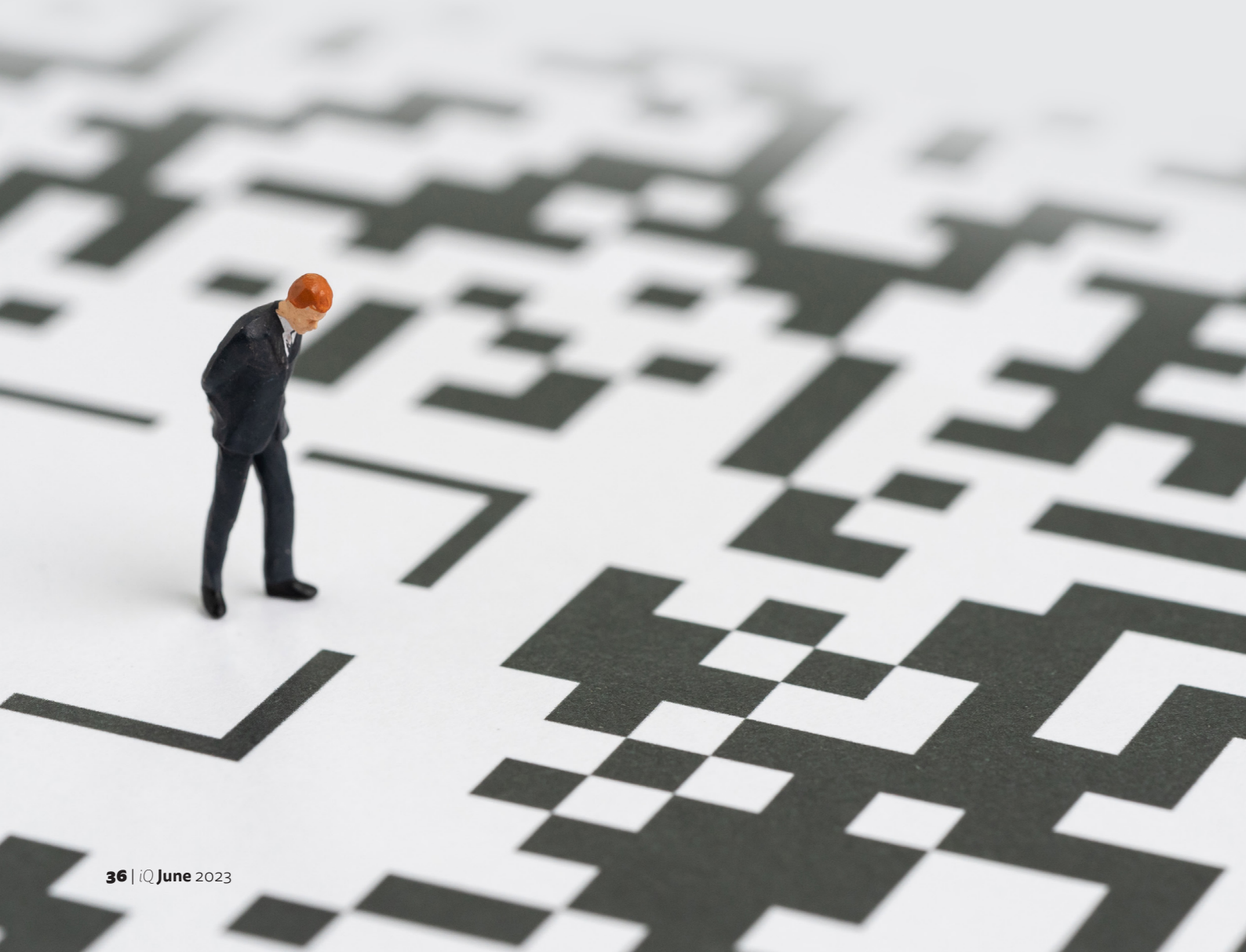# Overcoming data challenges in the workplace

BY DR SELENA FISK

Data has become the lifeblood of modern businesses, and the ability to harness its power can provide companies with a significant competitive advantage.

Making sense of data, however, is not a particularly easy task. Many organisations struggle to know how to use data effectively, and with inconsistent models of good practice emerging, a changing landscape of data types and technology, and many employees who are self-taught, it is hard to know where to focus our attention or how to build a culture where data is inherently part of what you do.

