

Photo Credit: Robbie Quinn

IN THE DIGITAL AGE IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

Technology is empowering companies to change dramatically, but don't forget the people that make it all worthwhile.

As companies undergo digital transformation, they often focus most on the evolving technologies that are making that transformation possible. It's easy to see why—the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, machine learning, automation and so on are exciting and have the potential to change work (and the world) as we know it. But by focusing on the technology itself, organizations might lose sight of the true power of transformation: the ability to create more meaningful human experiences.

Speaker, author and technology consultant Kate O'Neill says the secret is using all of that exciting technology as a means to create those meaningful experiences. Her latest book, *Tech Humanist: How You Can Make Technology Better for Business and Better for Humans*, is helping business leaders across the world rethink what digital transformation really means, and embrace a new, more human-centric approach.

"At its heart, digital transformation is about people and helping them do what they need to do, faster, easier and more efficiently. The technologies are simply tools that help companies get there," says O'Neill. "We need to be thinking much more broadly about how human experience is impacted by all kinds of technologies, and especially the emerging technologies that have so much capacity and scale in them."

O'Neill began her tech career in the Wild West of the early 90s, when people were simply exploring and experimenting to see what the internet and web could become. From the start, it was clear to her that not enough thought was going into how things worked for the humans using the technology. "People talked a little about usability back then," she says, "and human-computer interaction was a rudimentary discipline, but it wasn't well understood. Today there's a lot more awareness of and interest in the user experience. The discourse is maturing."

But there's still a long way to go.

That's why O'Neill wrote her book and why she spends most of her time now helping CEOs and other corporate leaders think about their challenges in a new way and put them into a human-centric digital transformation framework. It goes far beyond thinking that, "IoT is all the rage, so we have to think about our IoT strategy now." It's all about how to put the human experience at the center of

their digital transformation and why it's important to make those experiences more meaningful.

What Does 'Meaningful' Really Mean, Anyway?

To O'Neill, meaningful experiences are those that have depth and memorability, that are significant because of how they transcend or complement their context. Technology exists to make our lives easier and more enjoyable, but it often does just the opposite. Think of all the frustrating tech support calls you've made, or online help instructions you've tried to follow. Now think of a time where you got exactly what you needed in a timely manner and the process was painless and allowed you to print that invoice, order that widget, set up that wireless router—and move on with your life. That's memorable. And meaningful.

As businesses progress down the digital transformation path, they often cite improving the customer experience as one of the benefits of that transformation. That's a valid and worthy objective, but it's just one step on the human-centric highway. O'Neill says, "In order to really appreciate the fullness of where a company and where a brand sit in the world and how its experiences intersect with the real human experience, we have to think beyond just the moment when someone is functioning as a customer."

In human-centric digital transformation, an organization takes into account all the people they interact with, not simply customers within a specific purchase cycle. Employees are humans, partner companies are made up

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of humans, and an organization's choices and behavior can even affect humankind at large.

Even the people who may become customers in time are not all the same. Think of someone who's checking out your website on a tablet in the middle of a city sidewalk versus someone who just got an email on their smart watch while in a meeting at work.

"The more you can think of the human perspective across the whole spectrum of their experiences throughout the day and the context in which they have those experiences," says O'Neill, "the more possible it is to design experiences that mesh with those realities and provide things that actually add some utility and convenience to people and give them something that's more meaningful in their lives."

It All Starts with a Well-Defined Purpose

You can't transform your company without a clear sense of direction, which then helps you know whether you're setting the right priorities and making the right calls. The first step, says O'Neill, is defining your organizational strategic purpose.

"Most companies are in business for some reason other than to make money," she says. "A strategic purpose brings them back to that grounding and gets them thinking more in terms of, 'How do we make the world just a little bit better in this one very specific area?' When they can align the rest of the organization around that, then they can deploy technology—whether it's IoT or AI or automation—in a way that aligns with that and amplifies that mission."

