to discussing work- and hiring-related practices: reddit.com/r/antiwork, /r/WorkReform, /r/recruitinghell. These communities, largely populated by employees and job candidates, espouse their disdain for people analytics tools such as applicant tracking systems (ATS). The members of these communities often share perceptions of the tools being arbitrary, gamified, and poor quality:

> "ATS systems have systematically ruined the job market"

> "I want to be clear that a senior manager at an insurance company looked me in the eye and told me to wiggle my mouse while reading to trick the productivity software our company just paid for."



Conversely, managers and companies adopt people analytics, with HR departments experiencing significant cost decreases and 22% of surveyed HR professionals stating that they "view recruitment as the function with the highest automation potential through AI (22 percent)". At first glance, the divide appears straightforward: employees criticize analytics, while managers embrace it. But is it really that simple?

Our observations contradict the assumption that managers are in favor, while employees dislike people analytics. In our 2026 study published in the Journal of the Association for Information Systems, we investigated why stakeholders (i.e., managers, employees, and HR personnel) react so differently to the same

technology. We found that former explanations grounding different perceptions in job role, skills, and usefulness cannot fully explain how people analytics is perceived or whether its potential is realized. One piece of the puzzle was missing: To understand the differences in perceptions, we had to look beyond organizational roles and examine stakeholders' underlying beliefs about the data underpinning people analytics.

Data Ideologies as an Alternative Explanation

Looking for novel explanations, we asked: what if people react differently to people analytics not because they occupy different positions in an organization or have different skills, but because they hold fundamentally different beliefs about data itself?

We call these beliefs **data ideologies**: Data ideologies comprise individuals' beliefs about data and how data represent reality. Contrary to other ideologies, data ideology's basic assumptions are not about economics or power per se. Instead, they emphasize empirical assumptions (e.g., can data fully represent a human?) and normative assumptions (e.g., should decisions be based on data only?).

Our study discovered two archetypical data ideologies: (1) **dataists**, people with favorable views on data and (2) **non-dataists**, people with unfavorable views on data.

Dataists assume that data facilitate a deep, novel, and clear understanding of a phenomenon, and that data depict a true representation of the world in accordance with reality. For dataists, data should be used prescriptively as they predict future trends, are without favoritism or discrimination and provide valid causal explanations.

Non-dataists are at the other end of the spectrum and believe that data are

incorrect, incomplete and do not depict a true representation of reality. For non-dataists, interpretations from data can vary and may lead to biases. Using data can lead to unfavorable outcomes for the data subjects. As a result, we should place greater trust in human judgment and interpersonal relationships than in quantification alone.

We found dataists and non-dataists among managers, HR professionals, and employees alike. In other words, support for, or skepticism toward, people analytics could not simply be explained by organizational role. Instead, it was closely linked to how individuals thought about data.

How Are Data Ideologies Related to People Analytics?

Our findings suggest that data ideologies influence stakeholders' interactions with people analytics at three stages: how they perceive the ease of leveraging the technology's potential, how they perceive the technology itself, and how they ultimately realize the technology's potential.

First, data ideologies shape how easy or difficult individuals perceive it to use people analytics to achieve their goals. People with dataist beliefs see people analytics as a powerful tool that readily supports their work. They require relatively little effort or persuasion to incorporate it into their decision-making. By contrast, non-dataists see the technology as less capable of achieving meaningful outcomes. They perceive greater limitations and risks, making the use of people analytics feel like a much greater burden.

Second, assumptions about data confirm both positive and negative prior perceptions about people analytics. For example, positive benefits and depth of insights in people analytics are reinforced among individuals with dataist beliefs. To the contrary, individuals with non-dataist beliefs are more likely to question these benefits and remain skeptical about the validity and usefulness of the insights generated.

Third, data ideologies shape how people analytics is ultimately used in practice. Dataist beliefs encourage individuals to justify and accelerate the use of people analytics in their work. In contrast, non-dataists are more likely to use people analytics selectively, relying on it only in certain contexts or choosing not to use it at all when they perceive its limitations to outweigh its benefits.

What Can Organizations and Data Researchers Learn From This?

Successfully implementing people analytics requires more than selecting the right technology or ensuring high-quality data. Our study suggests that understanding the different beliefs stakeholders hold about data itself is required. Therefore, employees, HR professionals, and managers alike should engage in discussions about the beliefs about data. Rather than treating data as objective evidence that simply needs to be communicated, organizations should create opportunities to discuss what data can (not) represent. As recent work on bodily data similarly suggests, the value of workplace data often lies not in the numbers alone, but in the conversations and interpretations they provoke. These implications extend beyond people analytics. As organizations increasingly adopt AI and other data-driven technologies, understanding stakeholders' data ideologies will become essential for realizing their potential.

More generally, our findings made us reflect on how we study data-driven technologies. We often explain differences in technology adoption through differences in capabilities, organizational roles, or perceived usefulness. Yet our study suggests that people may first evaluate the data before they evaluate the technology. Paying greater attention to stakeholders' beliefs about data may therefore help researchers better understand why the same technology is embraced by some and resisted by others.

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