Women in Logistics workshop – 26 June 2015 - led by Kirsten Tisdale

Reducing the risk of strategic decisions using data and analysis
…or Post-it Paradise, as someone tweeted!

This session was about both reducing the risk *OF* using data to make strategic decisions, and also reducing the risk *BY* using it to shape the future. The type of decision we were considering was big (important to the company concerned), long-lasting (and so requiring an element of projection and forecast) and involving development or change (and therefore probably requiring data from outside the company – from suppliers, market data…) – it could be about where to build a new warehouse, automating for the first time, offering a new customer service you can't step back from or going into a completely new business area.

Many of the group were new to the area of data and analysis, and described themselves as newbies rather than experts. In that week's Retail Week, by Jacqueline Gold, CEO of Ann Summers wrote: "At Ann Summers we divide our customers into the nervous, the curious and the experienced. The nervous look at it, the curious touch it and the experienced buy extra batteries. Our mission is to turn the nervous into the curious and the curious to become experienced". I hope that the workshop went some way to whetting people's appetite for getting further involved …in data and analysis!

We split into three groups with three different colours of post-its, and considered three sets of questions:
* Data: Are there particular areas where you struggle with data? What do you do to clean your data? And to fill the gaps?
* Analysis: What types of analysis do you find difficult and why? Are there any particular Excel features you use? Are there other software packages / programs you use in addition to Excel?
* What are the main risks you perceive in your use of data and its analysis? How do you address those risks?

Each group started on a particular area, brainstorming the issues that they perceived in that area for ten minutes or so, and then moved onto the next set of questions. For the next ten minutes the groups considered the issues the following group had highlighted and brainstormed solutions to them, and then moved onto the final set of questions. Here the groups were asked to pick out particular solutions – either that were new to them or particularly resonated because the issues were ones with which they were familiar. Without even realising that there was a name for it (I only learned that there was from Wendy Goucher who was leading the previous session), this was spiral workshopping! We then ended up feeding back to a group session

We ended up with over 60 post-it notes – some with just one word, through to those with with mini-essays. This workshop highlighted and reinforced particular points for me:
* The need for a clear question to be asked when sourcing data – does everyone understand the same thing from the question? And this can be particularly difficult when you don't even know what's available to start with.
* Getting data in different formats including the dreaded pdf which doesn't transfer well to Excel …the suggested solution being to go back to the producer and get the raw data!
* And all sorts of points like training to get rid of human error, sense checking with other teams like finance, non-standard formulas (one I got caught out by only the other day, not realising that ISNA doesn't work in Excel 2007), and the need to have skilled data analysts (again an issue I've come across since the workshop, where a crucial client spreadsheet contained a wrong formula).

Finally I shared a few slides which illustrated particular points I was keen to bring out: dirty data, what to do about outliers (are they really wrong or really real), the value of sampling, the risk of averages, complexity not necessarily being the answer and the need for gross error checks.