



# DATA MAN

BLENDING AN INTRINSIC CURIOSITY WITH A MCCORMICK EDUCATION, **GREG MCKINNEY** CONTINUES HELPING BUSINESSES TURN DATA INTO ACTION.

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As a perpetually curious kid in Glenwood, Illinois, who carried a slide rule in his pocket, Greg McKinney (MS '81) inspected and dissected everything from lawnmowers to worms. Data coupled with a keen eye provided a window into discovery.

Blending that intrinsic curiosity with concepts and techniques he learned during his graduate studies at Northwestern Engineering, McKinney has since spent the better part of four decades as a data scientist helping a diverse array of companies craft a more productive, stable future.

“I’ve always loved digging down and finding hidden gems in the data because I know somewhere in there is knowledge,” McKinney says. “Some people think about analytics in terms of terabytes of data, but I’m wondering how the data can inform the business.”

Such inquisitive, analytical work often means challenging conventional wisdom.

In 1981, for instance, after McKinney left the McCormick School of Engineering to enter the energy sector with Occidental Petroleum, the firm’s executives wanted a tool to better assess international exploration strategies. McKinney developed a model to evaluate these always expensive and precarious endeavors, and his results ran counter to the firm’s existing strategy. He suggested newfangled alternatives and had to use persistence and creativity to convince Occidental’s leaders of his work’s validity. Ultimately, his new methods spurred productive results.

“Getting into the data can lead to some pretty radical ideas, so you better have confidence and conviction in your

work because ideas that challenge the status quo are likely to come under attack,” McKinney says.

In later career stops at Bank of America, Charles Schwab & Company, and Kaiser Permanente, McKinney’s analytical work championed new approaches that altered operations and sparked heightened performance. “There’s great satisfaction when the models developed change thinking and the way the company operates,” says McKinney, now an independent consultant to large healthcare organizations.

Reflecting on his career, McKinney credits his studies in industrial engineering at McCormick with providing the technical knowledge, tools, and theory to transform a curious kid into a business-driving professional. “A lot of people talk about data analytics, but it’s shallow: Divide this number by that number,” he says. “At Northwestern, I was challenged to really dig into the data and to extract insights, draw conclusions, and take action.”

Now living in San Francisco, McKinney remains actively engaged with McCormick, serving as national chairman of the Walter P. Murphy Society, a group of donors who advise Dean Julio Ottino about funding decisions for faculty- and student-initiated projects ranging from integrating new curriculum elements to purchasing specialized equipment.

“The Murphy Society represents a level of donor engagement rare in higher education,” McKinney says. “That openness is what I love about McCormick and what makes it a special place.”

DANIEL P. SMITH