The digital transformation trap.

Don't ignore the marathon for the sprints.

Too many organizations are powering through the sprints of digital transformation and losing the marathon. Here's why and how to run the long race.

In the digital world, we love the idea of sprints. The influence of agile certainly has a strong hand here, but the passion for sprinting goes deeper than that. It's born out of a sense of deep impatience, that the world up until now has moved just a bit too slow.

This impatience is wonderful and world-changing. But organizations are tripped up, over and over, by powering through the sprints … and not seeing the marathon.

What does it mean to approach digital transformation as a marathon? What does an organization do differently?

Running a marathon means managing your energy differently. Think of all the wonderful "energy bursts" that organizations concoct to fuel the digital journey. Hackathons. Silicon Valley visits. Innovation sessions. From a sprint perspective, these events are fully optimized. Go in – learn something, do something, invent something – and then get out. High emotional impact in a short period of time.

But when you think about them as part of a marathon, they begin to fall short. We hear over and over that excitement was rampant for the days and even weeks after such an event … but as months stretched into years, mundane reality reasserted itself even more strongly than before.

And that's where the sprint and the marathon diverge.

> In the digital age no organization can afford to be good at just ideation or execution.

Don't just power through fumes.

In a sprint, quite quickly you collapse triumphantly at the finish line. In a marathon, even after a burst of speed, you have to keep running. Is the guidance then to slow down? Not at all. But organizations do need to think more

deeply about the time before and after the energy bursts. Similar to the marathon runner, who is challenged to remain hydrated across a long period of time, organizations have to be thoughtful about the fuel for their speed bursts.

It's not enough to power through on fumes. A few critical things power any speed burst event.

Tell a clear story about the "why"

For starters, a sense of "why" is critical. A vague "we need to be more innovative" or worse, "we need to be more digital" will not suffice. In what ways do you want the organization to change, afterward? How do you want people to change, afterward?

Tell a clear story about how a hackathon will enrich your product offering. Get specific about the different behaviors you want folks to test out after they visit Silicon Valley. Make sure your employees go in with intent in mind. That's the "hydration" that keeps them refreshed through the burst.

But don't just think "intro" – think "outro." That's where the other key ingredient – a clear link between ideation and execution – comes in. Linking ideation and execution is the difference between a series of sprints and a true marathon. It's not just "how do I get over this hill" or "how do I gain ground on this straightaway" – it's moving fluidly from one type of course to another, with very different challenges.

Fiendishly, many organizations are good at one or the other, but not both.

> **Organizations should test digital approaches under "low oxygen" conditions – oxygen, in this case, being money.**

Mind your gaps.

Some organizations are stellar at generating ideas and experimenting but stop short in their tracks when good ideas need to be brought to scale. Others have a gift for executing but struggle to open the aperture enough initially to get the right ideas to the table.

Know which kind of organization you are, and strategize accordingly. If execution is the strength and ideation the gap, dial up day-to-day fluidity and inclusion to get more ideas generated and heard. If execution is the gap, examine and remove structures that prevent "risky" ideas from coming to life at scale.

Much as a marathoner cannot just be good at running under one precise set of conditions, in the digital age no organization can afford to be good at just ideation or execution.

Fatigue hits people in different ways.

Looking beyond the varied terrain, there's also the question of the race in aggregate. Marathons are exhausting. Any organization on the digital journey right now should ask itself, "Are my people fatigued?"

Organizations all over the world have been transformation-happy. We've asked people to transform a lot. Folks are tired. And now, we are asking them to do even more – to make some seismic shifts associated with digital.

Notably, the digital journey drains the energy of different populations in different ways. Highly-structured thinkers may be worn out adapting to agile. Introverts may find their energy sapped as they're asked to verbally collaborate more. Older workers are under tremendous emotional strain as they anxiously question the relevance of their technical skills going forward.

You don't want any of these groups to fall to the sidelines.

Thoughtful organizations are realizing all the different ways fatigue is manifested, and caring for their employee populations accordingly. They're catering to an array of neurological styles. They're consciously including different populations. They're moderating the intensity of digital initiatives with a healthy dose of employee dialogue. They're keeping their runners on the course.

Final question: Should you train at high altitude?

Let's say an organization has mastered energy management for the digital marathon. They've prepared for different kinds of terrain, they've worked to make their bursts of speed fit the pace of the overall race, and they manage exhaustion intelligently. Is there anything else they can do? Perhaps one more idea from the marathon world is relevant.

We often read about runners training at high altitudes – the rationale being that the race seems "easy" at normal oxygen levels, closer to sea level. There's a great lesson here for organizations. Contrary to the maximalist approach to digital transformation often deployed under what can feel like panicky conditions, organizations should test digital approaches under "low oxygen" conditions – oxygen, in this case, being money.

Constraints, after all, can be the greatest breeding ground for creativity. They're what the vast majority of start-ups have in common. It's worth asking the provocative question: "Are our digital initiatives overfunded?" To put it another way, should the organization be training at 5,000 feet?

Another, even more provocative question might be: is the goal to win the digital marathon, or, understanding that no organization has fully completed a digital transformation yet, is the goal to simply get to the finish line?

If the goal is the latter, do you run the marathon differently?

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