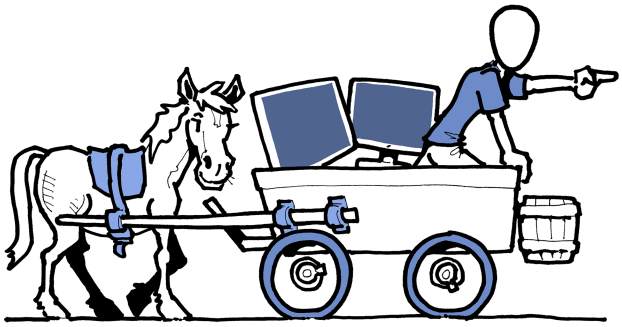

Reconceive

Technology-led change puts the cart before the horse

You can't move today without bumping into an article or presentation that warns of the perils of 'being Ubered', a phrase coined by Publicis Groupe CEO Maurice Levy, meaning your organisation is at risk of being disrupted, dethroned, or threatened with extinction by more advanced competitors, and that, to survive, an organisation must evolve.

These sentiments were front and centre of retiring Cisco CEO and executive chairman John Chambers' message in his final keynote speech: '"40% of businesses in this room, unfortunately, will not exist in a meaningful way in 10 years," he told the 25,000 attendees, adding, "If I'm not making you sweat, I should be."'[1]

Demise through disruption is a marketing message that technology firms have been very effective in promoting. Their premise is that the prevailing answer to disruption is to invest in technology.

It is tempting, as a business, to believe in this silver bullet solution. After all, we are promised, just install new technology and a better future is guaranteed! Certainly, technology can help complete existing processes and tasks more quickly, but does that necessarily make your services better or more competitive? And while it may make technology firms lots of money, ultimately, automation doesn't really help leaders solve core organisational issues such as control from above, negative mythologies underpinning culture, stultifying systems and structures, quality of leadership, unproductive behaviour and activity, and lack of clarity in role, accountability, authority, and working relationships.

Look around. There are no doubt people at the lower levels of the organisation who are aware of the risks of blindly following the technology-driven solution. However, if their leaders accept the technology silver bullet, these people have limited authority to influence that decision. Instead, all they can do is raise their concerns and then hunker down and focus on the process of implementation.

This technology-led approach is a classic example of a reinforcing loop. That is, an action produces a result, which influences more of the same action.[2] In other words, introduce new technology and then repeat, repeat, repeat.

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[1] Retiring Cisco CEO delivers dire prediction: 40% of companies will be dead in 10 years, Julie Bort, Tech Insider, 2015

[2] Reinforcing Loop, The Way of Systems, Gene Bellinger, 2004.

Employing technology to cure all ills is not a new phenomenon. Yet, despite the evidence of repeated failure, the technology-led paradigm is still assumed to be the single best way forward.

This phenomenon has been described since people embarked on technology initiatives as a means to improve their organisations. Back in 1993, Clive Holtham wrote: 'One of the problems in discussing how to make groups more effective is that the information technology thinking driving it is rooted in traditional, but potentially or actually inappropriate, paradigms'.[3] Although written 30 years ago, the technology-led paradigm still prevails.

So, based on these observations, what is the first step to effectively dealing with the 'demise through the disruption' mantra, if it is not technology first?

Progressive leaders know that to apply technology to already ineffective work designs predictably leads to frustration, failure, and lament, or, at best, mediocre change. In fact, what needs to change first is the way in which work is designed, organised, and managed. And, critically, this change should be customer-led, not technology-led.

Instead, the application of a different philosophy is required, where what creates value for customers and how best to service them sets the context for improvement, and people are organised and enabled to deliver outcomes more effectively, supported by productive organisational systems and structures. Only then can technology be applied that complements the more effective organisational systems and structures, enhances cognitive processes, and automates simple and repetitive tasks. This approach enables organisations to build long-term, sustainable, nimble, and successful businesses that are designed to adapt.

What does this more productive design look like in operation? Rob Butera, Head of Investment Infrastructure Engineering, Iress, a software company for the financial services sector, shares the approach he has found that works to create effective and positive IT changes:

> *It's not surprising that much of the IT that is built isn't of value because the process of delivering IT doesn't really focus on value; it focuses on delivering things that somebody thought of, that somebody had an opinion about, and that's what the purpose becomes: deliver the thing.*
>
> *We've left the comfort of the IT department, and that allows us to construct real relationships with people who use our services or use the things we build, and that changes an enormous amount with regard to my decision making as an IT professional and the things that I might do. The best way to describe it is a partnership. There's a shared body of knowledge, and that body of knowledge relates back to customers, and the way customer work is done. So, whenever we talk about bringing in an IT solution for something, we are already starting off with this groundwork of knowledge around customers and customer work.*

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[3] Holtham, Clive, *Improving the performance of workgroups through information technology*, City University Business School, 1993.

Effectively, as an IT team, we are compelled to make the IT changes at any given time that yield the most value for customers; that's what we are there to do. The customer work is central.

We try to reduce mental fatigue, to reduce cognitive load; work should just flow in. Somebody should be able to pick it up and be presented with the right information, at the right time, at the right place, to facilitate good decision making, and then make a decision, put in the decision. The mechanical work of processing should be taken care of for them.

So much of the IT that we used to build for our own people created friction: it made you work hard and put you in a bad mood; you had to fight it. We are trying to create something that does quite the opposite. Ultimately, the greatest achievement of the IT group is that we have been able to complement the more productive organisational systems which improves the work it does for customers.

Instead of a technology-led approach, let's focus on first creating a productive organisation which helps to create the conditions where people willingly work together and give their best, before we press the technology help button.