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The Guilty Digital Leader

Jon G. Hall
ITNow Leadership Insight Column

Summer 2021

As the old joke goes, there are 10 types of people in this world, those that understand binary and those that don't...

Some people don't get the joke, and they don't get digital either. In fact, I'd go further: most people — 99.9% — don't fully get digital. Why should that be? Are there insuperable hurdles that make digital difficult? And if digital is difficult, what does that say about digital leadership? I asked some of my favourite digital leaders — CIOs, IT directors and other members in the UK home of digital leaders, the BCS IT Leadership Forum — to complete the following phrase, and to complete it truthfully: 'I'm a digital leader but...'

Their responses were revealing (too revealing to reveal their names!). They included:

- ... I have my secretary print off all my email to read it.
- ... don't ask me to use anything other than Internet Explorer.
- ... I struggle to know what digital actually means.
- ... I've never used a beige box PC.
- ... I still listen to my gut when decision making.
- ... I still think confidentiality trumps availability.
- ... I still need to physically connect with real people to solve problems.

(I do feel for that last digital leader at this time of COVID.)

Do any of these answers ring a bell? Or are you the one in a thousand with no guilty digital leadership secret?

Don't get me wrong, there's absolutely nothing to feel guilty about in not being 100% pure digital. Digital is a destination, but it's the journey too. Even accepting that many people have had their lives turned upsidedown this year, we've all come on leaps and bounds in our new virtual offices.

But has organisational leadership changed too? A recent report would suggest not.

What does digital mean for organisational leadership?

Four in 10 agree that their organisation is falling behind when it comes to new technology and close to half believe that they are not doing enough to address their digital skills shortage, digital skills that understand the new media, that accelerate processes based thereon, and that leverage shrinking distances ([http://bit.ly/ OUPreport](http://bit.ly/OUPreport)).

Organisational leadership is in a digital struggle: only 39% strongly believe that their senior leadership team has the skills and training to take advantage of technologies like AI and Machine learning, analytics, augmentation and automation, with one in three unsure where to start when it comes to developing their own digital skills.

Is there some cognitive dissonance between the traditional organisational leadership mindset and the digital organisational leadership mindset. If so, where does it come from?

The traditional business model is to restrict sharing for profit: you've got something someone else needs; if they can't build it (or do it for themselves), then you can give them access to it, for the right price of course.

For this traditional model to work, keeping it scarce has to be easy. But was it easy in the non-digital? Lock it in warehouse, for instance, or own the skills to produce it.

Digital scarcity

Keeping digital scarce is really hard.

Digital, shared once, is gone. In fact, the whole of cybersecurity, that behemoth of modern business, is what is needed to keep digital scarce. If your board's been 'in business' for a while, there's a good chance that their finely tuned business gut, the thing that makes them valuable to your organisation, is based in tradition.

So, when some lousy new-fangled zero cost sharing thingy comes out, all my intuition just goes up the spout.

For the non-digital leader, recognising the digital means recognising their intuition is shot. Evidence suggests that, even if you have a guilty secret as a digital leader, you're the most senior digital leader that your organisation has. You're the one that understands a business model based on sharing and it's your finely-tuned business intuition that your organisation needs to take its next step into its digital future.

I've an admission to make... that 'never used a beige box PC' guilty secret is mine.

Now it's your turn to reveal all.

Finish the following, truthfully: 'I'm a digital leader, but...'

When you know what it is, while you're waiting for the last participant to arrive in your next v-meet, why not start a conversation about *your* guilty digital secret.

Word association followup

My last column left you with a leadership puzzle: which words went with what in the word association.

Here are the answers:

From women:

Football: ball, crows, hooligan, competition, St Mirren.

Update: blue screen of death, complete, inform, efficiency, relevant.

Pursuit: tenacity, follow, chase, resilience, goals.

Mountain: view, top, high, plan, communication.

Leader: charisma, ethics, first, compassioante, woman.

Badge: shiny, election, honour, reward, award.

From men:

Football: sex, money, Rashford, Tottenham, word association.

Update: women, work, time, inform, tomorrow.

Pursuit: flirt, relentless, race, desire, help.

Mountain: venus, ears, summit, corporate, Mohammed.

Leader: pointer, decision, vision, value, follower.