

Data Swamps, Ethics, and Rodents of Unusual Size

Just two CPOs talking privacy, data ethics, data curation and leadership in the digital economy.

Michelle Dennedy: A data swamp can be as deadly to your business as the fire swamp was to Buttercup and Wesley in *The Princess Bride*, one of my favorites. Without knowing where your data is or what information you're storing, how can you expect to benefit from its true potential? Worse, how can you be sure you're adhering to data privacy regulations or your own company's policies on the treatment of customer data? If you're not careful, the unintended consequences can quickly turn into creatures capable of swamping your entire organization, making the "Rodents of Unusual Size" look tame in comparison.

Cybersecurity data protection, privacy. You like to stay ahead of the curve and listen to experts who are leading the way in deriving greater value from data with a more organized approach to data privacy. You're like us just, a few deviations past the norm. You are a Privacy Sigma Rider.

Hello Privacy Sigma Riders. In keeping with our *Princess Bride* theme, I thought I would introduce myself with "hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father..." But I won't torture you with my bad impressions. I am, of course, Michelle Dennedy, your humble host and chief privacy officer at Cisco and your host for the Privacy Sigma Riders podcast.

My guest today is a dear friend, a longtime champion, an icon of goodness in the privacy and data and ethics and consumer and marketing world, champion of ethical data practices and policies, the one, the only, Barbara Lawler, who is chief privacy and data ethics officer, we're going to talk about that, at Looker. Welcome, Barb.

Barbara Lawler: Hey, Michelle. Thanks. It's a ... okay. Already I screwed up.

Michelle Dennedy: (laughs) I can see there were words in there. So many words.

Barbara Lawler: So many words. None of them came out. Yeah.

Michelle Dennedy: You can just say hi.

Barbara Lawler: Hey. It's inconceivable that I could finally make it here.

Michelle Dennedy: Inconceivable. Barbara, I do not think that word means what you think it means.

I'm going to brag about you a little bit because I know you won't and I'm probably going to make you do it some more today. But Barb was the first chief privacy officer at Hewlett Packard and she served in the same capacity at Intuit for many years. She's president and founder of Digital Stewardship Strategies, which helps organizations implement ethical approaches to data with an

emphasis on stakeholder-focused accountability. And we will unpack all of those important concepts in a bit.

In addition to stakeholder-focused accountability, she also focuses on automated processes and machine learning. Hot, hot, hot topics. Just recently she accepted a new chief privacy officer position, always a glutton for punishment, taking her considerable skills to the fast-growing data insights company, Looker. And I'm gonna already say, spoiler alert, at some point in the future we need to get the general counsel from Looker on this show because she is a firework waiting to happen.

So, Barb, let's start off at the beginning. So, HP, Intuit, these are brands that almost everyone knows and has heard of for a long time. How in the world and what in the world is Looker and how do they manage to snag someone with this breadth of experience? What's going on? What's Looker? Tell us about it.

Barbara Lawler: So, Looker's a new way to help companies look at their business data and really get not just insights, but actionable analysis and recommendations in a way that's easy for anyone, whether you're a data engineer, whether you're a data analyst, or whether you're a business user. And the problem that the company was trying to solve is that, if we think about kind of the history of data and databases and data sources, all of those data sources are structured differently. They come from many different companies and so how do you wrangle that, what really has become the data swamp?

Michelle Denedy: Yes.

Barbara Lawler: And so how can you model that in a way that's coherent across many different legacy or new structured data sources. Whether they're structured or unstructured. And so Looker and Look ML, which is our modeling language, actually allows the technical user to do that, to provide that insight, that analysis, but real time, quickly, fast, easy, across many different databases, which was really something that couldn't be done before.

And while there are other technologies out there, they were really built on old structured databases that were slow. And imagine the queue of the business user who's in marketing or who's in finance or who's in logistics who just wants to understand what happened last quarter. And that they have to wait a year to get a structured report to figure out how to do that.

Michelle Denedy: To figure out what happened last quarter. So now you're six quarters behind.

