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# AI LEADERS PODCAST EPISODE 1 AMY GERSHKOFF BOLLES

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:00:07]** Hi, everyone. I'm Arnab Chakraborty, managing director, Accenture Applied Intelligence. I'm here today with Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles who is currently the Chief Data Officer of Bitly and GM of BitlyIQ, Bitly's Insights Division. Previously, Amy served at the CDO at Ancestry.com and Zynga and Chief Data Scientist of WPP's Data Alliance. She built and led the Customer Analytics and Insights Team and the Global Data Science Team at eBay. She was also the head of Media Planning and Analytics for Barack Obama's 2012 campaign. Thanks for joining me today, Amy. It's great to have you here today for our conversation on data driven transformation.

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:00:53]** Thank you so much for having me. Always great to be here.

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:00:56]** Awesome. Awesome. So, there is a lot of buzz, Amy, especially over the last six months, with the pandemic that we are all in, about the digital disruption that's happening all around us and the role of data driven transformation. So, what's your take about the whole data driven transformation that we are seeing around us and what's the reality and what's the hype?

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:01:23]** Great question. Well, I, from what I can tell, obviously, data driven transformation was on the rise even before Covid. But now with Covid, everyone's especially interested in digital information and digital data. But I think it's really important, you know, as you mentioned, Arnab, so many companies are getting a bit wrapped up in the hype. And I think it's really important to take a step back and think about why you're trying to undertake a digital transformation journey or a data driven transformation journey. Is this really about increasing revenue? Is it about lowering costs? Is it about increased efficiency? Is it about enhancing the customer experience or providing and enabling digital customer experiences at a time when Covid is making in-person interaction much harder? Of course, usually data driven transformation, digital transformation is really about all of these. But picking one goal in particular is super important because it allows you to design the data function within your organization to drive the outcome you're seeking. So, if you really want the data function to drive increases in revenue, you don't want to situate the data team in the office of the CFO because CFOs are all about lowering costs and being very careful with spending. And they are going to be less of the mindset of spending money to drive top line revenue growth.

But, at the same time, if you really want to lower costs, you don't want to situate the data team to partner really closely with product and marketing. Right? Because that's not necessarily about lowering costs.  Designing great customer experiences is not really about lowering costs. So being really clear about why you're undertaking this journey, I think, is super important to making sure that the team is situated in the organization in the right way to be optimally set up for success.

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:03:20]** That's great. Amy, I think you talked a lot about the purpose, you know, the big purpose you would need to really think about for the data driven transformation for your organization. And, as I speak with a lot of the C-level executives, the conundrum that they are in is that the purpose is clear but then how do you actually go about the journey from a pilot? How do you scale a data driven initiative? And the question they always ask me is 'what are the key ingredients that I need to really care for in that journey?' So, coming to you, based on the journey that you have been driving across so many different companies, what are what are some of the key ingredients of the data driven transformation journey?

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:04:02]** Yeah, I think it's a great point. Figuring out the purpose behind data driven transformation is really only step zero in what can be a long and challenging journey, especially in some organizations that don't necessarily have as much digital muscle built up. So, I think first and foremost, it's about hiring the right talent because talent is so key. No one ever did anything interesting at the office all by themselves. Right? All work is a team sport and you've got to have the best team. And so, to me, for data driven transformation, the best talent is not just about technical skills, although technical skills are obviously extremely important. You want to have muscle around data: data science, data engineering, folks who are trained up in all the latest and greatest technical skills is extremely important. But to me, that's only the beginning. It's really critical to have a team that's strong in business thinking and communication skills as well, because, you know, it's not just about understanding the math or being able to write some code. It's also about understanding the business problem that you're trying to solve and making sure that you're attacking that problem in the right way. And so, what I found over the course of my career is…I built data teams, data science teams, data analytics teams, digital analytics teams…is that technical skills is just the beginning. You really need that strong business thinking infused as well. And then you've got to really immerse that talent in the problem you're trying to solve. So, one of the things that I've seen some organizations do that is I think a mistake is they've treated their data team, their data science team kind of as short order cooks, if you will. So, "I'd like this model by this date using these parameters" and that sort of specificity is really under serving. It's not serving folks well because a really strong data science group, for example, if you really help them understand deeply the business problem you're trying to solve, they're going to come back with probably ten better ideas than the one specific model that you asked for. They're going to ask great questions about how you're going to apply the model. What's going to be the method by which that model is going to drive business impact? And that's going to help get you to the right answer.

