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Book Review

**Simon, P., Too Big to Ignore: The Business Case for Big Data.
2013, John Wiley & Sons, Pages: 256, Price: USD 15 (LKR 4,903)
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Introduction

We cannot ignore the term ‘Big data’ just as a buzzword (though we could a decade ago) and avoid or neglect the term big data as impossible today because it is everywhere. Now it has entered the DNA of business entities and has started to influence almost all processes and the future of business organisations as well as other types of organisations. An individual not knowing how to contribute to a discussion on Big data is a weakness; you cannot afford to not know it.

The book ‘Too Big to Ignore: The Business Case for Big Data’ is a book written in 2013 by Phil Simon. One may question the currency of this book that was written a decade ago, but the content it covers is current and suitable to any audience even

after another few decades later as this book simply describes the core concepts of Big data that none of us can ignore. Among many books written on Big data and data analytics, this book can be recommended as a good starting point for a novice reader of Big data. It introduces several concepts related to Big data in a very simple form with mini-cases and explanations. This enables a reader to visualise (with minimal effort) the historical evolution of Big data, how Big data is created and managed, and how it was used in the past.

The book consists of eight (08) chapters and an introductory chapter. Each chapter consists of a summary and a list of references that guide readers to possible further readings. The author has no one intended audience for the book; any party interested in understanding the phenomena of Big data in detail such as senior management and other staff in business organisations, consultants, researchers, academics, students, or any other party can immensely benefit from this book.

Main Content Covered

The title of the book itself is expressive of the contents of the book and the main message that Phil Simon intends to communicate. The content covered within the eight (08) chapters is briefly mentioned in this section together with the five (05) themes that could be extracted considering the entire book.

Chapter 1, 'Data 101 and the Data Deluge,' focuses on the evolution of Big data; covers the background details on Big data, and clearly and simply defines the key terms essential to understanding discussions around Big data. Details on structured and unstructured data, and how changes have occurred in the composition of data and metadata are discussed in detail with useful examples. Together with the Introduction chapter that precedes Chapter 1, the readers are provided with the basics and foundation level understanding to further grasp the content discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2, 'Demystifying Big Data,' presents a brief account of the characteristics of Big data. Throughout the chapter, several characteristics are presented randomly under sub-sections. In addition, how Big data compliments the decisions taken based on traditional data is presented together with the perceptions of Big data and its usefulness.

Chapter 3, 'The Elements of Persuasion: Big Data Techniques,' examines the specific fields that are included under the umbrella term Big data. Five commonly

used techniques for analysing Big data (i.e., statistical techniques and methods, data visualisation, automation, semantics, and predictive analytics) are discussed and it guides a reader on the basics that are useful to develop a foundation-level understanding of how to comprehend Big data.

Chapter 4, 'Big Data Solutions,' presents the details of technical tools and resources that are useful in converting Big data into useful information for decision making. Some of the initially used tools and how they were used together with the hardware requirements are detailed in the chapter though it is not a complete end-to-end discussion with guidance on the application of the tools. The further reading suggested leads to gaining better insights and minimises this limitation.

Chapter 5, 'Case Studies: The Big Rewards of Big Data,' presents three case studies with details on how those organisations have deployed Big data tools and been successful. Case 1 - Quantcast – being a web measurement and targeting company, facilitates companies to precisely target their audiences in advertising; Case 2 - NASA runs contests through the gamification site TopCoder and rewards contestants for the most innovative and cost-effective solutions. This enables the engagement of more problem solvers than when they solve them within NASA; and Case 3 - Explorys deals with healthcare behaviour and integrates clinical, financial, and operational data to provide superior delivery of care to customers. The cases represent three industries and details of the methods followed and the results gained are discussed providing a comprehensive understanding to the readers on the application and success of Big data.

Chapter 6, 'Taking the Big Plunge,' advises the reader on how to start using Big data. Several questions to be analysed and answered before any attempt at using Big data are provided with the importance of considering them. The technical, financial, and non-financial factors that influence the success of a project are discussed.

Chapter 7, 'Big Data: Big Issues and Big Problems,' discusses the issues related to the use of Big data (such as privacy, security, employee resistance, and many others). Though they are obvious inhibitors and negative influences on the use of Big data, they can be addressed to minimise the damage done since the benefits of using Big data outweigh the costs.

Finally, Chapter 8, 'Looking Forward: The Future of Big Data,' presents the predictions on the direction Big data is taking and what we can expect to happen in

the future. Several examples of such hi-tech and smart cases are presented referring to many other sources. Most of these are visible implications at the present and they are accurate predictions made nearly a decade ago.

