Data Lake. Big news. Big data. The concept has even been incorporated into at least one actual product name.

Fair warning: I'm going to push metaphors well beyond the limits of good sense, or taste, in this posting.

The very term, Data Lake, leads to thinking of a vast quantity of unstructured/semi-structured data poured into a basin which just sits there until someone wants to do something with it. I contend that leaving your analysts swimming in a data lake, or others fishing about in it in the hope of finding something interesting, is a waste of time, effort, and intelligence.

And I did warn that I was going to push the metaphor, yes?

Dr. Robin Bloor of [The Bloor Group](http://bloorgroup.com/) speaks of data reservoirs rather than data lakes. The term encapsulates some key concepts:

* The data repository has purpose (it's not just there to be...scenic)
* Some controls are applied to its being there and its usage (it doesn't just drop...as the gentle rain from heaven)
* There are established processes in place to cleanse and prepare for consumption (plumbing!)

The above may well be true in any given organization of something characterized as a "lake", but the words we use impact the thinking underlying the concepts, and the approach we take.

At the other end of the data flow lies what is being referred to as the data or, better, analytics buffet. We have all suffered through those breakfast buffets in hotels while attending conferences, exhibitions, trade shows.

Here you have the pre-packaged foodstuffs: muffins, pastries, other items never found in Denmark no matter their name. Elsewhere there's the "some assembly required" items as you mix/match cereal, discover if pineapple really does go with Canadian bacon, match an array of bagel flavors with a wider array of cream cheese. Finally there's a line of patient chefs who will mix and match ingredients to create an omelette to your specification. Sometimes the result is what you hoped. Other times, indigestion follows.

The muffins are the "standard" reports, the dashboards, the "single sheet with all she needs to know" the CEO has with the main talking points for an analyst briefing, or keynote address, covering where the company is and where it's going.

The Mix/Match elements are those aggregations, and underlying calculations, that savvy analysts can make use of to dig deeper into questions about the business, products, market, cost and benefit.

And then there are the questions whose answers require pulling together varieties of data elements, in sample or in whole. For example: "If we lower prices and open up inventory how will that impact current customers and what's the likely net increase in customer numbers and revenue and does price sensitivity differ across geographies, across dense/sparse populations, and how?"

The "lake" is just a big body of water. It sits there and it's hoped that people will come and make use of the amenity.

The "reservoir" serves a purpose in the organization and there are automated processes in place for ensuring cleanliness, for piping the data through to various end points, meeting the needs of the analytics consumers.

Plumbing. It's not sexy and it doesn't have fancy names attached to it. But it's how an organization will have data at the core of how it does business.