Barbara Lawler: And with Looker you don't have to do that. You can actually get that, and you can slice and dice almost real time, and in many cases real time to understand what happened an hour ago, what happened yesterday or last month. And you can do that really quickly based on region or location or by product or by activity or service. So, it's really the new way for businesses to get insights and understand how to make use of their business data.

Michelle Denedy: So, there's so much turning, people thought that a data lake was going to provide magical insights. But for all of the reasons you're talking about Barb, it really is a data swamp unless you do have the capabilities that you're talking about, some fine-grained examination, some

trending examination, not all data analysis fits all outcomes if you will. So, I can hear in my privacy filter why they needed you.

Before we get further into more of your work in ethics and privacy and data curation, which is critical for that kind of company and your customers of course, let's talk a little bit just about career management and leadership. So, I'm giving her, I told her we'd go off script in like 10 seconds. So, I'm already off the script. Barb and I, Barb was the first person I called when I looked at the problem almost 20 years ago now Barb. It's been 2000 we sat down. I invited her to a breakfast at Hobees.

Barbara Lawler: Breakfast at Hobees.

Michelle Dennedy: That's right. And we had the coffee cake.

Barbara Lawler: That should be the name of this podcast, Breakfast at Hobees.

Michelle Dennedy: It really, Breakfast at Hobees.

Barbara Lawler: Maybe I'll use that for mine.

Michelle Dennedy: Let's call that, Breakfast at Hobees. And in that time there wasn't such a thing as a chief privacy officer, we hadn't named ourselves and our profession really yet. We were doing the work, but we all sat down and said okay, we know that our companies need us, our companies don't yet know that they need us.

So here we are 19 years later, and your company obviously needs you. They know they need you. Tell us a little bit about how you decided to come out of what, initially you said to me you were retiring, at Hobees again. And I laughed a hearty laugh and said ...

Barbara Lawler: You didn't believe me for some reason.

Michelle Dennedy: No, I did not believe her. And then she came out with his wonderful term that I think everyone should think of in their mind is "rewiring" rather than retiring. And that has really stuck with me as a career maneuver. And now here you are going into a very small company that's rapid-fire growth, in a stage when you could be rewiring or retiring. So, tell us a little bit about how that thinking is for you personally. And then let's dive back into privacy and ethics as you're looking at them today at looking, looking at Looker.

Barbara Lawler: A couple of things that I really like about Looker and why I think it's not just the product. So, what I described was kind of a company and the product a little bit, but what appealed most to me about Looker and just became very compelling, it was the siren song if you will, is the people and the culture. And so, then if we look at it from a leadership perspective, so my background in privacy is different than what people think of commonly. So, I've always been a little bit ... always been a sigma rider before we knew what that was.

Michelle Dennedy: Exactly.

Barbara Lawler: Because my background is business and data and marketing and technology. And I spent years working in a call center, actually.

Michelle Dennedy: You mean you're not a lawyer, Barb?

Barbara Lawler: I am not a lawyer, no.

Michelle Dennedy: It can be done, sigma riders. It can be done.

Barbara Lawler: And actually, I'm a big believer, that's probably even a different podcast, what are the skillsets that privacy leaders, whether they're chief privacy officers, more and more we see chief data ethics officers. But if you back up a little bit and say how did I even get to privacy in the first place? First of all, I took a job that nobody else wanted or understood. And that still happens today, but it was a different time. It was frankly less complex.

But when you bring a background where you're talking with customers directly on the phone, you're interacting with and then you're trying to understand what are the trends that we need to understand about what, at that time, Hewlett Packard customers wanted or needed, that was just the early stages. And when I jumped into privacy it was like I just got it. It just clicked.

And you asked why Looker. Because I'd been a chief privacy officer twice and I think I even told you, I'm not sure I really need to do that again. I wasn't looking for that.

Michelle Dennedy: Right. Been there, done that.

Barbara Lawler: Sometimes the best things come when they tap you on the shoulder from behind. And so, what I like about Looker as the culture and the people, and what I mean by that is that the people who started this company had a real problem they want to solve. And we talked a little bit about the data swamp. What you need is just not only technology but good people behind that.

