

Year-end Musings on Technology







■ Hurricanes, Tornadoes and a World-Record Attempt at Mixed Metaphors

When trying to come up with useful metaphors for the business world this year, these two meteorological phenomena spring to mind. We are in the middle of a whirling cascade of change driven by technological advance, loose money and huge amounts of energy – a hadron collider of things smashing together with new elements emerging in all directions, and useful secrets uncovered.

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Never has the pace or direction of change been so fast and so unpredictable since the Industrial Revolution. It is no wonder that many business leaders seem to be reacting to this by ducking...it is what you do in a hurricane – hunker down until it is over. But it won't be for some foreseeable time before the maelstrom abates.

The vernacular that has emerged to explain this is “digital”. Overused, often misused, this word throws up some conceptual challenges. Just what is a “digital vacuum cleaner”? Sucks up the dirt if it lines up in ones and zeroes? The term has already come to be abused as a catch-all marketing term that is a positive attribute – it implies modernity. The problem is that some things are genuinely “digital” and clearly some others aren't. It is distracting and marketing sleight of hand. As recruiters that's why we are cautious when taking on searches for “Chief Digital Officers” to make sure we know which aspect of “digitalness” the client wants? What are the core attributes we are seeking, or are we just seeking someone a bit more “modern” than our fusty old selves?

Now digital also seems to create data. The two seem to be inextricably linked. If we do “digital” it leaves a trail, footprints in the sand if you will. Each footprint is represented by data, lots of it. How many toes? Pointing which way? How many

steps before it? In which direction were they? How many steps after it? Whose foot is it anyway and where has all this sand come from? On and on and on *ad nauseam*. Data about data about other data. So it is BIG – VERY BIG. Monumental, colossal in fact. So BIG we can't really measure it all and have no idea what truths and secrets it hides. We cannot see the wood for the trees at all. So we need special tools to analyse it – to search for the ingots of truth that makes supermarkets put beer side by side with nappies – sorry “diapers” in US supermarkets, because men just can't be trusted to only buy the essentials on any shopping list and the lure of the six pack is a trait that runs deep. So now, armed with our clubcards and sparks, and rewards, and points, we leave digital trails everywhere we go. Our mobile liaises regularly with the security services to ensure they also know your location (a supermarket no doubt buying beer) and whom you have been communing with and probably what about. You leave more terabytes of data about your daily life lying around than the moon-shot had capacity to store, by a very large factor. If you do this as one tiny person then what does your company do? If someone studied the data you all collectively look at from your office in a week say, how secret do you really think “Project Top Dog” actually is. Might it not be a little “guessable”? With the right tools?



Then of course you have to consider networks. Not the most transparent of worlds but once, and probably still, a world controlled by largely bearded, besandalled creatures in pointy hats and darkened caves called “lights out datacentres” (much more sexy than cave but about the same conceptually). Actually I rather like the idea of Google and Amazon caves – it’s a nice juxtaposition of the old and the new. Maybe they’ll also like the vibe? Also, copper or fibre? It is like “beef or chicken” isn’t it? Who cares really as they are both troublesome and most times unless you live in London you don’t get the choice. It is chicken for most of us. But until we all get fibre (unless little rumours about light speed over copper are to be believed) then the digital, big data world of loveliness is like London traffic in the rain – frequently bottlenecked in inconvenient places at inconvenient times for no discernible reason. The roadworks with nobody working them. Just inherently irritating. On the contrary, it is amusing to reflect that in just twenty years time we have become addicted to always on, instant messaging, searching, viewing whatever and yet when we don’t get it, it is like prehistory has collapsed into those last twenty years and we can’t imagine how awful it has been. We have always been mobile – other worlds are figments of history books imaginations surely?

Not only do we need “always on” over wires but suddenly everything has gone mobile as invisible bandwidth has expanded enormously. In fact it is probably the case that actual bandwidth is physically the same but using clever algorithms and some new science, a lot more can be squidged down an available space, the atmosphere being one of those “spaces”. Now the big question is like the age-old annual bonus conundrum “has the availability of cash led to an expansion of expenditure at a greater rate than the bonus?” The more

you have the more you use? In any event big data and enhanced bandwidth are inextricably tied together and with the technical compression of everything (the digital world) we can now get it mobile rather than only over wires. A special form of mobile “Bluetooth” has allowed our cars to electronically “absorb us” as well as for most of our household devices to do unspeakable things to each other without us knowing. Side by side with Wi-Fi we are now a mobile aerial picking up TV, radio, email, internet wherever we go. Do our devices serve us or do we serve them?

