# CAN DATA BE BRAVE?

**Instinct and visionary leadership will never be replaced by technology, says Brunswick's DAVID YELLAND**

BY 2020, WE'RE TOLD, there will be more than 30 billion devices connected wirelessly to everyday objects, greatly expanding the "Internet of Things." Eventually every aspect of life will be available to be measured, compared and slotted into the Big Data storage facilities dotted around the world.

A rational parsing of this information has such enormous potential that it would seem sufficient to turn any business that commands it into a success.

Yet data alone is just not enough. Human qualities remain prized. Leadership – political, military, artistic and business leadership – has always been the province of garlanded human beings who are unerringly described as having "great instinct" or "vision."

Could such instinct ever be replaced by digital certainty? Alain de Botton, philosopher, writer and co-founder of The School of Life learning center, doesn't think so.

"You could have had Big Data around all the artistic activity in Florence and Siena in 1200, and not have seen Botticelli coming," de Botton says. Sandro Botticelli's 15th century paintings were the work of an inspired, individual genius, breaking the mold of his predecessors.

Tim Steiner, co-founder and CEO of Ocado, who marshaled the technology that built the world's largest dedicated online grocery retailer, agrees with de Botton.

"You can have all the Big Data in the world but you will only monetize it if you make people's lives better," says Steiner. For that, leaders need a more personal approach than statistics alone can provide. Nothing, Steiner says, can replace the experience of being a shopkeeper who knows his customers. "Use the data to assist you, not the other way around."

As chairman of Penguin Random House and the UK's National Theatre, John Makinson is a powerful investor in ideas. He says the data-driven and creative sides are learning to work together.

"I do think Silicon Valley is getting smarter about this," Makinson says. "Apple has always understood the importance of curated content and the Netflix success with *House of Cards* has shown that technology-driven organizations can succeed if they give creative people a budget and some freedom."

Even supposing that data and computers can point leaders to unexpected outcomes, machines still lack an essential ingredient: courage. Defining courage is hard, but its chief characteristic is that it usually involves a big risk, reaching into the darkness.

"One of the problems with predictive software in publishing is it tells the company what customers might want to buy, but not what they might want to read," Makinson says. "After all, so many books are bought as gifts … so when we publish a book it has to be based on something more than the data."

De Botton says it is human nature to believe we can predict the future. We crave surety, so we read the tea leaves and try to assure ourselves we are completely prepared for the next disruption, the next Botticelli. He even calls Big Data "Big Daddy" – a paternalistic comforter we would like to believe can solve everything.

"Our lives are so out of our control," de Botton says. "We want Big Data/Big Daddy to assure us we know the answer. Well, we don't. And we must suffer the anxiety of existence as a result."

Courage in business means accepting this anxiety, moving outside the comfort zone in defiance of the majority view. The definition of a visionary leader remains what it has always been: someone who successfully defies accepted perception.

Will future innovators be brave enough to defy Big Data? The better question might be, will we be brave enough to follow them?

**DAVID YELLAND** is a former Deputy Editor of the *New York Post* and Editor of *The Sun*, the biggest selling newspaper in the UK. He is now a Partner in Brunswick's London office.