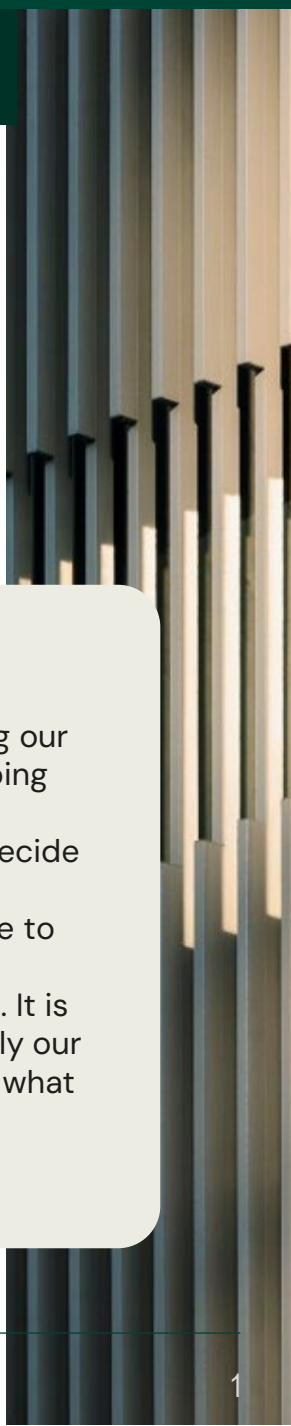
From insight to decision:

The evolving role of the insights professional

Insights professionals have always helped organizations understand what is true. As decisions speed up and AI makes analysis easier to access, our role is evolving: connecting evidence to the choices, trade-offs, and actions facing the business. Beth Finn explores what that shift asks of us and how it changes the way we partner to help organizations move forward.

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THE DIRECTIONS group



For years, our profession has been built on an important promise: help businesses understand what is true. Whether we work within an organization or support it as an outside partner, we listen to customers, test ideas, identify patterns, and bring evidence to conversations that might otherwise rely on assumptions. That work matters, and it will continue to matter.

But the environment in which our work gets used is changing. Business leaders face more information, faster decisions, and persistent uncertainty, while AI is making many forms of analysis easier to access. A well-supported finding can still leave someone asking, “So what should we do?” Understanding the evidence does not always mean an organization is ready to act. For insights professionals, helping close that gap is not outside our role; increasingly, it is central to it.

The next chapter of our profession is about carrying our expertise further: from helping organizations understand a situation to helping them decide how to move forward. That means connecting evidence to the choices, tradeoffs, and actions facing the business. It is an evolution in how we apply our craft, not a departure from what makes it valuable.

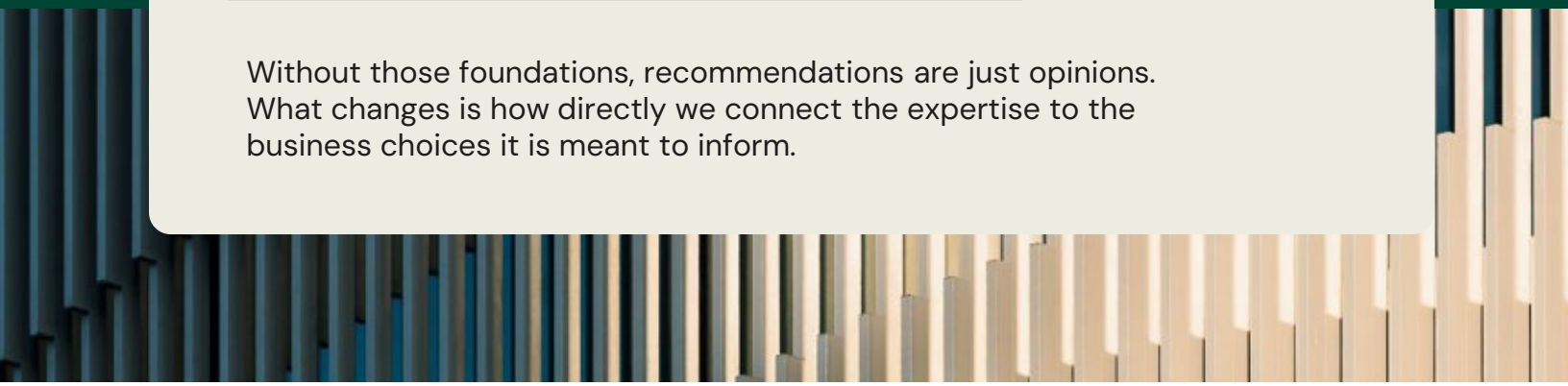
Building on the craft, not leaving it behind

The foundations of research remain the same:

disciplined thinking | thoughtful design | quality insight &

a deep understanding of people and context

Without those foundations, recommendations are just opinions. What changes is how directly we connect the expertise to the business choices it is meant to inform.



Evidence alone does not resolve every challenge an organization faces. A team may understand the findings and disagree about their implications, or a leader may see an opportunity but remain uncertain about the tradeoffs. An organization may even agree on a direction without being ready to act. Our opportunity is to help close those gaps between what the evidence tells us and what the business needs to do.

At The Directions Group (TDG), we describe our part in this evolution as strengthening our insights core while expanding our impact. We are not moving away from the capabilities that earned our clients' trust. We are making those capabilities more useful to our client partners and the organizations they serve. We call that broader role Business Decision Support. At its core is a simple responsibility: understanding the choice, bringing the right intelligence to bear, and helping people move forward.



