

Governing What Matters

*Why Data Prioritization Is
Becoming the Foundation
of AI-Ready Enterprises*

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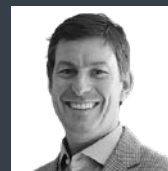
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The Scale Problem: When Data Ambition Outpaces Data Reality

Across financial services, ambition for analytics and artificial intelligence has accelerated sharply. Executive teams are pushing for enterprise-scale deployment of advanced models, automation and real-time insight, with clear expectations of measurable business value.

Yet for many institutions, the foundations required to support that ambition are misaligned. Legacy platforms coexist with modern cloud architectures, often without full integration, consistent definitions, or shared ownership. This creates a widening gap between what leaders want AI to deliver and what their data infrastructure can support.

Diego de Aragão, SVP, Balance Sheet Management & Analytics at Citigroup, says: “The big disconnect between the ambition and the reality of enterprise data lies in the gap between the senior management desire to deploy sophisticated high-value AI models versus the foundational reality of the data stack and the data capabilities and the data governance that are currently in place in most financial services institutions.”

The operational consequences of this gap are increasingly visible. Data teams might spend too long identifying data sources, securing access, reconciling definitions, and preparing datasets before meaningful analysis can begin. This imbalance places growing strain on analytics teams. Pawan Verma, Managing Director and Chief Data and Analytics Officer at ICBC, emphasizes how quickly inefficiency compounds: “If your analysts or data scientists are spending anything more than 30% of their time just

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SVP, Balance Sheet Management & Analytics at Citigroup

trying to get the right data, you have a problem.”

As AI initiatives increase the challenge intensifies. New use cases are launched faster than organizations can standardize data inputs, forcing teams to repeatedly solve the same foundational issues. The result is slower delivery, inconsistent outcomes, and declining confidence in enterprise analytics.

The issue is not a lack of investment or an unclear mission. It is a structural problem rooted in data foundations that were never designed to support enterprise-wide analytics and AI at speed.

As organizations attempt to scale on top of those foundations, the limitations will become increasingly difficult to ignore. ▶





Why Traditional Governance Models Are Breaking Down

As organizations attempt to operate at this new scale, pressure quickly shifts from technology to execution.

Governance frameworks that once functioned adequately under limited scope begin to strain when applied across hundreds of systems, thousands of data assets and constantly changing use cases.

The challenge is not that governance principles are flawed, but that the operating models behind them were built for an era defined by fewer data sources and narrower analytical demand. As programs expand, the burden placed on data owners and stewards grows rapidly.

Garland Lynn, RVP, East Region at Alation, observes that governance frequently breaks down when the human cost becomes visible before the value does. “What breaks first is the level of manual effort and getting people to buy into why they have to do it,” he explains.



Without a clear understanding of how governance connects to business outcomes, engagement fades, fatigue sets in, and programs begin to stall.

In response, some organizations attempt to scale governance horizontally, expanding documentation across thousands or even millions of data assets. But this “govern everything” mindset frequently produces the opposite effect. Teams become overwhelmed, prioritization disappears and governance turns into an exercise in volume rather than impact.

As Lynn notes, a shift in mindset is required: “Don’t do data governance on everything,” he says. “Do data governance on what matters.” ▶

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RVP, East Region, Alation

Five Signs You're Governing Too Much (and Getting Too Little Value)

Even well-intentioned governance programs can struggle when scope expands faster than impact. These signals often indicate that effort is increasing, but confidence is not.

1 Governance coverage keeps growing, but trust does not

More assets are documented each quarter, yet executives continue to question the numbers that matter most.

2 Every analytics or AI initiative restarts data discovery from scratch

Teams have to search for the right data, reconcile definitions, and validate quality because trusted foundations are not reusable.

3 Data scientists spend more time finding data than analyzing it

Highly skilled teams lose momentum when access, preparation, and validation dominate project timelines.