So, I'll give you an example. When I, in one of my previous roles, one of the things that my data science team was asked to do was to build a ‘likelihood to churn’ model for customers for our entire customer database. That sounds really straightforward. And we had gotten a request from the particular business unit saying ‘I'd like a likelihood to churn model,’ but we turned around and asked a whole bunch of questions: ‘would you like us to predict that someone is going to churn after the current session that they're in or that they're going to churn, that they've already had their last session and you're never going to see them again? Would you...are you planning to operationalize that model with push notifications at a particular point in time? Or is the model meant to inform whether or not to offer them a discount on the next time they appear in your app? And so, all of those may sound like really minor details. They actually matter a lot when you're thinking about designing a model. And so that's why I think the integration of that data team with the larger business is so important.

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:07:32]** I think Amy you kind of read my mind there. And as you were speaking about the talent and the wonderful teams that you have built, I was thinking, what would be one of your favorite projects that you have worked with your teams around data driven decisioning? I think the churn topic that you just brought out is a classic example. Right? You know, that is so applicable, whether it's the B2C business model or B2B business model. It's so, so applicable. The question that comes to my mind, you know, is with all these great outcomes that you are speaking about, how do you drive adoption? And, you know, you speak about the talent at one end. Right? That is so critical but then the talent can develop some really pathbreaking solutions. But how do you drive adoption at scale within the organization? Any thoughts from you on that? What you have seen that drives adoption for these AI lead solutions within the organization?

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:08:26]** Yeah, I think that's a really great question, because you're right that the best models and technical solutions are only as good as the ability of the organization to then implement them. Right? One of the things that I've seen is that goal alignment becomes incredibly important. And this is one thing that I think eBay did very well when I was at eBay and I was running the Customer Insights and Analytics Group and running the global data science team. Those teams, we did not have goals that were just analytics goals or just data science goals. We shared goals with our partners in marketing and in product. And that goal alignment was incredibly important because ultimately our goal wasn't to build a beautiful data science model. It was to build a model that would have impact on certain business metrics. But in order for us to have that impact, it has to be in very close partnership with the business. And whether that's a product, team, marketing organizations, operations or any other part of the business, it's really about that business outcome. And so that's where I think shared goals can actually make a big difference in aligning incentives into ensuring that there is going to be greater adoption. Because, if everyone is agreed on the objective, you know, at the beginning of the quarter, beginning of the year, they've agreed on the ways that they're going to partner to get it done. Then you're much more likely to see that adoption at the end than if the data team is just off in the corner building something that they think might be useful as opposed to something that the business has asked for to solve a key problem.

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:10:00]** I love the whole notion about goal alignment. And this actually talks about the view that analytics and AI needs to be fully integrated with the business objectives and business priorities of the company and it's not standing alone in an ivory tower. So, I think that makes a lot of sense. I think the other dimension that, Amy, I hear a lot from our clients is that there is the analytics team, the data team. Right? And, this is where all of smart brains are. Right? And then there is the rest of the organization. So, you spoke about the alignment of goals, but then there's also an aspect of the fluency in the language and the acumen around data and analytics. And organizations find it really hard. It's not easy. It's hard to rotate the hundred thousand employees that large organizations have - the Fortune 100 companies - to bring that same level of fluency and the same level of language, the same language and acumen around data and AI. That has a huge role to play in adoption. How have you seen that within the organizations that you've worked in, a lot of them data natives. How does that whole data fluency and the rotation of the broader organization happen around data analytics and AI?

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:11:21]** I think that's such a great question. And, you know, where we are today with the integration of data in most organizations sort of reminds me of where we were in the early to mid-2000s with the internet. I remember one of my first jobs...it was maybe my second job out of graduate school. I was working in a company. I was GM of their analytics division. I was working in a company that had an internet department. Lots of companies had internet departments back in the early 2000s ...but today, no company has an internet department. Everybody uses the internet. Right? That's part of how we all do our jobs in every sector, in every industry and every function. We all use the Internet. That's just part of how we work. And so, I think where we're moving towards...I think this going takes more time for sure...is to where data fluency becomes as an important part of every role in every company at every level. But we're not there yet and it's a journey. And while we're on that journey, I think it's incredibly important to have a set of experts within a company who can think about some of these harder challenging data assignments, who can caretake the data cleanliness, the data quality, data governance. And there's a lot of aspects of this that need that care, at least for the time being. But, long term, I think data is going the way of the Internet, which is that it will be ubiquitous across teams, companies and industries.

