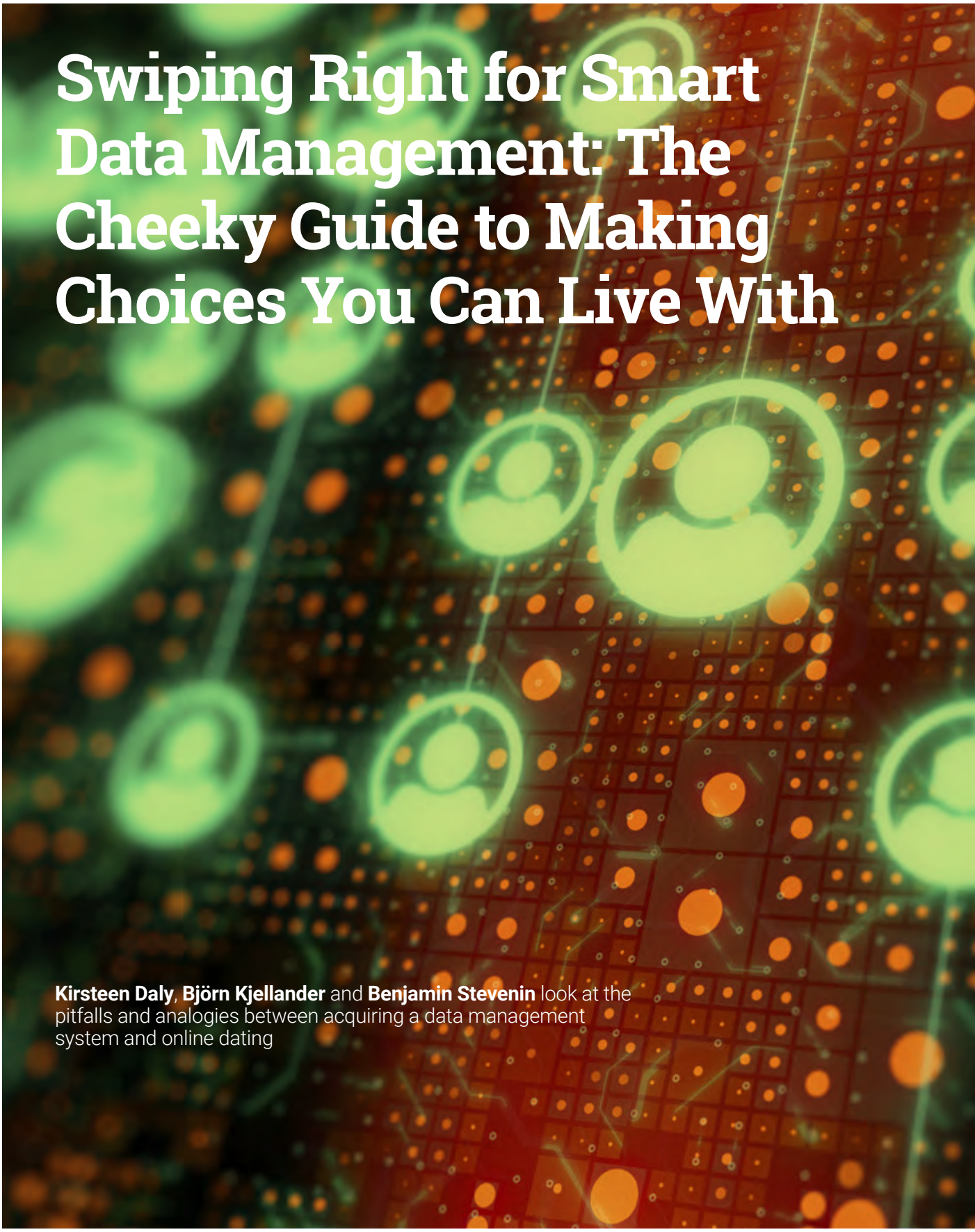
Swiping Right for Smart Data Management: The Cheeky Guide to Making Choices You Can Live With



Kirsteen Daly, **Björn Kjellander** and **Benjamin Stevenin** look at the pitfalls and analogies between acquiring a data management system and online dating

The name of the game

Many of us have been mesmerised by dazzling pictures and self-declarations on dating apps, and come to the conclusion that a certain person matches all our requirements, however on meeting face-to-face we realise the reality is often very different. Well, the same is true of presentations with tantalizing overviews, reports and tables that seem to address all our needs for managing data effectively. Whether online or offline, carefully embroidered feature presentations and elevator pitches focus on creating interest and reducing decision friction. Most of us are less than tech-savvy and have no clear vision of what is available in our institution, not to mention what could be useful to other departments. With limited experience in smart data management, we risk choosing a solution based on the persuasiveness of the presentation/presenter and the overall feel of the offer rather than making a sound, informed decision. Much like dating apps, appearances can be pivotal when deciding – but they can also be deceiving.

So, let's explore the analogy between online dating and choosing a data management system.

The day you decide to put yourself on a dating app, you have an idea in your head - finding the perfect companion. The same applies when you choose to start looking for a system you need to solve a problem, but in both cases does it always work out the way you anticipate it will?