Michelle Dennedy: So real outcome over ego is what you're saying.

Barbara Lawler: Well, and actually, one of the company values is check your ego at the door.

Michelle Dennedy: Excellent.

Barbara Lawler: And that's a much more politically correct phrase for something that's really about no ... holes.

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, a . . . asterisks, asterisks.

Barbara Lawler: Yes. That's a part of our interview process, but what I liked is if you think HP was a huge company. Intuit was a big company, very different from HP, similar cultural values. And so there's this consistency of values and what's important to me. And when I learned actually in stepping away from Intuit, doing some consulting work and then coming to Looker is it's important to be a part of something. And I think to do a great job in privacy and data ethics, and data ethics is where it's going, you actually need to be a part of the team, you need to work from within.

And the leadership at Looker is such that they want to make a difference. They want to make a difference for every business. But as a fairly young company, we're only five and a half, six years old. As a really young company that there's mature executive leadership that wants to be ethical and responsible and accountable and wants to build the right frameworks and approaches in a way that works for a modern, smart, savvy, but actually very people, incredibly people-centered organization.

And so, you walk in the offices and it's actually the architecture—the design—is like your home. We have a kitchen, we all go in and we make our own lunch, or we make our own breakfast and then we clean up. We're expected to load the dishwasher, and it's that kind of self-sufficient but also collaborative ... sitting literally at the kitchen table to share ideas on how to help customers.

And that was just really appealing. And it's good for my approach to leadership, which is really around servant leadership, which is helping others be successful. That can be helping our chief data evangelist be successful, that can help our CSO be successful, and it can help the legal department, it can help, most importantly, our customers be successful and understanding their business data. So I just, I couldn't resist.

Michelle Dennedy: That's so good. I love it. And part of the reason I really wanted to deep-dive into this is because it does come back to data and what you've not heard is they had a really good CRM system. They had some great databases, they had some encryption. So we talk in tech sometimes from the tech lens out, but the outcomes, even when you're a machine-learning, innovative tech, intellectual-property-driven company is about culture. It's about people. It's about managing and sharing information and ideas.

So I think if we put this lens as data professionals on, what are the outcomes of our ultimate customers and consumers and the data about whom we have stores, I think that really puts a lens on really what I want to get back into, the data swamp and let's like unstink the swamp together for a minute here.

We're not talking about swampy stuff. How do we get from the Rodents of Unusual Size, or the ROUSs as they say, to things that are a little more manageable, to imbuing this ML for the Looker ML with privacy and privacy engineering? How do you make that leap? Also off script so I'm totally like, she's looking at me like this is not on the script, Michelle. Barb is very organized. I am very not.

Barbara Lawler: But hopefully flexible ... and certainly in a small company you have to be that. So, when I think about, and when we think about the data swamp and what are the problems that that creates? And yes, Looker can solve the problems, but from a broader perspective, what are some of the issues that privacy officers, data ethics officers are working with is what do you do with all of that mess, and which part of the swamp is stinkier than the others, if you will, which has something really strange growing up out of the bottom that you just don't want to touch with your feet? Haven't we all been in that pond or that lake somewhere where it's like what was that? What was that?

Michelle Dennedy: Exactly. And is it dangerous?