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:12:56]** I love the analog and I can relate to that. You know, late 90s, I still remember we had the internet departments and if you were part of that group, you were actually a privileged lot because you had access to resources that most of the other people in the company didn't have. But one role that I think that played in that era that is very applicable here is that there were these top leaders in the organization who are sponsoring that initiative. Right? Whether it's about the internet, whether it was about the digitalization that happened, and the same thing applies for us. You know, as we think about data driven transformation, I think the C-level leaders and the CEO of the company will play a very vital role in that transformation. What would be your advice, especially for the C-level leaders, as they think about driving data transformation? What are the few things to be watching out for because what they say and what they do is what the organization is going to follow? So, what are the few things that you know feel like the C-level leaders and the C-level and the CEO of that company should watch out for when it comes to data driven transformation?

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:14:08]** Yeah, that's a great question. And, you know, this brings me back to my undergraduate training in economics. I believe most people respond rationally to whatever set of incentives they are given. And so, no one is going to become a champion of data or data science or data transformation or digital transformation unless it's in their interest. But the good news is that for most companies today, in most industries at almost every level, it's in their interest to actually pursue data driven transformations, to make decisions with the latest data. To be using data to inform not only business decisions, but to inform the customer experience, to inform planning and so forth. And so, if it's in their interests, they're going to do it. So, I'll give you an example from some of the work that I'm doing today at BitlyIQ. One of the things that we're seeing is…we've had at BitlyIQ real-time data for a long time but what we're seeing now in the age of Covid is this huge demand for real time data and real time data has existed for a long time. But the demand has greatly increased because it's so challenging to forecast consumer demand right now because all of the historical models that companies were using over the last, in some cases decades, don't work anymore. All of our consumption habits have changed. We're buying more groceries. We're traveling less. We're seeing fewer movies.  You know, we're eating out at restaurants less but we're buying more toilet paper. So, everything has changed. And so that real time data becomes incredibly important to forecasting demand in a way that was always important. But it was never this important until this moment. So, one of the things we've been doing is helping our clients with real time consumer demand forecasts based on aggregated insights and trends from our data on the Bitly platform, understanding what is being read on a market by market basis gives you some indication - we found actually quite strong prediction - of what people will do. So, if you find in a particular market that people are reading a lot about taking a vacation. And so, they're looking at articles about, you know, best beach vacations in Florida and best hotels to stay in Florida and best restaurants to eat at in Florida. And if they live in Chicago, that's a pretty good indication that they might be planning a trip to Florida. And so if you aggregate all of that reading material across, you know, a marketplace or specific market like the Chicago metro area, for example, then all of a sudden you start to have a signal about whether or not people are going to be traveling, how much they're going to be traveling and where they're going to be going…all, of course, in a very privacy friendly, fully optimized way because we're looking at this on a city by city basis. But that's that real-time consumer demand signal can be incredibly valuable. And it was always valuable but becomes incredibly valuable in a situation where, you know, traditional data just won't do it, just won't cut it as far as forecasting.

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:17:23]** I think you raise a great point. I think the current times that we're living in and I think in the future, the dependence on data to make decisions, whether it's know at a personal level, whether it's at the company level, we are going to be, very, very dependent on making those decisions based on sound data, trusted data and making decisions real time. A question that comes with that is once you start seeing that level of data driven transformation happening, there is a level of responsibility. There's a level of accountability that also needs to come in terms of who is making the decision, whether it's actually the human, whether it's the algorithm, whether it is the data that is feeding the algorithm.

Right? And when you do that at scale across thousands of your employees and millions of your products that are there in the marketplace that becomes really an important topic of how you manage the AI led solutions in a responsible way, in the ethical way, so that everybody can have trust in it. Right? So how do you see that Amy especially as you are working with a lot of the digital natives and large companies. How do you see that out in the field evolving with time?

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:18:43]** I think that that's a really important point and one of the things that I think we're starting to see. I would love to see more is instead of the data team or data scientists operating in sort of a silo, all of the work around data, but also around digital analytics, around building products with data, with AI....all of that needs to incorporate experts from legal, from privacy, from compliance at the beginning, at the design phase, rather than at the end. What I have seen and heard from some of my peers at other companies is sometimes the legal team or the privacy folks are brought in at the very end of a project and asked to greenlight something that really never should have been built. My philosophy has always been to really rely on those experts at the earliest stages of even conceiving of a product or an algorithm or a data strategy, and to really bring those experts in as partners at the beginning so that what you're designing is not only ethical but privacy friendly and compliant in every way, because that's what consumers expect. And so, if you make those internal experts your allies in the creation process, you really end up in a much better place for your company. But you also end up in a better place for consumers as well. And that ultimately is important for long term corporate health as well.

