

PERFORMANCE ARCHITECT

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IN A POST
DIGITAL WORLD



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By Terry Fewtrell

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Phone apps are the most emphatic indicator that we live in a post digital world. Gone is the time when our mobile phone was primarily a means of being able to speak to others while on the move. Today's 'smart' phone is a powerful personal computer capable linking to and leverage off incredibly powerful sources of data. The app is the means by which we personalise our mobile computing power.

It is no longer just the cranium size of homo sapiens that determines our intelligence. It is also the computing power that we hold in our hands and our ability to unleash its seemingly unbounded potential. Harnessing the power of digital computing has led us to a point where as a species we are starting to live our lives in radically different ways. It is as if we now have another brain that can interrogate any amount of data around the globe and provide us with answers and services, that we are fast learning to apply in our daily lives – and we carry this potential in our pocket!

But as profoundly significant as they are, mobile phone apps are just one of a series of menu items in the post digital world. Social media, cloud computing, Web 2 and the looming NBN are all signposts to our digital future. Individually and collectively they have enormous potential to radically change the way we think and operate as individual human beings and as members of various communities, whether that be our home lives, the footy club, our lives as employees and customers, and even our broader identifiers as Australians and citizens of planet earth.

It is, as was said 80 years ago, 'a brave new world' – only this time there is an inkling of 'species creep'. In short we seem on the cusp of profound changes to the way we live, work, communicate, think and engage with our world(s). As in most things technological we are primarily driven by the push factors – the reality that the technology is a powerful enabler. We just need to imagine the uses to which it can be put. Technology for humans is the catchcry. But if we are not to let technology alone drive us, it is all the more important that we do the 'dreaming' about the sort of world and lives we value and that can offer meaning to sustains us.

These questions are just as relevant to the organisations in which we work. Indeed one impact of the post digital world is that for many the workplace is now a very fluid concept. Life/work balance and the sashay between work and home offices are now framed in the lens of 24/7 connectivity and contact in a world that never sleeps. Our roles in the workforce are being transformed from being assessed simply against skills and capabilities for a particular role or task to our potential to make a broader organisational contribution. Roles change but beliefs, attitudes and a thirst for knowledge can be applied in many situations.

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Increasingly the digital age is shifting the emphasis further towards building and tapping the learning and knowledge of the employee. While the focus on social media applications has been largely around engaging with customers, the technology is moving us towards a focus on empowering the employee to add greater value to those customer interactions or program delivery. It seems that the focus will be less on the cost of that interaction and more on the value that can be brought to it, by the informed and motivated employee and their capacity to translate the interaction into sales, effective interventions or achievement of integrated policy outcomes.

In such an environment the term 'performance' takes on added importance and needs to be measured differently. All of this might sound fanciful and a touch unreal for some in government, but the recently released guide to encourage agencies to think about how they might utilise the NBN means this emphasis is fast becoming mainstream. The Guide document is part of the National Digital Economy Strategy and is intended as an aid to get agencies thinking about how they can apply the digital communications bonanza that the NBN will deliver.

This challenge is very much a case of getting people to think outside the square. This will likely require different types of capabilities, to imagine and then playfully ponder the scope for electronic shaping of the delivery of government services and the achievement of policy outcomes. These could include establishing a culture of openness and improvisation to facilitate online engagement and collaboration; or realigning organisational structures from being vertical/hierarchical to outward focussed and engaging with citizens. This is not unlike much of the thinking that agencies have shown themselves capable of in relation to harnessing Web 2 technology to the business of government.

Social media, Web 2 and the NBN are therefore powerful catalysts for radical change across society and specifically within government. They are about imagining the future and then making it a reality. We are fast moving past the welcome signs for the new digital world, as seen in Centrelink going cashless and only offering electronic payment of benefits or the ATO forcing electronic lodgement of tax returns. Such measures are mere housekeeping compared with building government delivery models based on harnessing the potential of digital technology.

The NBN guide gives some glimpses into that future as a way of enticing the sort of radical thinking required. Health and education are areas of considerable opportunity, delivering outreach to remote clients and alleviating the shortage of on-the-ground technical expertise. Other opportunities provide evidence of gathering data to enhance productivity and decision making, such as automated on-line plant sensing to assist optimal crop irrigation management.

In all these instances an overriding requirement for the leader and employee will be a savvy but mature sense of judgement. In the end it is not just a matter of what is possible. Rather it is what delivers the best outcome for a reasonable investment. It is simply speculation to predict organisational scale and shape in the post digital age. It is inevitable however that remaining flexible and fluid will be key characteristics, as too will be an ever quickening rate of change. In the end performance will be the ultimate measure.

Part 1 of 2.

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