Many years ago a scientist known as Moore also coined a “law” that has continued to underpin change at a breadth and rate that maybe not even he expected. It goes something like this. “Moore’s law” is the observation that, over the history of computing hardware, the number of transistors in a dense integrated circuit has doubled approximately every two years.” Well, going beyond the processor itself, many things have followed the same basic roadmap of doing twice as much every year or two years. That rate of change has never before been experienced and it is pretty damned exhausting trying to keep up with it. The issue for business is that the rate of market change can switch in an instant – an unguarded moment. One day you are driving your taxi, being mildly unaware of what is going on, listening to Five Live happily and then Uber eat your lunch!! It doesn’t matter what you think about Uber this sort of disruption in our lives and businesses is not going to go away. Many, many people are going to have to re-think their life, skills, aims, challenges and targets. They have no choice, they are mere seaweed under a digital wave, getting ripped apart and discarded on nearby shorelines. This is the downside of digital - it is not a historically normal state of affairs and the bar has been set a lot higher for many of us. The “new normal”. Whilst we think “kids

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today can cope” - maybe they can’t and the 40 or 50 year old is even less likely to cope. So if you don’t “get digital” as one well-known Government CIO puts it – you are on the scrapheap.

A colleague of mine went on a study tour to China about ten years ago – before the whole China manufacturing shift had really cemented itself. He came back and said that he was blown away about how China was going to be the world’s manufacturing hub. It begged the question “What are we going to do in the UK then?” The answer was “look after all the old people”!! Many years ago I was also very fortunate to share a private plane trip with Sir John Harvey Jones, the “Troubleshooter”. Why and how is not relevant, but he was a deeply passionate advocate of manufacturing as a core source of national income. He was adamant we had to get back to making stuff. Principally and logically we cannot all only serve each other – one needs only so many haircuts and financial advice. With the advent of “digital” over the services sector especially, it is getting even worse. We are becoming a knowledge economy and what differentiates us from each other is what knowledge we have, what knowledge processing skills we have learned, and what we have done with this knowledge to turn it into monetisable IP. So if you are not a knowledge worker then what is left for you? Doesn’t really bear thinking about but someone has to.

To recap. We are in a storm at sea. Everything is wanting to be “digital” whether it is or isn’t. Everything we do is tracked by someone or other. We are sloughing off data like dog hairs in the summer. IT doesn’t stay in the office or home - IT is everywhere. Our devices own us. There is no time to relax at work or play. We face redundancy in a heartbeat even if our jobs have not shifted overseas. Our business is constantly under attack by change (cyber warfare later!) and the time

to respond is very limited. Sounds great eh? Orwell had no idea at all.

Some other aspects of the business world today are mere “icing on the cake” so to speak. Every day, unless your business has no Information Technology at all and no connection electronically to anywhere, you are under potential destructive threat. Not so much at the SME end because you have “jewels in your safe” that you are guarding, no, often just for teenage kicks. Because some kids can – they do. Going up the threat ladder then maybe your secret sauce recipe is being lifted by a nefarious Chinese copyist hacker as you read this. Or your customer financial data is being “Talk-talked” off your systems by organised crime, or possibly worse reputationally, by schoolkids. Whatever happened to the old blagger with a sawn-off? (He too is becoming redundant by the way.) Criminals have a motivation that is maybe stronger than yours - they are the attacker as they don’t have what you have. You have to defend yourself from people and organisations you have no connection with and haven’t normally expected and certainly do not know. Now you must assume that someone somewhere wants to destroy your toffee fudge factory!! Do you have the skills, the time or the money to defend it yourself? Of course not, but you have to find it. Hiding in the cloud won’t crack it. Nor will your insurers be happy if you have not self-protected. Often high ideals are being rent asunder by something that is so blunt and so unexpected it could happen overnight as well. I wonder if Tim Berners Lee expected any of this?