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:20:15]** I think you bring a great point, Amy, about the collaboration that we need to have across different constituents within the company. You know, whether it's legal, whether it's finance, whether it's the data team all coming together, but also outside the enterprise. And this is something that we are seeing becoming very real with now in the pandemic. We are seeing that companies need to come together to actually find a solution where it's about a new drug that has to be brought into the market, right, to solve the pandemic? Or whether it's about training the right level of preparedness, you know, with our supply chains and everything in place to serve the patient, right, and the citizens that need help. Right? So, I think it's going to transcend the whole topic around responsible AI and ethical AI. You would need a very strong collaboration across enterprises and people to come together. Do you see any big challenges with respect to the collaboration that you spoke about, that will be very important under big challenges that will come in the way that we need to be cognizant about or, you know, find our ways to form some kind of consortiums that can come together, you know, within the company, outside the company that can help us with navigating this this topic.

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:21:34]** Yeah. I think you've mentioned sort of collaboration externally, and I think that's so important. One of the things that's concerned me and I've done some writing about this and speaking about this over the last several years is

generally speaking, there's been very little collaboration between the technical community and the regulatory community. And I think part of that is because many in...many people in tech might just hope that there's no regulation of A.I. or that there's no regulation of some of these new algorithms and processes. But that's really a foolhardy position, in my view. And what it means is that regulators who are not very technical are left writing these laws by themselves. And so far better, in my view, would be to drive a partnership so that the regulation is sensible. It's balancing the needs of consumers in different markets. It's being smart about how those regulations are written rather than the tech community's sort of head in the sand approach. And I think if we, you know, if we collaborate as a community more closely with the people writing these laws, we're going to end up with laws that make more sense. So, I'll give you an example. And I've done some speaking about this is if you look at the GDPR law, some of the provisions are around the need, if asked to provide all of the data that went into a machine learning algorithm. But anyone who's ever built a machine learning model knows that that's a bit of an odd thing to say, because a machine learning model, by definition, is constantly learning with new data. And in fact, all of the advances lately in machine learning technology are about layering machine learning on top of real time data streams which nature of being real time means they're constantly changing. And so, it doesn't reflect the way the technology works. And so, a lot it is smart and sensible, perhaps, and meant to protect consumers actually in practice became sort of challenging to implement because it doesn't match how the technology works. Far better, I think, would have been for some machine learning experts to partner with the European regulators to write down some rules that actually do make sense for how machine learning technology works.

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:23:47]** That's a great piece of advice, Amy. I think early collaboration, education, they go a long way, you know, in in creating higher levels of clarity in topics like what we are discussing around data analytics and A.I. So, these are I think I think we covered a lot of ground here today, Amy. I think we started with talking about, you know, the role of data driven transformation today and in the future. You touched upon the role of talent, which I think is the secret sauce in scaling a data driven initiatives within the company. We touched upon the topic of adoption. And one thing I liked is we used to have an internet group earlier. There's no Internet group. It's everybody's business. Data is going to go the same way. It's going to be the electricity that will be everywhere, you know, within the company. You talked about the collaboration, especially when it comes to driving the legal aspects of A.I. and ethical aspects of A.I. both within the company and outside the company, adding some great points and advice you gave there. So, I think I think this is this is great, Amy, in terms of kind of talking through the whole journey. Any last comments from you before we sign off with the team here...top three things that, you know, takeaways for the audience.

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:25:08]** Well, I just wanted to mostly say thank you so much for having me on. Accenture has been a great partner to me, and my data driven journeys at various companies, and I'm sure we'll continue to be a great partner going forward. So, thank you so much for including me in this podcast and I look forward to continuing the conversation.

**Arnab Chakraborty [00:25:26]** Thank you. Thank you, Amy, and thanks to all of our listeners, you know, for me being part of this. And feel free to subscribe and share the podcast with your friends and colleagues and have a good day. Thank you so much.

**Dr. Amy Gershkoff Bolles [00:25:41]** Thank you.