**How expert analysts think about time**

**The journey to becoming a “real” data analyst**

When I began speaking at conferences about the importance of [analytics](http://bit.ly/quaesita_hero), I found that convincing an audience of its [value](http://bit.ly/quaesita_valueanalyst) was the easy part. The mood changed when I explained the catch: **Analytics is an investment of time**… and, as with all investments, there’s a chance you get nothing in return.

Analytics is an investment of time… and like all investments, there’s a chance it leaves you empty-handed.

A culture of analytics can only thrive in organizations where analysts aren’t punished for coming back empty-handed.

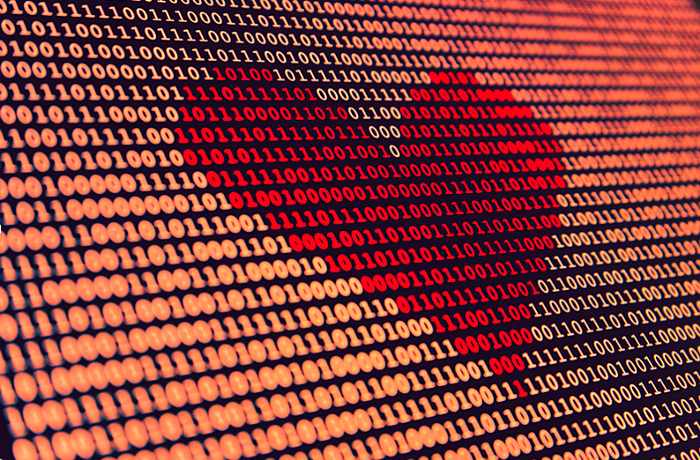


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This article is part of a series covering 10 big differences between an amateur and a professional analyst. We covered the first 8 in detail in my previous articles [[1]](http://bit.ly/quaesita_realanalyst) [[2]](http://bit.ly/quaesita_careeranalyst) [[3]](http://bit.ly/quaesita_realisticanalyst) [[4]](http://bit.ly/quaesita_valueanalyst) and now we’ll continue our journey here.

**Data pro vs amateur difference #9 — Thinking differently about time**

Data analytics comes in two flavors:

* ***Reactive analytics:* looking up data that answers your team’s specific questions.**
* ***Proactive analytics:* exploring data to inspire your team to consider new directions.**

The most valuable contribution an analyst can make is inspiring a decision-maker to consider courses of action they didn’t know they needed to think about. In other words, doing [exploratory data analysis (EDA)](http://bit.ly/quaesita_hallows) to successfully hunt for unknown unknowns worth knowing about. That’s proactive analytics.



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Now prepare for some discomfort! This most valuable contribution an analyst can make… also happens to involve an investment of time with no guaranteed results. Uh-oh.

Experienced analysts choose bosses who think about analytics the right way.

***Unlike amateurs, professional analysts understand this brutal juxtaposition*** ***and they look for bosses who understand it too****:* bosses who have the guts to make an unrecoverable investment and take responsibility for it.

Unfortunately, such bosses are rare\* and organizations where analysts thrive are even rarer. It takes courage to build a culture of no-strings-attached analytics.

\*This, by the way, is how useless dashboards are born. They come from managers insisting that analysts always have something to show for their time.

**How professional analysts think about time**

A seasoned analyst understands that their work isn’t a sure thing with guaranteed payoffs, but rather a time investment in inspiration, innovation, and early threat detection.



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If they’re working for a savvy organization, their team trusts them to make the best possible use of the time that’s allotted to them, so they’re constantly thinking in terms of the return-on-investment (ROI) of their actions:

* **Professional analysts work systematically**, prioritizing the most promising areas of inquiry and staying alert for signs that they’re headed for a dead end so they can pivot early.
* **Professional analysts work iteratively**, starting with the big picture before zooming down into the (most promising) weeds. They also communicate iteratively with their decision-makers, keeping them apprised of progress so they can redirect the analytics efforts if needed.
* **Professional analysts work quickly**, coding in a style that maximizes [*inspiration-per-minute*](http://bit.ly/quaesita_speed)*.* This usually looks very different from a software engineer’s production-ready code… but that’s a sign they’re doing it right. (While they’re wise to take a sloppy approach to one-offs, they’ll write frequently reused code in a software engineer’s style to save time later.)
* **Professional analysts work smartly**, investing the right amount of time into understanding the quality of the data they’re working with so they don’t squander their time on exploring garbage. They know that time with domain experts is often time well spent.
* **Professional analysts work holistically**, piecing together clues from multiple data sources, including data documentation and real-world conversations with various stakeholders.
* **Professional analysts work proactively**, anticipating their decision-makers’ questions and proposing new data sources to explore.
* **Professional analysts work strategically**, understanding that the time they’re allotted comes from their decision-maker, so their focus should be on maximizing their decision-maker’s overall ROI of time (as opposed to thinking only about the analyst’s personal efficiency).

There are few roles as laser-focused on the ROI of time. Taking a nuanced view of speed is the key to unlocking your excellence as an analyst and growing towards the pinnacle of your profession, as we’ll see in the [final article in this series](https://bit.ly/quaesita_fastanalyst).