Rigor in service of a decision

One of the harder parts of this evolution involves an instinct many of us share: we want the complete answer. We want another data point, another cut of the results, or another round of groups. We know the consequences of weak evidence, and we take pride in getting the work right. That discipline is a strength, but it can become a constraint when we pursue greater certainty without asking whether it will change the decision.

Business decisions rarely come with all the information we would like.

Markets move, competitors act, and opportunities have a shelf life. Waiting is itself a choice, with consequences of its own. The challenge is not to choose between rigor and speed, but to apply the right rigor to the decision at hand.

This is not permission to lower our standards. It is a call to make our standards more purposeful. Some choices require extensive testing because the consequences are significant and difficult to reverse. Others can move forward with directionally strong evidence, clear assumptions, and a plan to learn along the way. Our judgment matters in recognizing the difference: what is at stake, which uncertainties could change the recommendation, and whether more evidence would materially improve the choice.

Making that judgment requires more than methodological expertise. It requires a clear understanding of the stakes, timing, and organizational context. Importantly, it requires a willingness to challenge both an under-supported conclusion and a request for more research that is unlikely to change the outcome. The aim is to make the evidence sufficient for the decision, not simply more extensive.

Start with the choice, not just the request

The evolution becomes practical at the beginning of the work.

A request may arrive as a segmentation, a concept test, or a need to better understand customer behavior. Those are legitimate starting points, but they do not always make the underlying decision clear. Understanding the decision at the heart of the request helps us design the work around its intended use, not simply around the requested output.

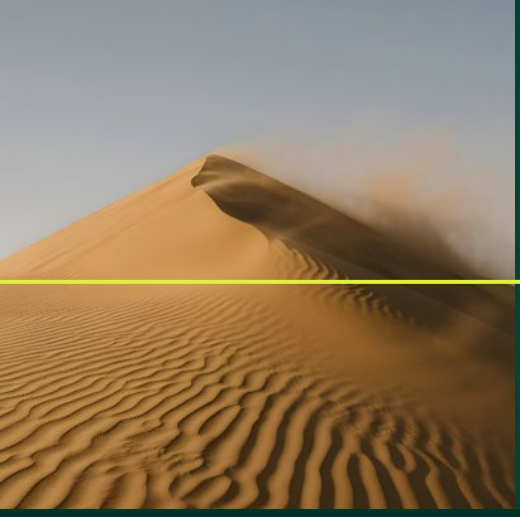


That requires us to ask a different set of questions alongside our research questions.

- What will the organization do differently because of the work?
- Who owns that choice?
- When does the decision need to happen?
- What alternatives are being considered?

The answers help us determine what intelligence is needed, whose perspectives matter, and where to focus our effort.

At TDG, that is one of the changes we are working to make more consistent with our client partners. We want to understand the underlying business decision earlier and connect our expertise with the knowledge already inside the organization. Human understanding, predictive intelligence, and decision-focused guidance offer different perspectives, and their value grows when they address the same choice. The goal is not to make every engagement bigger; it is to make the work fit the decision.



Carry the work beyond the findings

The way we communicate our work should reflect that same shift.

"Here is what we learned" remains essential, but business stakeholders also need to understand why it matters, what options it creates, and which tradeoffs deserve attention.

They need a considered perspective on what to do next. That asks insights professionals, inside and outside the organization, to contribute judgment alongside evidence rather than leave others to make every connection themselves.

Making a recommendation does not mean pretending the evidence is conclusive or taking the decision away from its owner. It means offering a point of view, explaining its basis, and being transparent about what remains uncertain. It also means recognizing when a sound recommendation is not enough because stakeholders are misaligned or the practical implications have not been worked through. Helping navigate those issues is part of connecting insight to action.

That responsibility should shape the work before the final presentation. Recommendations need to reflect the business context, make tradeoffs explicit, and clarify what acting on them would require. A deliverable should not simply mark the completion of the research. It should help the organization take its next step.

At TDG, we describe the intended outcome as decision readiness:

- Clarity about the decision
- Confidence in the evidence
- Alignment on the tradeoffs
- The ability to act

That changes how we think about success with our client partners. We still need to answer the research questions, but we also need to ask whether our work helped clarify the choice. A strong deliverable matters, and so does what the organization can do with it.

Build the partnership around the decision

This broader role also calls for a stronger partnership between internal insights teams and external partners.

Internal teams understand the business from within: its priorities, relationships, history, and the realities of getting something done. External partners bring specialized expertise, additional capacity, and perspectives informed by work across organizations and markets.

The value comes from putting those strengths to work together, not assigning each side a separate part of the process. That means clarifying the decision together, being candid about constraints, and agreeing on what evidence will be sufficient. It also means creating room to challenge assumptions, including whether the original request will answer the question the business needs to resolve.

The partnership should also extend to how the work gets used. Who will carry the recommendation into business conversations? What context is important? Where might further discussion or support help people act? Responsibilities will differ, but they should be explicit. The handoff should not be where context disappears or accountability becomes unclear.

The strongest partnerships are organized around a shared purpose: helping the business make a better decision.

The next chapter:

Where human judgment matters most

As AI changes how information is produced and analyzed, our profession has an opportunity to be clearer about where human expertise makes the greatest difference.

It matters in recognizing the question behind the request and understanding organizational realities that do not appear in a dataset. It matters in bringing conflicting evidence into perspective, surfacing a difficult tradeoff, and helping people work through it. These capabilities connect the quality of our thinking to the usefulness of our work.

Our future is not about producing more information, faster. It is about combining evidence, context, and judgment to help organizations make better choices.

The next chapter of our profession carries that value further; not just informing the business, but helping move it forward.



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