SCALE
SF Data Science Leaders

A conversation with data science leaders
Vectice HQ @ San Francisco, CA

Shailvi Wakhlu

Former Head of Data @ Strava

"Obtaining C-Suite Buy-in"

"Building Diverse & Remote AI Teams"

Shyam Banuprakash

Vice President of Data Science @ Clario

"Data Science in Alzheimer's Trials"

"Collaboration with Domain Experts"

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Speakers

Shailvi Wakhlu

Head of Data @ Strava
Formerly Komodo Health / Salesforce / Fitbit

Shailvi is a data analytics leader with 16 years of experience in Fortune 500 companies and startups. 8+ years in management leading global analytics & engineering teams across USA, Europe and Asia.

Shyam Banuprakash

Vice President of Data Science @ Clario

Shyam has been in the life sciences industry for more than 10 years and in data science for around 15 years.

He is the VP of data science at Clario where he works in the medical imaging business segment and manages a team of 20 data scientists across the globe.

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Shyam Banuprakash

Keys to Successful Collaboration with Experts

> **Do you work differently with Medical teams Vs. Finance Teams?**

Shyam: The Medical Team's sense of urgency is different; they know it's a long game. We're making a little progress every time, which then adds up. Medical trials take longer to complete and the feedback loop is much longer and this is particularly true with long-lasting diseases like Alzheimer's.

Like most data science teams, my team also works with a finance team. We're building finance models for revenue prediction every month and trying to create and tweak the features to increase the revenue.

Since we do revenue prediction every month, we can evaluate much quicker whether our prediction worked and can adapt our strategy. But with medical sciences, it takes longer to collect and analyze data to discover if you're on the right track.

Changing Approaches Based on Collaborating with Domain Experts

Shyam: We're conscious of the medical staff's time and effort. We won't throw something at them randomly, and we try to meet in person as much as possible.

We don't use tools; we show them and try to get a lot of knowledge from them. If we do something today, it will take a while for those trials to happen and to see the results.

Leveraging Experts to Ensure Alignment

> **How do you align your team efforts with the rest of the business?**

Shyam: The finance team's needs are urgent. We work with them to address the immediate needs.

Some deadlines determine the priorities. If we have a medical conference that we're working towards and want to get this analysis done, then that's what we work towards.
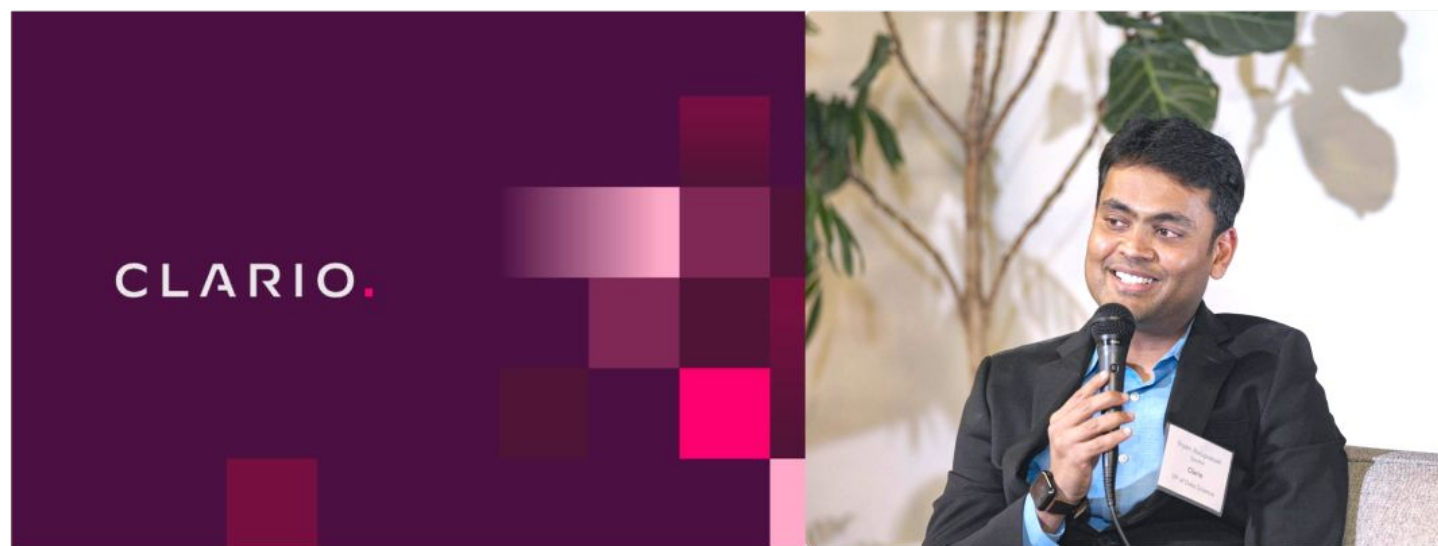
> *"We are staffed well enough that we can avoid conflict between priorities for science and non-science efforts.*
>
> *When there are multiple tasks, we leverage experts to prioritize what we're working on. We have experts in the data science and medical teams that collaborate to decide what's most important to work on."*
>
> — Shyam Banuprakash, VP of Data Science @ Clario