Your purpose statement should include what it is your company is trying to do, and what it's trying to do at scale—distilled down to three to five words. Sound tough? It can be, but by doing the work you'll see how every word matters and has to actually represent something pertaining to your values and to why you're in business in the first place. It forces you to jettison everything else that's muddying that picture of what your company is and what it wants. The result is an ultra-clear idea that informs how and where to proceed with your digital transformation.

Your purpose statement should inform and drive every decision and every interaction throughout the organization. It should be the foundation of your priorities and strategies. And most importantly, it should be infused throughout your brand and company culture and operations at every level.

Holding to Your Purpose Transforms Brand and Culture

The next step is holding your purpose statement up against a list of your organizational priorities for the year,

the goals you've articulated, and the strategies you already have in place for getting things done. Many companies, once they measure their newly created purpose statement with their existing strategies and goals, realize that they've been making decisions that haven't necessarily been in line with their purpose—that perhaps they were a bit off the mark or missing opportunities to deliver the best experiences to their customers, engage their employees to the fullest, most effectively model data to get the most critical insights, or use technology to achieve their objectives.

Company culture can begin to shift when employees understand that central strategic purpose and begin to act that out more in their interactions with customers and each other.

"Getting clear and succinct on your purpose can inform not only brand, culture and experience strategy," says O'Neill, "but also data modeling and operations and technology deployment that amplifies and accelerates that purpose. So the entire organization becomes more efficient, more effective, more aligned. And as a result, that sense of purpose, and what your company exists to do and is trying to do at scale, creates a more fulfilling, more meaningful sense of interaction between the company and the customer rather than something that's fleeting and motivated only by money."

Use Data for Intelligent Transformation

When we talk about digital transformation, says O'Neill, what we're mostly talking about is data—the way data makes the organization smarter, more connected, more transparent. And by and large, that information is human data. It's the data that represents the interactions, interests and preferences of real people as they go through their daily lives.

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"The amount of respect an organization shows for that data is made clear in the way it approaches and designs experiences from that point forward," O'Neill says. The opportunity is in gleaning valuable insights from the data and making changes to align more effectively with your strategic purpose statement as well as with what people want.

That takes an organizational attitude adjustment or strong leadership that can guide the company through that process and ensure that everyone is willing to take that learning approach and maybe change the ways things are done—all to make sure that there's as much alignment as possible between the company and the humans that interact with that company.

Happy Humans Affect Your Bottom Line

Simply put, companies that are able to design meaningful, human-centric digital experiences are reaping the rewards. When you make your organization memorable in a positive way and make people's lives easier and more enjoyable, it's not only profits that tend to increase. Employees are more content in their work, they're more loyal to the

company, partner companies strengthen partnerships with more projects and opportunities, board members like the reports they see, and anyone who interacts with your company comes away better for it.

O'Neill holds out a lot of hope for future success in human-centric digital transformation. "There are so many ways that technology can make human life better," she says. "It's just a matter of using it correctly, encoding the right values into the algorithmic decision-making and ensuring that we're making decisions on behalf of the most people who can benefit from it. And of course I think that's possible to do in a way that aligns with business success. That's the only way it's going to take and scale."

In the past, it was too easy to define digital transformation by the benefits it would bring your organization—more agility, faster time to market, more opportunities to innovate, more streamlined operations. But it's about more than just your company. When you put those benefits into service of improving human experiences by saying, for instance, "more agility, faster time to market, etc., in order to [insert strategic purpose statement]," everyone wins.

The Power of Purpose

One of O'Neill's favorite examples of a succinct, successful purpose statement comes from Disney theme parks, which is to "create magical experiences." Those three words convey a very crisp understanding of a branded culture and approach to how Disney works.

If that statement is truly understood and believed throughout the organization and employees are granted autonomy to follow through in the most relevant way necessary to ensure that they're creating the most magical experiences, then everyone in the organization—no matter who they are and no matter what job they have—knows how to solve any problem brought to them.

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