Decision-making

At the very outset, swiping left and right in, say, Tinder and choosing a data management system both comprise an evaluation process with mostly front-end and compelling information. With little experience in features, functionalities, and suitability for your needs, your decision to swipe left or right on the offer boils down to more trust in the offeror than trust in the solution.

Second, in an ideal world, you could distil all your self-understanding, needs, and references into an informed and distinct sweeping action to the left or right. Still, the reason why we even find ourselves on the online dating scene could also be explained by our inability to understand the needs and preferences of end-users to ensure that the application or system – or relationship – meets our requirements. Swiping left or right based on your preferences for potential matches should ideally be built on your preferences for features, scalability, security, and other factors that align with your specific needs and not only on images and physical attributes. We must decide based on what is good for us and the institution.

What is the reality?

Did they use Photoshop for their picture? What is the reality of what they say on their profile? What can I trust, and should I unmatch? Decisions, decisions. The same applies when looking at systems. The sales pitch will always give you the impression of perfection, but what is the reality? You remember creating your profile and all the questions you had to answer: your favourite colour, your ideal date, your favourite food, etc. For the system, you need to understand your institution, what systems are already in place, what they do and do not do, and how you could utilise them. It is a crucial step where you should take time to have a complete vision of your institution, researching what is possible and not possible and how it can work for you in creating a smart data system.

Were you swept away?

Also, what are you looking for? Do you understand what your requirements are? Because, as in a dating app, when you get a new romance, it will affect all your other relationships with friends and family. You cannot change everything for a new fling, you may not want to change your eating habits for example, just to please your new companion, you need to find compromises in your life. A system is evolving in a complex environment with different users needing different information. You need to understand the impact of what you are implementing and how this will affect colleagues and other users. It would help if you also saw that a system will be operational in a couple of months and what will happen in the meantime. Yes, love at first sight does exist, but with a system that is installed its full potential will not be immediately apparent or available for immediate use, it will need to be adjusted for your specific needs, data will need to be added, etc.

Matchmaking/compatibility

Granted, dating apps are designed for users and purposes that differ from data management solutions. A dating app user would be looking for a potential romance, companionship/relationship, whereas the database would be designed to help business schools manage large amounts of data effectively. Don't we all secretly long for 'the perfect companion'? Does that person really exist or have we let celebrity culture and the media influence our views? The same is true for a cure-all management solution that seamlessly integrates with our existing, often conflicting, systems and helps us effortlessly produce great reports. If that isn't romance, then I don't know what is. Choosing a system is like finding a partner; once you have it and are set, you cannot change it quickly. It will be a painful and costly process, it may not be emotional, but it will affect your work balance.

A match made in heaven still has to be lived on earth

And so, it suddenly happens: you have a match, and all that swiping work has paid off. And once the honeymoon phase is over you have the reality of 'normal' life with its ups and downs. For the system, it is the same; you discover six months down the road that there is an implementation phase, then there is maintenance, and you have to feed the system with data, exactly like in your relationship when you realise after a few months that there are flaws and everything is not as perfect as you initially thought. Buying a system and its life cycle (implementation, maintenance) are very different phases. To start with, there are technical complexities: buying the solution is relatively straightforward compared to implementing a data management system, which requires a more significant level of technical expertise, knowledge, and energy. Both dating and acquiring a data management system need considerable time, money, and resources, as well as dealing with the long-term implications. In a relationship you will start spending time with your companion's circle of friends and colleagues; it will be the same with the system, you will have to spend time with colleagues from different departments and backgrounds. Who is your IT colleague, data officer, HR office, Research Officer, etc? How do they work, and what are their requirements? Welcome to the data management implementation stage regarding data storage, data mining retrieval, security, and analysis capabilities.

The fear of FOMO

Once we have fully committed to a solution, in the romantic/novel phase of the relationship, we tend to show confirmation bias (process information that confirms our choices/beliefs). But already in the implementation phase of the new relationship, we may discover that we had unrealistic expectations, even if we carefully considered the potential benefits and drawbacks in committing to this new relationship or system, the outcome does not always meet our expectations. There is always

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the fear of missing out on opportunities or experiences (FOMO) by committing fully to one solution, particularly when we see others enjoying certain benefits or advantages that we do not have. When we choose, we may become aware of the opportunities we may be missing out on, leading to the perception that the grass is greener on the other side.

But we are creatures of habit and over time, FOMO may also turn into resistance to change (the friction involved to change outweighs the potential benefits). So, we hold on to our solutions, be it relationship or data management – because imagine dragging yourself back to square one again, no one wants to do that! So, hold fast and good luck for the next step in life with a system, it will be everything that you have been looking for and more but it will be hard work to make the relationship work, there is never anything perfect but there will always be a system that matches most of your requirements and you just need to define those that are really important. So, get ready to swipe right on your perfect data management system and enjoy the courtship and make sure you do due diligence for that perfect compatibility.

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Further information:

The next edition of the virtual workshop on Smart Data Management will take place in April 2024. More details can be found https://events.efmdglobal.org/events/2024-smart-data-management/, or email Marketa Dvorackova at marketa.dvorackova@efmdglobal.org for further information.