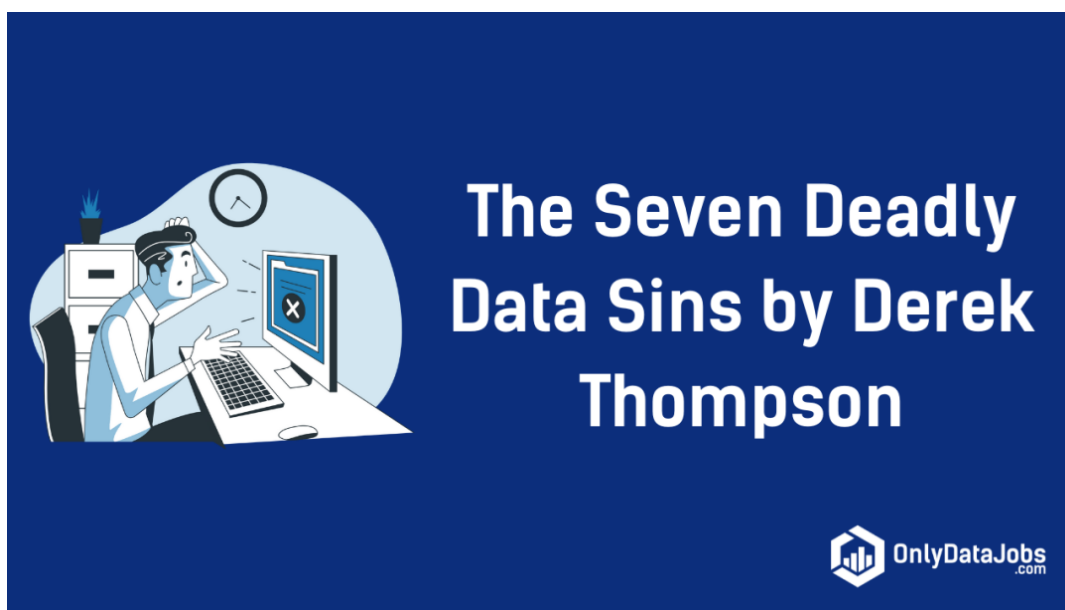☰

Expert Opinion

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The Seven Deadly Data Sins by Derek Thompson

by Derek Thompson | Expert Opinion

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Back in the day (well, okay, it was a Tuesday* sometime in the 6th

Century), Pope Gregory 1st – also known as The Great** – codified

the seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. What, you wonder, does any of this have to do with data management and analysis? Come right this way...

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Lust

Okay, I grant you, not everyone has the hots for datasets. Let's compromise with *seduction* instead. It's easy to become seduced by the data, leading to a global perspective that ignores a more nuanced view or becoming so mired in the detail that you fail to see the bigger picture.

As one of my own books says: desire makes hostages of us all.

Gluttony

As it's most simplistic, data gluttony is casting your net so wide that you have more data than you can ever process meaningfully, using up valuable and finite resources. Nobody wants to hear the words 'we're a little behind schedule'.

Greed

Remember the kid at school who would eat a whole packet of biscuits in front of everyone? When greed comes to data town it manifests in one of two ways: you refuse to share the raw data,

preventing others from making use of your research; or else you refuse to share all your findings (particularly the ones that won't sit well with the client).

Sloth

Lazy research is the bane of data analysis. It starts with too many assumptions and ends with a very narrow field of vision that sometimes – quelle surprise – *exactly* mirrors the original thesis. However, nothing is ever that exact. Sloth manifests as limited datasets, cutting so many corners that you end up with a circle, and producing simplistic analyses that do not stand up to scrutiny.

> **See also Dos and Don'ts of a Data Interview**

According to the great data warehouse that is Wikipedia, sloth can be defined as: *a failure to do things one should do*. Amen.

Wrath

It's not uncommon to experience push-back on your findings and that's a good thing. You need to be able to speak to your analysis and translate how you arrived at conclusions and recommendations. Don't take it personally when your client doesn't like what you're saying and don't get frustrated when you don't like what the charts and analysis are telling you.

Envy

Keep your focus on the original remit. Don't be swayed by what other analyses have discovered (especially when it's in a similar field and it conflicts with yours). In this context, envy can also represent an unwillingness to accept the limitations of the project

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parameters, or the data provided.

This clip sums it up rather well

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Pride

Newsflash: you don't have all the answers. Even the data doesn't have all the answers. But it does contain statistically verifiable truths. Never skew the data to fit your or your client's preconceived ideas and expectations.

What the weak head with strongest bias rules,
Is pride, the never-failing vice of fools.

– An Essay on Criticism, Alexander Pope

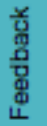https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69379/an-essay-on-criticism

How to avoid the seven deadly sins of data?

1. Ensure that there are clear parameters for data capture in terms of time, scope, quality and cost (aka the four horsemen of project management). When the remit is clear there is focus and shared understanding. You can build in a contingency to review the

original brief under certain conditions (e.g. lack of datasets) but that needs to be embedded in a formal process for the client's sign-off.

2. Follow the data and do it agnostically. Don't allow a client, however well-intentioned, to bias your professional view of what the data is saying. Data analysis and politics do not make for good bedfellows. And neither does personal bias.

3. Make sure you can back up any assertions with easily understood formulas and modelling (a bit like showing your workings out). Your job is two-fold: to let the data tell its own story, warts and all, and for your client is understand where that story comes from. Try not to be this guy:

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4. Don't hide the anomalies. Outliers are to be expected and welcomed as part of standard deviation.

See also **Why you should prioritise cleaning your dirty data**

* probably

** ahem...see the seventh sin

Derek Thompson

Derek Thompson has worked extensively as a project manager, project officer and data analyst – latterly on a large-scale project evaluation of young people's emotional, social and mental wellbeing, focused on part of the West Country.

When not defining, collecting, and analysing datasets (for evaluation and informing policy) he is a serial novelist, freelancer and occasional comedy writer.

His two series, the Complete Thomas Bladen Thrillers and the Craig Wild crime mysteries, are published by Joffe Books. Unsurprisingly, the devil is in the detail.

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Derek-Thompson/e/B0034ORY08

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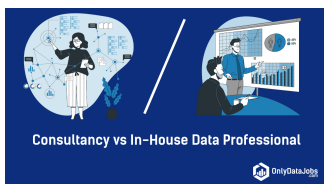
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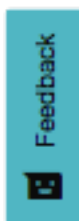
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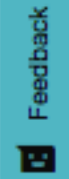Software Engineer Job Description

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