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# Data Offense and Defense

**By Thomas H. Davenport**

I am a New England Patriots fan, and it has been a pretty miserable season thus far. With [Tom Brady](#) at quarterback, we could almost always count on a good offense. Defense was sometimes lacking. This year, perhaps because Brady is aging, or perhaps because our offensive line isn't giving him a chance, we can't really count on defense or offense.

What does that have to do with IT and Big Data? I never thought of the linkage myself until yesterday. We had the inaugural meeting of the Data Economy Institute in Boston (so new we don't have a website yet, so don't bother searching for it), and one of our panelists, a chief data officer (CDO) for a financial services firm, talked about the difference between playing offense and defense with data.

It's a simple concept, but it was very enlightening to me. Offense is the stuff you do to make data valuable in business. It includes analytics, better decision-making, new products and services, data-driven marketing and sales, and so forth. Offense has always been my thing; I suppose I strive to be the Tom Brady of data offense (at least the Tom Brady of old). I have always focused on the upside of data and technology, rather than helping organizations avoid problems with it. Even when I focused on data management and infrastructure topics, it was like the offensive line—what has to be done in the background to make the offense succeed.

Much of the work—but certainly not all—of data management folks is on defense. Data governance, data privacy and security, preventing fraud, limiting “multiple versions of the truth”—all that can be classified as defense. It involves preventing problems from happening—one might say preventing the other team from scoring.

I used to resist the defensive work. As with football, it seemed to me that offense was where all the glitz resided. More recently I have realized how important defense is. This isn't particularly perspicacious of me; all the data breaches, hacking incidents, and data screwups in companies and organizations make it increasingly obvious that data defense is critical to every organization's survival.

It's obvious that, like football teams, organizations need both data offense and defense to succeed. But can the same people do both? Certainly if you're a CIO or CDO, you really need to focus on both. I feel that many CDOs are insufficiently focused on offense. If you have a head of analytics, the CDO can be freed up somewhat to focus on preventing data problems. Without that, the CDO needs to think both about defense, and offense—how you can get value with data. A CDO like Charles Thomas at Wells Fargo & Co. tries to be equally focused on both, and I think that's the key to success in the role.

Below the senior management level, I am not sure that most people can focus equally on offense and defense. Just as we have specialization in football, I think we need it in data management. The same people who focus on data governance models and analytics for fraud prevention are not those who should work closely with marketing to target promotions. In some cases (though not all), it's a skills issue. In other cases it's a personality issue. If you take a data defense person and try to partner him or her with the chief marketing officer, it probably won't go very well. The CMO may appreciate the need for good data defense, but may not want to dwell on it or work closely with people who do.

Perhaps there are also data equivalents of "special teams" players in football, who focus on kicks or punts or returns. For the moment, however, just making clear who is responsible for offense and defense would be a step forward for many organizations. For CIOs and CDOs and CTOs to think about the balance of time, attention, and money that they give to offense vs. defense would also be a step forward. Specialization is often a sign of progress, and I think it is here too. But the people who manage specialists have to understand the need for a balance of specialties.

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