

THE DIGITAL IMPERATIVE

Finding the way to take IT further



An interview with
Dominic Gaynor, Chief Executive
TeamSport

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Introduction

If technology is inevitably going to continue to be the driver of significant change, then is IT infrastructure up to speed or falling behind?

In The Digital Imperative initiative commissioned by Foundation IT, organisations which are really focused on their relationship with their people, customers, and suppliers will be talking about what they consider to be the mission-critical issues to get right, and how they identify ways of taking IT further.

Their views will form a series of papers leading up to the preparation of a digital book. This is one of the interviews to be included.

Making sense of new technology

“Unless your business is pure tech, I would describe IT as an enabler, an investment to improve delivery. The focus shouldn’t be on whether new technology is more advanced than what you have, but whether it makes things better for your business.”

Dominic Gaynor, chief executive of TeamSport Indoor Karting definitely walks that particular talk.

When Covid-19 struck, his company made the decision to replace their entire IT infrastructure, front-to-back, from talking bookings on their website, customers signing the necessary disclaimer, through to providing information on their lap times, – completely end-to-end.

“The business was effectively closed during lockdown – you can’t do takeaway go-karting – and that gave us the opportunity, even though for ten months out of a fifteen-month period we really had no income,” Gaynor explains. “The thing is, if you focus just on survival, that’s all you’re going to get. You need to have belief, to have faith there is a tomorrow, and that means in order to give people confidence, you have to make sure they see you are investing in the business.



Dominic Gaynor

“We’d been looking at how we could improve our IT from the perspective of making interaction with us easier and better for our customers, and the new system has resulted in on-line booking increasing from 45% to 88%.

“But you have to be clear about why you are doing it. For us, making the customer experience better is our driver.

“I personally find some IT really frustrating when it is applied to improve business efficiency at the expense of the customer experience. I’ll give you an example. During Covid-19 we adopted technology so that people ordered food and drink from digital

menus; then it was a necessity, but after the pandemic a number of companies kept that as the only way a customer could place an order.

“That can create friction and distance between you and the customer because they feel shoehorned into a process which is manifestly for the benefit of the company.”

So how did TeamSport implement their IT transformation? Explains Gaynor: “We turned a number of our people into what I would describe as ‘IT super users’, to help address the challenges of managing the introduction and preventing the project from going wrong.

“I remember we once did a smaller upgrade with payroll software which went massively over budget and users didn’t like it either. One of the reasons was that there wasn’t a good enough understanding internally of what we were getting – a business has to take responsibility for ensuring that isn’t the case.

“From each area of the business volunteers came forward to be our IT super users, from point of sale roles to digital marketers; we have six in the team. So we had a group of our employees trained up so well that in fact they were now in a position to make adaptations to the IT and that they could train colleagues in their own everyday language.”

Gaynor makes the point that if people don’t see how the introduction of new IT is going to make their job easier, you’re



going to get pushback. “Minor things can get in the way from them seeing the big picture,” he suggests. “People are prepared to make some sacrifices to what they are comfortable with if you explain it well enough and show them the bucket of twenty other things which are going to make life at work infinitely better.

“Then they get it, but you have to devote the time to achieve that. We’ve got to keep in mind as well that people, quite reasonably, have become more used to intuitive ways of working with IT, such as their smartphone.

“If a company’s culture is exciting, that it’s about being prepared to do new things, that will be reflected by the type of people who

are attracted to the business, people who are potentially more open to different ways of working and less fearful of IT.

“Look, I think the last couple of years have also shown us the incremental benefits of using IT to make small changes as well. Our digital marketing team for example has been playing with ideas like changing the colour on website buttons to see if there is any improvement in immediate conversion rates. Can we reduce the steps in the booking process? What additional features can be put onto the app?”

“And the ability to automate using tools for analytics mean we can show data in a way everyone in the business can understand. What was previously enterprise level stuff is now available to smaller businesses, which means a company of any size can have better, quicker information, delivered live on a dashboard.”

“Artificial intelligence is a topic which fascinates me and if I’m honest, scares me as well,” says Gaynor.

“There’s a really interesting book, Rise of the Robots, which predicts that instead of mundane admin work being replaced by AI, the bigger impact will be on professional jobs because, as an example, AI can ingest all of the volumes of tax law and produce the answers required.

“We already have an element of AI with our chat bot which responds well to about one third of questions and we make sure there’s a real person monitoring it who can step in.

“Of course the irony is that we’re a truly analog business which is really on top of technology.”

That extends to the very nature of the product offering and how it is delivered. “By the end of 2023, fifty percent of our karts will be electric and we will be fully electric by 2027,” Gaynor explains.

“The technology we’re introducing didn’t exist four years ago. There is no noise, no smell, the karts are cheaper to run and there’s instant torque. Just running all of our existing extraction equipment today costs more than electrically powering the carts.

“Initially we were worried about the reaction of the real enthusiasts, but it’s been favourable. The technology means the electric karts have a ‘push to pass’ button which provides a three-second boost for overtaking, a feature which isn’t possible with the internal combustion engine karts.

“We also introduced CCTV covering all of our tracks, instead of having to have marshals in position, which means we could deploy more resources where customer service is experienced such as front of house. And we are putting in universal chargers across our forty sites so that customers can charge their vehicles while they’re racing an electric kart.

“We’re looking at how we can put in devices like smart meters for utilities at all of our sites, which means we can see centrally what is happening at each location in real time. The granular

detail means we can identify if a tap on a particular sink is continually running at one of our sites. It's important from an ESG perspective because if you want to make something happen you need to be able to measure it, and technology is the enabler. Before would get a bill for a particular site and have to try and find out why there was a sudden spike in cost.”

As well as expanding into mainland Europe, TeamSport are also reinvesting in the UK business, adding additional leisure activities such as indoor mini-golf.

Another offering is an F1 racing simulator on which customers can select the preferred car and circuit with up to four taking part in a race. “It also means we can run championships between different sites,” explains Gaynor, “and customers will stay longer when they visit.

“A company out performs its competitors if it recognises the importance of innovation. It's an imperative because if you don't, you risk becoming another Blockbuster. You have to keep an eye on macro environment trends, to seek out what new things are out there.

“For us, it means our digital imperative is intrinsic to making the transition from a karting business to a leisure experience provider.

www.team-sport.co.uk

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About DECISION magazine

First published in 1988, DECISION magazine reflects the business lifestyle, the trials and tribulations, the hopes and aspirations of business owners and directors responsible for businesses with a turnover of £5million and above across the south of England.

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