Use the Cloud To Get a Start Toward Becoming "Data Smart"

(BPT) - No matter your job or the size of your business, you are probably aware of the piles of digital information inside your company. Data is everywhere.

You know this information can provide valuable insights, whether you're in marketing, sales, human resources, product development or finance. But how do you tap into the data to make better decisions if you're not a trained data analyst?

There's good news: Cloud services make it much simpler for you to analyze data so you can make the right calls and become more persuasive with your boss, your co-workers and your customers.

"Business analytics is going mainstream," says James Phillips, general manager at Microsoft Corp., who oversees the company's Power BI cloud service. "And, with the cloud, you can get started fast. In a matter of minutes, you can pull in a variety of data to create reports and visualizations."

Follow these five tips to start getting data smart in your job:

1. **Identify the data**. Wondering where to start? You likely already have data you can analyze in your financial, inventory, marketing and customer systems. To help you dig into this data, free cloud services such as Power BI (powerbi.com) can connect to other services such as Salesforce and Marketo. If you want to explore data outside your organization, free datasets, such as those on www.data.gov, are available on the Web.

2. **Build on the tools and skills you have**. You likely use Microsoft Excel to some degree, but even if you're not an expert, your information and any analysis you do in Excel can be fed into cloud services.

3. **Visualize**. With the new tools, you can tell a story with data. They offer drag-and-drop ways to go beyond typical charts and look at information in multiple dimensions, over time, with maps and more. They're great for creating presentations and plans.

4. **Go real time**. Keep your finger on the pulse of your business by mashing up data in easy-to-use dashboards. Cloud services keep your dashboards up-to-date, providing insights about what your business looks like moment to moment so you can make better decisions, faster. Your bosses and teammates will be impressed.

5. **Care to share**. When choosing your service, look for features that make it easy to share reports and findings with co-workers. And encourage them to use the services so everyone has the opportunity to contribute insights.

Now is the time to become data smart. Today's cloud services make it simpler than ever to analyze your data and find the insights that will help your business. ❖