When considering the book as a whole, it evolves around five themes answering five important questions: (1) *What facilitated the rapid developments and growth* – the automated systems in business organisations, rapid growth in the use of smartphones and social media, and the other sources that generate huge amounts of data have skyrocketed the amount of generated data. In addition, compared to decades ago, the costs of handling and storing data have dropped drastically and business firms are attempting to gather more data about their business processes and stakeholders. The supply and the demand for data together with the reduced costs and opportunities to use Big data promote the creation and storage of Big data; (2) *What benefits can be gained* – the availability of unpredictable amounts of data and the possibility of analysing large amounts of structured and unstructured data had enabled companies to make decisions more efficiently and effectively. The ability to generate comprehensive reports and details together with visualisations on inter-relationships and interdependencies of data at a low cost, has increased the useability of data and the reliability of data. The large amounts of data can be converted into more useful decision-ready simple information using data analytics tools individually or in collaboration with other organisations; (3) *What analysis methods and tools to be used* – traditional analysis tools such as Excel, cannot handle large amounts of data/databases. The need for more sophisticated mechanisms and data analytics tools and software (such as Hadoop) should be introduced to the systems to gain the benefits of Big data; (4) *What to consider before using Big data* – despite the benefits it can provide, not all companies are/can be successful with using Big data. The ability to embed the use of Big data into the company's DNA should be analysed in advance. A real necessity, a suitable culture, sufficient resources (e.g., availability of reliable and relevant Big data, skills to use/analyse, financial support), and infrastructure need to be in place; (5) *What are the implications of Big data* – positive as well as negative implications are visible, however, in most cases the benefits outweigh the costs/negative impact. Ensuring the privacy and security of data is an important aspect influencing the success of Big data use.

Why Best and Why Good

This section explains why this book can be considered one of the 'Best' reads and what might make a reader consider it a 'Good' read but not the 'Best'. The book paints a holistic picture of what Big data is, the ways and means of how Big data is

created, and how big data can be used/handled to add value to existing processes. In addition, the book can be recommended as a 'Best' read because (1) it introduces and simply explains almost all the related concepts to the phenomenon of Big data. The explanations are merged into the content with minimal distraction to the reader at the initial instance of its mention, enabling the reader to flow smoothly through the content; (2) the interrelationships and interdependencies of the concepts around Big data and how they evolved and the possible future developments are stated leading the readers to think further beyond the current situation around Big data; (3) the author directs to several other books while the book goes on and at the end of each chapter a list of references are provided. Interested readers can effortlessly refer to many of those related texts to gain additional details; (4) it contains content useful to a novice reader as well as to a person with a considerable understanding of Big data. As a reader with a considerable understanding of the phenomena, I was able to refresh my knowledge and understanding while gaining new insights into cases and examples from various contexts which are useful; (5) it caters to many stakeholder groups with varying intentions – for instance, the content covered is useful for an academic to use in an introductory course on Big data and the book can be recommended to students as a reference text. For novice researchers in the field of Big data, the book provides a thorough foundation to start their research journey. The representatives of organisations planning to use Big data can understand the phenomena and the process involved in implementing Big data and make decisions on adoption/non-adoption; and (6) it uses many cases from different industries in explaining the details and this gives the readers a comprehensive foundation to build upon on Big data and analytics and visualisations etc.

Amidst the several positive views, there are a few limitations that drag it to the 'Good' read level from a 'Best' read level: (1) the limited information presented on the technical aspects and the application of Big data such as refining and using Big data, analytics and visualisation. Provision of the content of the basics around these would have made the content to be complete and a one-stop-read for a reader; (2) the presentation style is very informal and easy to understand; however, in certain instances, this style tends to influence the perception of the reader on the quality of content and the reliability of the facts presented (as to whether they are real-world cases or ones created by the author); and (3) though not a major drawback and not visible throughout the book, the flow of presenting facts and the coherence of the sub-sections may have been improved in certain chapters such as Chapter 2 where the characteristics of Big data are discussed in a random flow. Listing out or categorising the characteristics would have helped a reader easily identify the facts under each sub-section.

About the Author

Phil Simon holds degrees from Carnegie Mellon and Cornell University, and he is a technology consultant and the author of five similarly important and interesting books including an award-winning book - *The Age of the Platform*. His contributions have been featured in many mainstream media outlets worldwide, including the *Harvard Business Review*.