- Barbara Lawler: Don't want to know. But what we're looking at is you actually do want to know. And if you use a tool like Looker—and Looker as the proxy for a broader kind of modern approach and ethical and structured approach to managing your data—what that does is, actually, it reduces risks for your company, for the company's customers themselves.
- Michelle Dennedy: Because you're planning for it or because ...
- Barbara Lawler: Because we're planning, it helps you organize it and also supports this idea of data minimization. And data minimization seems almost like an obsolete concept. I know that we keep talking about it in--
- Michelle Dennedy: Such a good one though.
- Barbara Lawler: --privacy policy circles, but from a practical matter, the incentive—and that's not necessarily a bad thing because there's many cases where more data is better because you get better learning models, you get better training datasets for machine learning and AI. But if you don't know where, it's kind of the basics of data governance, actually. It's the data swamp is another way of saying you have no freaking idea where your data is, what it is, what you really need. Do you really need all of these pieces?
- So being able to organize that and actually then make decisions to do something with the data that you don't need, those are goals of strong data governance. Those are goals of data protection and privacy.
- And I think there's actually an ethical piece to it too, which is you don't want to be a hoarder and there's kind of data-hoarding going on in a lot of ways. And I think the mindset is the more we have, we'll figure out something to do with that eventually. But by the time you get to that point, you have so much muck in that swamp, you can't find the real knowledge.
- And the other advantage is that in organizing your data, every business user can actually understand how their business is working. Again, whether I'm in marketing or finance or sales or logistics. When you look at the range of Looker customers, they're using it for everything possible to understand their business. They run their business better. That's more effective, more efficient, can make better decisions. Because without data we make decisions based on our point of view, our lens. And, Michelle, your lens across the way is different than my lens from this side, even though we're in the same room.
- And I think you can expand that concept and say when you have data, you can supplement human judgement, or you can add human judgment to human data, to actual datasets. You need both. It's not one or the other.
- Michelle Dennedy: Yeah. And I think that's where this ethics piece comes in. So, there's a couple of thoughts running through my head. One is, I just had a couple of weeks off, and one of the weeks I spent filling two cars full of things to give away because I had too many things. I mean nice first-world problem, right? I didn't have an organized closet, so I couldn't find anything and I thought I just needed to buy more. So, I had a scarcity-of-use problem when I felt like I had, I have an over-abundance of things.

I think that's the same thing that you're talking about with data is really curating down to the things that you need and you want, and you can look at them and find them and see them and they're clean and they're ready and inviting for you. But then there's this other piece that I'm hearing from you of human decision-making being either augmented by, shared with, maybe pushed forward faster through machine learning. And so that naturally triggers the ethics conversation.

So, tell me where you are with data ethics and what your views are of where are we? It started to become a buzzword before we've even defined it, I think, in the data industry. I know you've been talking about data ethics for a long time, so how do you approach data ethics and where does that all fit in with this model that you're talking about of human to machine, machine to human and human to human?

Barbara Lawler: Data ethics is a fascinating topic that we're just really kind of peeling back the layers on. Because first of all, when you start with ethic, that sounds kind of squishy.

Michelle Dennedy: Or everyone gets an opinion.

Barbara Lawler: Well, everyone gets an opinion or your ethic, if you will, may be different than mine. Now there's actual very scholarly ethical thought on different ethics frameworks. And if we think about, for example, our colleagues over at Santa Clara University, the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, they have some really excellent foundational material for a number of areas.

Michelle Dennedy: I want to get Shannon on the show.

Barbara Lawler: Oh, Shannon would be great.

Michelle Dennedy: Shannon Vallor, shout out to you lady.

Barbara Lawler: Yep. When we think about data ethics, I think there's a tendency to say well, are we saying ethics as a replacement for instead of a legal framework, instead of the GDPR or instead of GLBA or pick your favorite privacy rule or legislation? And, so first of all, that's not what we're talking about.

What we're talking about is kind of this mix of what our company values, and we're sort of presuming there are company values, but there are societal values of what matters to people, what matters to us as human beings, what matters to us as citizens of our respective countries, whether that's the United States, a country in the European Union, or really anywhere in the world is what are the values and the ethics.

Now, the values and the ethics might be different in ... at a country level or at a regional level, but there are, at least in Western civilization, some fairly common ethical values around autonomy, the individual's right to determine their own purpose and direction, freedom from intrusion, the opportunity for economic security, just to name just a few. That's certainly nowhere near a comprehensive list. And you think well, what does that have to do with data ethics?

Every company is a data company right now, whether they realize it or not. And there's a tendency to talk about tech and big tech and hold up certain companies as good guys or bad guys are evil or not evil, and everyone has an opinion on that right now. But there's so many other tech and technology companies, but the reality is every company is a data company. It's just how well are they using it and what are the implications of understanding what your business data is, what decisions are you making?

