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Digital transformation: What? How? Why?

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Citation

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Leadership and prep work ahead of transformation are key

Do an online search for "Rules of digital transformation" and variations of the following come up: Communicate; a clear vision; embrace failure etc. But what about 'data renovation'? Or 'data plumbing'?

"The analogy used to be: In government, data-sharing is difficult because when you turn on the tap, you have to call the data owner to ask for permission for the data to flow," explains **Tan Chee Hau**, Director of Planning & Prioritisation at Singapore's Smart Nation & Digital Government Office. "There were processes, bureaucratic or otherwise, and there were technical difficulties with regard to how the data was being shared."

"For example, there was no consistency on how gender was recorded in databases. There were discrepancies on the capitalisation in spelling 'male/female'. Some used numbers such as '0' and '1' or '1' and '2' to denote the genders but which was male and which was female? These things might not interest the typical policy maker but it's the laborious work that needs to be sorted out to unblock the plumbing to get the data to flow."

He concludes: "We use the term data renovation as an analogy to think about how we are doing this. You really need to make sure data is sorted out before digital transformation can happen."

PREPARING FOR TRANSFORMATION

Tan made those observations at the recent SMU School of Computing and Information Systems (SCIS) virtual Master of IT in Business (MITB) Day themed "Embracing Digital Transformation: Moving from Physical to Digital World" where he laid out the lessons learnt in the Singapore government's digital transformation journey. While pointing out the critical role committed leadership plays in digital transformation – Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has been reported to possess considerable coding skills – Tan stresses it is not all about the technology.

"When we think of transformation, we often think about engineers but we really need multi-disciplinary teams for many reasons," he posits. "When you want to put users at the centre [of digital transformation], you need designers and people who can represent different perspectives of the customer, who have the empathy and domain experience. Just for the pure fact of their diversity, this group of people is able to think about different people's points of view. That's very important."

Tan points to some statistics suggesting successful digital transformation: 95 percent of government transactions are completed in a paper-less, cash-less, and presence-less manner, i.e. done online; 85 percent of citizens were extremely or very satisfied with government digital

services. Approval from the general public, who are a government's ostensible audience, is a key performance indicator but Tan hastens to add that "internal users [and employees] must be satisfied…to be able to be productive and effective before they can get things done."

It is a point echoed by **Darren Thayre**, Google's Head of Digital Transformation & Digital Ventures, JAPAC.

"It's tempting to jump straight into doing things, the faster you get into building and changing things, the faster you learn," observes Thayre in a panel discussion at the event. "However, at the beginning of any big change initiative, you really need to do a great job of communicating the 'why' for the change.

"Most people want to enhance their lives and roles. Humans are afraid of the unknown. When the unknown has some guard rails around it, or if we understand why the unknown can be beneficial, then we can lean into it much more."

IDENTIFYING AND LEADING TRANSFORMATION

But with 'digital transformation' being bandied about like other buzzwords such as 'blockchain' and 'sustainability', the question needs to be asked: How do you know if your organisation is indeed driving digital transformation instead of a run-of-the-mill updating of operations?

"For the past few years, shoe manufacturers have gone to a B2C model to build a direct relationship with the consumer," explains **Ewen Plougastel**, Managing Director of Digital Transformation at Accenture Strategy & Consulting. "They started with an app where you track your athletic performance. It was a direct connection: they were able to get the name of the consumer, they know where you live, your demographic group and sporting habits. They then use that information to position their products in a personalised way. The company changed its business model from B2B to B2C.

"That's digital transformation because you are leveraging digital technology and digital methodology to change the way a company works."

For **Mark Shmulevich**, Senior Vice President of cognitive A.I. company TAIGER and Digital Transformation Chapter Chairman of tech industry trade association SGTech, bigger companies are typically at least partially digital and are looking to form partnerships with the right solution providers. SMEs, on the other hand, turn to SGTech "for best practices and improving back-office efficiency".

But fostering the right company culture is key, he adds.

"I like the concept that says the best people strive for three things: autonomy, mastery and purpose," he points out. "It's especially evident in the technology world where you have to be technologically advanced and flexible to be successful, and then you get people on board who have mastery of the technology. But in order for them to be able to do digital transformation and

remain autonomous, the culture they see around them should also be around that transformation. So people at the top should monitor for that."

"It's about the leadership being the role models, adopting the desired behaviour," offers Thayre. "Often the leaders are at the latter end of their careers and there's this 'I'm too old to change' response. Instead, by going on your own change journey, it is really important. It's a myth that one is too old to change. I've seen 60-year-olds learning to code for the first time. It's not an age thing. It's a mentality thing."

Kind of like Singapore's Prime Minister then.

Tan Chee Hau, Darren Thayre, Ewen Plougastel and Mark Shmulevich were speakers and panelists at the virtual SMU MITB Day themed "Embracing Digital Transformation: Moving from Physical to Digital World" held on 25 March 2021.

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