

No more future-gazing, no more predictions... digital has landed

MOMENTARILY BLINDED by the disorientating dazzle of a technological revolution, today's smartest organisations are now getting on with the truly transformational business of deployment. Roads-as-a-service, super-fast start-ups, paperless healthcare: Digital Britain Plc is wising up to the whys and wherefores – and the rewards are being reaped in spades.

A group of these committed trailblazers gathered at a *Business Reporter* roundtable lunch to trade tales of rebooted business models, better-served customers and leveraged bottom lines.

Giant engineering firm Costain constructs motorways, bridges and power stations. They still build in concrete, steel and asphalt but are now in the maintenance business too, by using the Internet of Things and sensors to analyse data such as traffic flow, footfall and energy consumption.

Bill Price, the firm's business systems and technology director, described the company as bullish: "We are embracing technology in a big way to improve the performance and the life cycle management of our customers' assets," he said. "We used to just build. Now we provide an end-to-end service. Take roads: we now construct them AND use smart infrastructure such as cameras and sensors to improve traffic flow and reduce journey times. The same technology allows us to map and repair potholes for a local authority in Sussex. Soon, connected cars, like the Tesla, will be doing that for us by simply driving over them and sending us the data we need to despatch engineers to the scene."

It's about getting ahead of the rest. But it's also about understanding that digital success can only be built on solid digital foundations.

Sean Harley, chief information officer at B2B media company Ascential, says real digital transformation is only possible if a business's front-facing functions are married to its back-end processes and supporting business systems. That's when customers revel in the fully seamless, fully satisfying experience. "The customer experience is layered at the top with the front end, but it is really the business systems that enable all of that," says Harley. "It's things like CRM linking to finance systems. For example, when a client transacts with our business at the front end, we capture that data in the CRM platform, which then links seamlessly through to finance systems for invoicing or instant payment."

Start-ups are the companies likely to lap up the spoils of digitisation most



Clockwise from top right: Nathan Marke, Bill Price, Sean Harley, Joanne Frearson, Carolyn Lees, Rob Price, Lesley Sewell, Simon Wright, Karl Goatley, Beverly Smith; inset: Nathan Marke and Rob Price

Photos: Neil Atkinson

"Digitisation is an absolute imperative for all businesses now" – Nathan Marke, Daisy Group

energetically. Not for these bright young things the agonies of fighting legacy systems hard-wired to rebel.

Lesley Sewell, chief operating officer at new challenger mortgage lender Vida Homeloans, said: "The technology strategy was always at the forefront of the business strategy. Our business is generated through a remote intermediary market – interacting with potential new customers away from an office environment and often in their own homes – so digital is really important to us. It is also how we interact with each other, within the organisation. We minimised the use of paper and maximised digital, and we have been able to build all of that from scratch, which has been fantastic."

Nathan Marke, chief digital officer at Daisy Group – one of the UK's biggest enablers of digitisation for businesses small and large – believes an inflexion point has been reached. "Digitisation is an absolute imperative for all businesses now," he says. "But a good digital business must have the digital foundations right. It can't be the IT bolted onto the side. It has to be at the very heart of everything." No surprises then that this is a view shared by 92 per cent of CEOs surveyed by PWC last year. But, although the desire might be there, implementation can be fraught.

Carolyn Lees, global IT director at private equity firm Permira, said: "The digital agenda is quite interesting in our business model because we invest in a whole variety of companies that are at completely different stages of digital maturity.

Digital is a huge disruptor and you need the right people to support the processes. It is creating a dynamic which is extremely challenging. Think about the skill sets you need to deal with it – not just in your own tech space, but in business as a whole. That said, digital transformation is a huge opportunity: you have to enlighten the board about the possibilities that exist in your business."

In the NHS, the digital agenda is huge. Convert Karl Goatley, director of IT at Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, is already driving digital adoption programmes, and says it is redefining patient care. "It means taking paper records and digitising them so they are always available," he says. "That then gives us the ability to join up disparate parts of the health record and share this across care settings. It gives healthcare professionals a holistic view of our patients and doctors can treat accordingly."

On a practical level, it can also transform service delivery. Goatley's Trust operates a street triage team in Eastbourne, providing late-night crisis care to the most vulnerable people with mental health issues. The team can access patient records and medication schedules from their mobile devices while on the move and operating alongside the local police force. "That's digital in action," he says. "And it's helping save lives."

Health and welfare services firm MAXIMUS is also simplifying and supporting customers via digital. Beverly Smith, vice president UK IT, said: "We have introduced a number of digital services for internal processes and customers. One example is the introduction of transcription service for

doctors to try to encourage them not to write it down. Instead, it is dictated, translated and validated – all digitally."

Daisy Group's partner in digitising UK Plc is global tech giant Cisco. Its UK Partner Organisation's chief technical officer Rob Price says it has several moving parts. "The first of these is the Internet of Things," he says. "There are 15 billion things connected to the internet. By the end of the decade it will be 50 billion or more. That's huge growth potential for businesses, right there."

However, the real benefit in connecting all these things together is that it allows us to gather huge amounts of data. This data can provide significant insights, and drive business outcomes. But it's not all plain sailing. For digital opportunity, read threat of cyber-attack. Seventy per cent of FTSE 350 companies have paid ransomware demands.

Lees believes that to inform workforces on cyber-security, it has to be culturally driven. "The tech is easy," she says. "The toughest part is the culture and the awareness. People can see it as getting in the way of doing their job. We have tried to relate it to our people not in a business context, but in a personal one."

It's clear that, for some companies, digital transformation is a challenge, while for others it has come naturally. But, whatever stage they are at, it is providing them with new opportunities that can influence their futures. And those futures look very bright.

INDUSTRY VIEW

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