We do a lot of recruitment internally and If anyone on the science team wants to join us, we'll take them in a heartbeat.

It's easier to get someone who knows medical science and train them on data science than the other way around. Their domain knowledge comes in handy when we're trying to prioritize the workload.

Building Trust In The Organization

> **How do you build trust between data science teams and the business?**

Shyam: Building trust is essential. It's a cliche, and everyone says it's easier to do a decision tree-based model first so you can look into the model.

When someone asks, 'Hey, why did this model predict this?' And if you tell them it's a black box or something similar, it will be hard to gain their trust in your results.

> *"When we do linear regression or a decision tree, we break down the tree and show it to the medical team. This helps to build trust in our methods.*
> *If we do make a mistake (which often happens in data science), it's easier for them to understand why and accept it without losing trust in our methods."*
>
> — Shyam Banuprakash, VP of Data Science @ Clario

It took us a while to build that trust. Some people think data science is cool and really want to work with us. Other people believe that we're never going to improve where we are. So it's essential to build that trust in the capabilities of data science.

In the beginning, it's essential to have simple models where you can look inside the model, under the hood, and then if someone asks you, you can tell them why the model made a particular decision. If you don't do that, they slowly start losing trust.

Shailvi Wakhlu

Getting C-Suite Buy-In

> **How Do You Approach The Challenge Of C-Suite Buy-In?**

Shailvi: Every company has its own culture and approach for larger leadership teams. In some companies, the C-suite can be very hands-on in data science, and in others, the C-suite is pretty hands-off. Regardless, you need to align your requests with the priorities of individual executives.

> *"The best approach to getting buy-in from a company's executives is to understand everybody's motivation.*
>
> *Ideally, one company shares the same goals and everybody is working towards achieving them."*
>
> — Shailvi Wakhlu, Head of Data Science @ Strava

But every individual still has their little pocket of the business that they focus on. They will have their P&L responsibilities and measures of success for their department that ultimately decide if they're doing their job right.

If you are presenting data science solutions that are helping individuals look better in their roles, that goes a long way in ensuring that you get support for the things that you care about. Aligning your priorities with theirs sets you up for success.

Leveraging Experts to Ensure Alignment

> **How Do You Communicate With Different Executives? CFO, CTO, CEO?**

Shailvi: Having the CFO as an ally for data science projects is great for data leaders. Part of that is ensuring that the CFO sees the return on investment by focusing on different parts of the life cycle.

A CMO might care about entirely different things. They're like, 'Hey, I have a big budget, and my people are building awesome things, but I need to be able to market that,' and 'I want to show that my marketing is also bringing value to the company.'

The best approach is align them with the data pieces you have available that demonstrate the impact and value of their work to the rest of the business.

Building Diverse Teams And Keeping Morale High

> **How do you internally keep the excitement and morale on projects like the ones addressing technical debt?**

Shailvi: Having centralized learning and building and a space where the whole team can gather and work on something together is important. That's what we did in our team.

We actively said that everybody's time would be split, where 80% of that time is spent working with their direct stakeholders (like teams that they are supporting, typically in the product). But 20% of their time is reserved for foundational projects.

This was an excellent way to get various team members together. During this 20%, we got some foundational work done that had long-term impact.

(...) and people loved that collaboration aspect: 'Hey, I never worked with this other person, but this 20% special time is an opportunity for me to do that.

Changing our job descriptions to attract not just athletes was one that I insisted we put there. Strava is a company built for athletes and in the past, we only tended to attract people who were athletes. My thing was, they're obviously very welcome here. But we are building a data organization; if people are great at data, they belong with us.

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Topics we discuss

- Alignment with the business
- Talent acquisition & retention
- Centralized & embedded teams
- Distributed teams, OKR, KPIs
- C-level buy-in
- M&A impact on DS/ML function