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Five habits for executives to become more digital

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Need to catch up to the digital revolution? Here's our cheat sheet for the C-suite.

For many consumers, being digital is second nature. Activities unknown a few years ago are now commonplace: using a smartphone to compare prices while shopping, or seeking product recommendations using Facebook. Yet an organization's top table can take a while to catch up to this reality. After all, most of today's senior executives built their careers in the predigital age and for the past ten years have been too busy hitting their numbers to spend much time following tech trends or posting on social media.

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone: we often hear from leaders we work with that they feel left behind by the digital revolution. So here are a few practical tips that we've found help senior executives make the transition from analog to digital:

1. Think like a geek

Set up a challenge session. Get your senior leaders, tech team, and marketers together to confront the critical question: If software is eating the world, how could it eat us? For example, one European media company asked executives from a bunch of start-ups, "How could you disrupt us? Which activities would you replace with algorithms? What advantages do we have that you can't replicate?" Not only were they surprised by the results—they acted on them.

Teach your team to program an app. Demystify technology by taking a handful of direct reports—or your C-suite peers—to a one-day course. Even a novice can learn to write simple code in a day. It's the digital equivalent of looking under the bonnet (or hood) to see how the engine works.

2. Carve out time to look beyond your company

Get a news feed of tech developments in your industry. Try a "5 at 5": Every day, put aside five minutes at five o'clock to get smart about a topic. If a news item or an article or a blog makes you see your business in a new light, share it with others—why not tweet it?

Hold regular meetings with innovators. When people are perpetually fire-fighting, it's easy to miss what's going on in the outside world. Invite industry innovators to come in; you may find new talent to hire or new options to pursue. Build networks as well as knowledge, and raise your internal and external profile as a company that's receptive to fresh thinking.

3. Behave like your customer

Think mobile. Over a billion people have a smartphone in their pocket. Think what you like doing on yours, then honestly consider what your company is putting on that small screen. Does it make consumers' lives better, easier, faster? Are you putting their needs first or optimizing for a marketing campaign? You'll be amazed at how many things you could do better.

Don't ignore that app everyone's using. Download it; engage with it. Do you have an Instagram account, pin on Pinterest, rent your holiday home from Airbnb? It's time you did. Need pointers? Ask your kids. Keep going: What opportunities could social, curated, and marketplace approaches open up for your company?

4. Surround yourself with the right people

Find a 'reverse mentor.' Get that interesting new hire with the funny haircut to send you snippets to guide you through the digital world. Ask your CIO or CTO to suggest likely candidates, spend ten minutes talking to them, and select whoever gave you most to think about.

Be thoughtful about your team. Get your head of HR and commercial director to identify your top digital talent. Then ask, What are they are doing? Who are we hiring? Do we have the right roles and structures? Do we need a digital officer or an "innovator without portfolio"?

5. Remember it's 99 percent perspiration

Sweat the small stuff. Get excited about your backlog of tech improvements, not just your three-year plan. What's being launched in your next release? How will it enhance the customer experience? Improving load times on your website isn't just a detail for the tech team; ease of use is something you should be passionate about.

Increase your metabolic rate. Finish your meetings in half the time. Ask how you can complete a task in one month rather than six. Favor quick-and-dirty work-arounds over purpose-built solutions. Set a culture of try, fail fast, learn, move on. And don't reinvent the wheel. One company was planning to develop its own instant communication system but ended up using Snapchat instead; it was available, free, and it did the job.



Remember, these are tips, not a to-do list. Start with one or two and see how easily they fit into your everyday routine. They may be small, but their collective impact on you and your company could be enormous. Have fun! □

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