We inexorably pour more and more resources into technology today. Not only do we now sit at the hub of our devices and suck in or spew out data permanently but as we said above our devices have now caught on themselves. The internet of things, the internet of everything.



Everything connected to everything else or everybody else. A gigantic seething mass of connections. With little old “us” in the middle of it. Getting more and more limited joy from the high-speed, instant gratification of everything we want when we want it. We will become internet “diabetics” - too many hits of sugar to be able to process it. We will know as much as our pitiful organic brains can accommodate. Then the machines can truly take over.

All is not lost however. The festive upside! Technology is doing more for “third-world” have-nots than we know. Even remote villages now have cellular digital access. Medicine can be diagnosed from many miles away. Education is distributed remotely by teachers who may be hundreds of miles away. Connection to the outside world and vice versa assists understanding and dialogue. The monstrously bloated big databases of the pharmaceutical companies are making sense of stuff they never even connected before and new medicines are coming on stream. The global drug development pipeline is perking up. With every job de-skilled someone else with different skills may be able to assume an uplifted role in society or commerce. As we age as a population (pre- mass migration point this one!) then we no longer have to replace retirees by people, systems can often do it better and more reliably. Information technology is helping us to make food go further, plants be more productive, charities easier to donate to. And we still haven’t mentioned social media!!!

In my mind the jury is out on social media. I am a bit of a sceptic. I think it brings out the worst in us all often and rarely does it bring out our natural best. It trivialises lots of things. It makes us laugh at the misfortunes or straightforward idiocy of others. On the upside there are sooooo many funny cats!!

As we all go forward into 2016 my hope is that we can all give ourselves time to think

a little more clearly. We just have to do it carefully and with some altruism. Many of our worlds will change faster than we can accommodate. If you are smart and agile, and probably young, then maybe you can adapt fast enough, but don’t pretend it is ever going to be easier. Don’t think that technology improvement is always benign – it isn’t. People win and people lose. Can we look after the losers? Do we even know who they are? Can we turn these technologies to do more good than just cram the world with data that may never get analysed by anyone to learn anything.

As business leaders there are so many lessons that need to be learned from the new era of tempestuousness. Some of these might be:

- You simply cannot be still if you wish to maintain control of your life and your company. Keep swimming upstream.
- Knowledge is everything and will become your only property worth anything.
- Be very, very careful. Just when you thought it might be safe to go paddling, the sharks appear. Keep alert.
- It is never going to get slower so make sure you stay “on the grid” as long as you can – but it’s less likely to be in one job. Metamorphose. Learn to change.
- Helping your people (friends, family, work-team) to adapt is the nicest thing you can do.
- Set your IT and HR people the challenge to work together to make sense of the change that is now upon us. It is people that really matter.
- Take time out to gain rationality. Is that really sensible; even if we can do it - should we?
- Don’t abandon instinct even though there isn’t any data.

Have a Very Happy Christmas, and if by 2016 you are still lost, call Odgers CIO Group to help you find the navigator you need.

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■ **Alan Mumby**
20 Cannon Street, London
EC4M 6XD
D: +44 207 529 3973
M: +44 7887 791118
E: alan.mumby@odgersberndtson.com

Alan Mumby is a Partner and Head of the Global CIO & IT Transformation Group. The Group houses Partners with current and relevant technology expertise from each major continent. Alan's early career was spent in IT in the automotive, financial services and retail sectors. He became General Manager of a multimedia software consultancy in the 1990s, before moving to Executive Search in 1995. Alan was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he read Philosophy, Politics and Economics.



■ **Caroline Sands**
20 Cannon Street, London
EC4M 6XD
D: +44 207 529 1131
M: +44 7734 826389
E: caroline.sands@odgersberndtson.com

Caroline Sands is a Principal Consultant within the Global CIO & IT Transformation Group. She began her career in executive search in 2000 and has since developed a niche in the appointment of senior IT management executives, with a particular focus on cyber security. Prior to joining Odgers Berndtson, Caroline operated in search within the IT services and management consultancy arena where she recruited Senior Managers through to Partner level. On graduation she joined a specialist technology search firm as a Researcher and was engaged in high-level appointments for the application software industry.



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