

Career Advancement In Data Mining

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Original version of an article that appeared in the March 19, 2001 issue of “DM News”

If you are just beginning a career in the field of direct marketing data mining, then congratulations! You have made one of the most professionally rewarding career choices you can make. If you are a few years into your career, then you already know what we mean. Regardless, this article is for those of you who want to understand how to expand your horizons.

Ample Opportunity Across Multiple Career Paths

If the past few years are any indication of what lies ahead, then you will have no shortage of jobs to choose from. You will be in great demand because you are on the vanguard of the Customer Relationship Management revolution. Employment prospects will be particularly attractive if you successfully combine the statistical techniques that you learned in school with the “data detective” skills that can only come from extensive, in-the-trenches experience.

The exact direction that your career takes will be influenced by your non-quantitative skills and interests. Typically, data miners follow one of two very different career paths. Some remain on the technical side of the business, and eventually either move up the ranks to manage an entire staff of analysts or transition into the related field of data warehousing and processing. Others evolve into generalists, and ultimately become senior level marketers or strategy consultants.

Establishing a Solid Foundation of Statistical Techniques and Programming Skills

Regardless, you must first establish a solid grounding in the basics of data mining. You should strive to develop deep expertise in core analytical techniques such as clustering and predictive modeling. You should also work to become an excellent programmer in one or more of the widely used analytical packages such as SAS or SPSS.

There are two kinds of data miners. One has just enough programming proficiency to execute the statistical steps, or “procedures,” required for analytical projects. The other is able to manipulate data in complex and sophisticated ways. Consider, for example, a predictive modeling project where the data miner wishes to create a derived field to act as a potential predictor variable, and where the analysis file must be manipulated in a complex way to achieve this end. The data miner with weak programming skills will either have to forego this variable or depend on others for assistance. The data miner with strong programming skills, however, will meet this challenge with ease.

Often, analysts with weak programming skills work at companies with large statistical staffs, proprietary data mining systems, and rigid processes and methodologies. We have both interviewed candidates who equate data mining with the pushing of buttons in the prescribed sequence indicated by the company manual. They have little appreciation of the “eureka moments” that occur when laborious digging unearths a paradigm-shifting fact or market segment. You do not want to become one of these individuals! They are of limited value to other firms.

The Effect of Employer Size On Career Development

The size of your employer is an important consideration. If you are at a small company, you will have a relatively greater impact on the organization. However, opportunities for growth might be more limited. Also, there may be fewer chances to latch onto experienced mentors who will push you to achieve your potential.

Building Upon the Base: Effective Communication and an Understanding of Direct Marketing

As an ambitious data miner, you must develop an appreciation of how the results of analytical projects are leveraged by marketers and fit into the company's overall strategy. The astute analyst will soon realize that it takes much more than just statistics and programming virtuosity to break into the elite of our industry. It will be critical for you to begin thinking of yourself as a quantitatively grounded direct marketer rather than as just a technician.

As you evolve into a well-rounded business professional, you must develop the ability to communicate clearly and concisely. This will allow you to work effectively with experienced professionals in marketing, sales and business development, many of whom will have MBA's and more years of experience than you. If you are a foreign national, a language barrier might be an additional hurdle.

Do not be discouraged if you find it difficult to master the business and communications side of direct marketing. It is understandable because you will have spent several years focusing entirely on numbers and code. Fortunately, many inexpensive vehicles are available for self-improvement. You might want to start with community college courses in business, grammar and writing. You can also choose from countless audio tapes, videos and books on these subjects.

Data Warehousing and Processing: A Related Technical Field

If you think that you would like to eventually branch out beyond data mining, but want to remain on the technical side of the business, you will be in an ideal position to transition into the exploding field of data warehousing and processing. As a successful analyst, you will have honed your logic and data detective skills. Also, you will have become an accomplished programmer.

Your greatest asset, however, will be your years of experience as a sophisticated, technically grounded, direct marketing oriented, end user of data warehouses and marts. Stories of data warehousing disasters circulate throughout our industry – systems that either do not accomplish what they are supposed to, or that do so with an unacceptable expenditure of time and effort. Often, the reason is that the designers and builders of these systems are not direct marketers. You, however, will be in an ideal position to avoid these pitfalls, and your employer and clients will recognize this fact.

An estimated 30,000 new jobs will be created in the direct marketing industry in the next five years. Many of these will be in the area of data warehousing and processing. Do not be concerned if you need additional training – to learn a new programming language, for example. There is such a shortage of experienced personnel that many employers will contribute towards, or even pick up all of, your tuition.

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