4 Metrics are debated longer than decisions

Meetings focus on whose numbers are correct rather than what actions should be taken.

5 Ownership exists on paper, not in practice

Roles are defined, but accountability for data quality and change is unclear or inconsistently applied.



From Governing Everything to Governing What Matters

Rather than attempting to apply the same level of rigor across all enterprise data, data leaders should focus governance efforts on areas where failure would have the greatest regulatory, operational, or strategic consequences. The objective is not maximum coverage. Instead, it is to ensure that critical data can be trusted and defended when it matters.

By narrowing focus, organizations create space to define ownership more clearly, reduce inconsistent interpretation of standards across teams, and demonstrate progress toward goals that resonate with business stakeholders, particularly compliance.

Across financial services, three common areas emerged from our interviews about how organizations

reassess the scope of their governance initiatives.

The first is regulatory-critical data. These are the attributes tied directly to reporting, capital adequacy, and supervisory scrutiny. Failure in this layer creates immediate exposure, making accuracy, lineage, and ownership non-negotiable.

The second anchor is executive decision data. Metrics used for forecasting, performance management, and capital planning must be trusted across the organization. When definitions vary or lineage is unclear, confidence erodes quickly and often at the most senior levels.

The third anchor centers on high-value business outcomes. Whether improving underwriting efficiency,

accelerating claims processing, or enhancing broker and customer experiences, organizations are increasingly aligning governance with the data that enables measurable operational results.

This outcome-led mindset reflects a broader shift in how data strategy is being defined. Rather than governing data simply because it exists, leaders are starting with the business problem and working backward to determine which data must be trusted to solve it.

As Pawan Verma, Managing Director and Chief Data and Analytics Officer at ICBC, puts it, “The key is not to build something because the technology exists, but because the business problem is clear.”

From Data Control to Data Confidence

For years, governance was defined primarily by control. Policies, documentation and oversight mechanisms were designed to demonstrate compliance and manage risk.

While these capabilities remain essential, they are no longer sufficient on their own. At enterprise scale, governance must enable performance on key business priorities.

The shift now underway reflects this change in expectation. Rather than measuring success by how much data is governed, leading organizations are focusing on whether the data that matters most stands up to regulatory scrutiny.

This focus becomes particularly critical as AI adoption accelerates. Advanced models, automation and agent-driven workflows depend not just on accurate data, but on having enough context to interpret results confidently.

Importantly, this transformation does not require governing more data. It requires governing with intent, concentrating effort where it delivers the greatest impact.

In an environment defined by rapid change, data confidence is essential to scaling AI without compromising oversight or regulatory defensibility. For data leaders navigating the next phase of transformation, governing what matters is foundational to sustained control and credibility.

“At scale, governance only works when it is intentional,” says Garland Lynn, RVP East Region, Alation.

“Organizations don’t need more oversight mechanisms. They need clarity about which data truly matters and the discipline to govern it consistently, which is why we’ve seen so many FSI companies embrace the Critical Data Element (CDE) strategy, even when not just driven by compliance mandates. ■

About Alation

Alation is the data intelligence company. More than 650 global enterprises — including 40% of the Fortune 100 — rely on Alation to realize value from their data and AI initiatives.

Customers such as Cisco, DocuSign, and Nasdaq trust Alation's platform for self-service analytics, cloud transformation, data governance, and AI-ready data, fostering data-driven innovation at scale.

Headquartered in Redwood City, California, Alation has been recognized five times by Inc. Magazine as one of the Best Workplaces.

To learn more, visit www.alation.com



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Gareth Becker is an experienced editor and content marketer and produces B2B stories that focus on emergent trends in data and analytics, cloud computing, information security and more.

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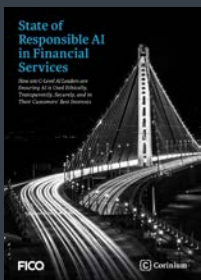


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