### CHALLENGE 1:

Data literacy is a key challenge and barrier in the effective use of data in organisations. Many employees are not trained to work with data, most have not studied business intelligence or data analytics explicitly, and thus many do not know how to interpret or analyse it effectively. Combine this lack of training with people who refer to themselves as 'not numbers people' and people who lack the confidence to tap into the data effectively, and this can lead to poor decision-making and missed opportunities.

### CHALLENGE 2:

Another challenge that organisations face is the sheer volume of data that is available. With so much data being generated every day, it can be difficult to know which data to focus on and how to use it to guide business decisions. This is nobody's fault – often times, data is added, technology platforms are added, new initiatives are introduced, and nothing is taken away. We cannot possibly expect our people to use and act on all of the data that they have available, but we can have a plan to cut through some of the noise and make it easier for people to use.

### CHALLENGE 3:

Data quality is another challenge that organisations face when it comes to using data effectively. There is little value in investing time and effort in using and analysing data if we cannot trust the data or insights that we are collecting in the first place. If we are unaware of issues with validity and reliability, this can lead to inaccurate insights and poor decision-making.

### CHALLENGE 4:

Data security is the final main challenge that organisations face when it comes to using data effectively. With the increasing amount of data being stored and shared, there is a growing risk of data breaches and cyber-attacks.

Often, if decisions are made about increasing security, sometimes, key users of the data are not involved in decision making. Meaning that some structures are prohibitive or make data use even harder.

To address these challenges and move the organisation forward in their data use, organisations should consider how they might build a data culture that permeates the people, processes, and technology in the organisation. A data culture is one in which data is valued and used to inform business outcomes, and all users know what is expected of them and when.

**To address these challenges and build a data culture, organisations need to take a holistic approach that includes people, processes, and technology.**

**People:** Organisations need to invest in data training and support for their employees. This training should be tailored to the specific needs of each employee and should include not only technical skills, but also an understanding of how to use data to inform business outcomes. In my data diagnostic, the two lowest responses, consistently, and across the country are time (40%) and support (46%) from the organisation. These two need to be prioritised to build capacity across the organisation, not just for the people who have 'data' or 'business intelligence' in their role descriptions.

**Processes:** Organisations need to have a clear data strategy in place that defines the types of data that are most relevant to the business and how that data will be collected, analysed, and used to inform decisions and track progress. Often, this takes the form of a clear organisation-wide data plan, a data policy, and systems and meetings that feature evidence as a key element of the decision-making process.

They also need to invest in data quality tools and processes to ensure that the data being used is accurate and reliable.

Errors also occur when data is not satisfactorily cleaned and processed, or when it is transferred from one form to the other. Minimising the impacts of these challenges by having good processes in place will help ensure decisions are informed by good information that accurately reflects the state of play.

**Technology:** Organisations need to invest in the right technology to support their data strategy. This includes data analytics tools, data quality tools, and data security tools. There are a range of products available for purchase that visualise data, and a range of products that contain different information on different platforms. Technology should support employees to use the information well, and not expect them to search multiple platforms to find the information that they need.

Organisations are inundated with the amount of data that is now available, but using data effectively is not always easy. They face a number of challenges, including a lack of data literacy, the sheer volume of data, data quality issues, and data security risks. To address these challenges and build a data culture, organisations need to take a holistic approach that includes people, processes, and technology. By investing in data literacy training, having a clear data strategy, investing in data quality tools and processes, and implementing robust data security measures, we can support our people to use data effectively to inform business outcomes, track progress, and gain a competitive advantage.
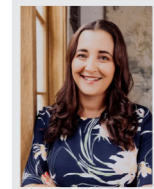
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**
Selena is a data storyteller who is passionate about helping others sort through the numbers to tell the real stories and lead positive change. Data is an increasing presence in our work and home life, yet Selena recognises that this doesn't always come naturally, so she seeks to build skill in others and make the use of data less daunting. Selena has mentored hundreds of executive leaders, middle managers and employees in data storytelling, with the goal of benefitting the organisations and communities in which they work. Selena's book, 'I'm not a numbers person: How to make good decisions in a data rich world" was published in April this year by Major Street Publishing.