So, the ethical questions become who are the stakeholders, who are the individuals, the groups impacted by actions driven by data or decisions made through data, whether there's a human involved or not, and understanding that AI and machine learning are moving to more and more at least first-stage decisions. Not just analysis, but decisions.

When we think about the ethical questions, who's impacted? And I say impact rather than risk or benefit, but when we think about impact, there can be positive impacts. There can be neutral impacts. Or there can be negative or potentially negative impacts, and that's going to be unique to you or to a group of individuals. But the first thing is actually asking those questions, who's impacted by our decisions and what does that impact look like?

So, going through some scenario planning, which is its own actual science, but asking those questions. And then what do those impacts mean? What have we not thought about? And the reality is we can't, we don't know what we don't know. But even asking the questions about what it means. And when you think about some of the recent issues we've seen over the last year in the world of data and data analysis and let's say surprising, again, I'm going to go back to it: inconceivable data uses. Turned out they were actually conceived by someone. And very far from what was originally expected by the individual. So, there's an individual expectation, there's a company accountability.

And when we think about ethics, we tend to also go to a user rights approach and that gets a little bit into the policy side. But what are my expectations, my values as a member, again, of the state of California? Citizen in the state of California, as a citizen of the United States and really as a citizen of the world. But what are the other complementary, not competing, complementary things that are in play? And what should we do about that? Like how can we turn that from a practical matter then into what are the questions that a chief data evangelist, that a chief financial officer, that the chief security or chief information security officer should be asking about the data they have? And how should they make those decisions and actually consider that. And that organizations need to be accountable. And I think the accountable piece balances the user-rights piece, which is think about the impact to individuals, users, groups, but where the individual or group may have no knowledge is asking that question. What should they know but then the organization is accountable?

Michelle Dennedy: Absolutely.

Barbara Lawler: Even love to talk about, so what does that mean in terms of the data supply chain?

Michelle Dennedy: Exactly. Exactly. And the value that it can bring. So, I'm getting the high sign from these guys. We're way over 20 minutes, right?

Barbara Lawler: Already?

Michelle Dennedy: He's like oh yeah, you passed that a while ago. So, we're going to do a quick rapid fire.

Barbara Lawler: Okay.

Michelle Dennedy: Ready? GDPR: Goddamn Privacy Rule or Gotta Do People Right?

Barbara Lawler: Oh, Gotta Do People Right.

Michelle Dennedy: Federal policy in the US, yes or no?

Barbara Lawler: Yes and no.

Michelle Dennedy: (Laughs) Sooner or later?

Barbara Lawler: Sooner, lots of debate and fire. Later, an actual regulation.

Michelle Dennedy: An actual thing. I like that.

Barbara Lawler: An actual thing, yeah.

Michelle Dennedy: I like it. Digital economy or digital wasteland?

Barbara Lawler: Oh, I've got to vote with the digital economy. I'm an optimist. Glass is always half full, even though we don't always know what's in that class.

Michelle Dennedy: That's true. Machine learning, real or not real?

Barbara Lawler: I think machines learn, but they don't learn like humans.

Michelle Dennedy: I like it.

Barbara Lawler: So, it still gets to what is the human input to those?

Michelle Dennedy: I think Alan Turing is still resting comfortably.

Barbara Lawler: Yes.

Michelle Dennedy: Okay. I can't think of any other good ways to close out the Princess Bride analogy. But, you know, as you wish, Barbara.

Barbara Lawler: As you wish, Michelle.

Michelle Dennedy: Well thank you very much. We've covered a lot of ground. Analytics, data privacy, decision-making, accountable organizations, machine learning used for good, Looker, Shannon Vallor, Trisha Montalbo, the challenge has been laid, ladies. We need you on the pod. So, thank you very much. Barb Lawler, chief privacy and ethics officer for Looker and an all-around icon. She's one of these, what my friend Lisa Lee calls the one-namers. If you say Barbara in the world of data, everyone knows it's Barb Lawler. You're a one-namer.

Barbara Lawler: Well, you're awesome. This has been great. It's been fun.

Michelle Dennedy: Thank you. As you wish, Barbara, as you wish.

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