

Multi-Dimensional Digital Transformation

Stop Thinking in Only One Dimension

Everyone these days is chasing some version of a digital transformation strategy. Whether it is big data, AI, advanced analytics, connected businesses, or ... the general result is the same. Companies are asking how can we do what we do faster, smarter, cheaper, better? This focus on digital transformation is driving some great innovations in industry, and in some cases, enabling complete transformation in how we work and what we can do. However, with everyone chasing the same goal, we are seeing many people making some of the same basic mistakes. They are thinking too one dimensionally when the real prize and the real transformation that everyone knows is out there comes when we leverage this explosion in technology to drive multi-dimensional organizational improvements.

Before we go any further, I need to explain what I mean by a one-dimensional approach. For many companies, their digital evolution is being driven on multiple fronts by many different people, even when they have dedicated teams to tackle the digital challenge. The reason for this is simple — most everyone has gotten the message and is incorporating new technologies into their thinking when pursuing assigned improvement initiatives. The result from all of this focus is that many different teams inside the same company are all pursuing solutions enabled by a specific technology(s) to address individual opportunities. This in turn creates an environment where many different teams are pursuing technologies independently, each with a singular focus (i.e., one problem, one solution, one enabling technology). What is great is that often each of these initiatives is creating real value for the company. What is not as great is that this singular focus is creating many one-dimensional technology solutions that may or may not converge to create a unified platform and are very likely missing the real value that can be realized when we open our minds and approach our digital evolution as a multi-dimensional problem.



Now that we are all on the same page in terms of understanding what we mean when we say a multi-dimensional vs. a one-dimensional approach, the real questions become “Why should we...?” and “How would we take a multi-dimensional approach to accomplish this?” First, let’s answer the “why” question. The simple answer is because successful businesses and the organizations that support them are rarely, if ever, one-dimensional. More importantly they are also not just a collection of one-dimensional teams. Instead, they are complex systems that rely on the integration of many different people and many different processes to function at their best. It is this inherent complexity that ultimately answers the “why” question. However, there is a bit more to it than just that. Today’s technological advances are not just enabling us to do what we do more efficiently or more effectively, but in many instances these advances enable us to completely rethink how we work and what we can do, which is the whole idea behind disruptive technologies to begin with.

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This is where the real opportunity comes in. When we disrupt a core business process, there is the potential to ripple that disruption through all of the connected processes so that we can completely transform how we manage our business as a whole. This is the pot of gold at the end of the digital rainbow that we are all chasing and the “why” question.



This all leads us to the “how” question. Unfortunately, “how” can be more difficult for many reasons. To start with, multi-dimensional problems by their very nature are complicated. They are complicated to define, complicated to solve, and sometimes they are even more complicated to implement the solution once you have figured it out. Beyond that, most organizations have some level of silos defining how the organization actually works, and addressing these silos is a challenge unto itself.

Finally, let’s face it, it is easier and faster (notice that I did not say cheaper) to approach things in the more linear fashion that one-dimensional thinking allows for. So how do we get past all of these complications to arrive at a multi-dimensional solution that ultimately ties to an overall digital strategy?

As you approach this question, it is useful to first start with a blank sheet of paper and ask a few simple questions:

- What problem am I trying to solve, or opportunity do I need to capture?
- What process(es) do I need to improve/change to support the solution?
- What other processes are connected to the process(es) identified in the previous question?
- What teams or individuals need to work differently to support the solution?
- What employee (or work group) interfaces need to change to support the solution?

With those initial questions answered, you start to get a feel for the complexity of the multi-dimensional approach. It is also from the answers to these questions that we begin to see the real potential value by looking at the problem/opportunity a bit more holistically. However, it is not until we get to the “what if” questions that we can start to see the true potential of a transformation. With the frame provided by those initial questions, it is worth spending a bit of time asking:

- What if I can revolutionize this process? What possibilities or challenges does it create for the other related aspects?
- What if a process becomes irrelevant and can be eliminated? What then?
- What if the level of expertise needed to support a particular technology or process changes? What does that mean for talent management?
- What if we could...? What else would be possible?



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Once you have answers to all of these questions, you can start to piece together the multi-dimensional puzzle that is real digital transformation. Part of piecing this together to form a picture is also deciding which pieces are important, which are just nice to have, and which fall into the “too much added complexity” category. It is important to remember that while you need to see all of the potential pieces of the puzzle, you do not need to use them all to make the picture that you want or need. This is where it gets a little more challenging because it involves balancing what is possible, with what is critical, with what the organization can handle. At this point, it is important to remember that transformations do not happen in single instances but instead happen over time. Therefore, this is where you go from a single initiative to one initiative that is part of a bigger strategy, and subsequently where your longer-term plan comes together.



Digital transformation is just that—a transformation—and because organizations are complex organisms with many interrelated functions, you should approach the digital question holistically so that you do not solve one problem only to create another or set yourself on a path where you must redo work in the future. While taking a more encompassing approach adds more complexity, it is important to remember that taking this does not mean you address everything

at once, only that you progress forward with a clear view of the bigger picture and where you need to end up when you are done.

About the Author

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