

# THE DIGITAL IMPERATIVE

Finding the way to take IT further



**An interview with Mark Bramwell  
Chief Information Officer  
Said Business School, University of Oxford**

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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.

# Why evaluation is a pressing issue

“Technology is equally exciting and daunting. It’s whether your outlook is to see that as an opportunity, a positive challenge. And technology moves so quickly, we haven’t really seen the start of it,” says Mark Bramwell, chief information officer at Said Business School, University of Oxford.

“The conversational capabilities of chat GPT demonstrate that technology in the form of artificial intelligence is advancing faster than policy. How do organisations evaluate and implement new technology in a safe framework when it hasn’t been fully developed yet?

“You could say it’s the digital equivalent of cart before horse. We’re talking about proliferation in, for example, artificial intelligence, experiential reality, and the juggling act is how to create a secure environment to prove there is a practical use for it. There is still an element of thinking it’s new and shiny, so we should have it. But why make an investment in something if you don’t know how and where it is going to add value?”

“There is another reason why evaluation is a key issue,” says Bramwell. “We have to be compliant with the requirements



*Mark Bramwell*

relating to processing data which are black and white, binary, but new technology doesn't give a jot about existing rules or even cyber security. So how do we create that environment for experimentation? Nobody has come close to providing a definitive answer.

"It's an unpalatable position because it means IT professionals feel they are going back to the 1980s when their role was often seen as blockers not facilitators. And we don't want to return to a time when people responded to that by trying to work around IT protocols and processes.

"How do we pragmatically and proportionately assess risk? Current research shows that higher education is in the highest attack sector because we have to be open access - we are all about sharing knowledge from every source possible.

"And with a hybrid approach to work we are also delivering IT strategies which provide more choice of access. An analogy I give

is that I want all members of my team to be the equivalent of a maitre d', not a waiter, in that they make the effort to know the customer and what they like, and can suggest a way to utilise a particular technology or suggest an alternative.”

“The \$64million question is always whether something will deliver organisational benefits or whether the reality is that it is technology for technology sake,” muses Bramwell. “An organisation has to acknowledge the need to carve out some space for trialling innovation. If something doesn't go any further, that isn't the same as failure. The challenge is how do we find the time and resource when the pace of potential technological change means we are running at full tilt just to keep the lights on.

“Digital transformation has to deliver on the basis of no one size fits all. Within an organisation as a consequence of hybrid working there are roles which have to be undertaken on site, those where there is no need to be at any given location – web development can be done anywhere in the world – and others that will require a blend of both. The introduction of new IT has to take all that into account as a prerequisite.

“That means the role of the chief information officer has to take on many more different flavours as a consequence. It is one of the very few in an organisation which has a truly holistic view of the entire operation because it touches every person. That requires broader shoulders but it's a privilege to be in a position to apply IT to the benefit of the organisation and its stakeholders.



*Said Business School*

“The CIO will have an equal voice on the executive. Although I lead on technology my remit includes conversations about sustainability, people and well-being, as well as policies such as hot desking and remote working.

“The catalyst for the successful implementation of IT is to have first built relationships, getting out there to talk to stakeholders, including our students about their learning; the knowledge of practical possible pinch points enables IT to deliver solutions, not different problems.

“The school has a five-year plan to move up from being one of the top ten in Europe to being in the top three, with an IT

strategy in place to support that. Our existing physical locations won't be able to accommodate all the expansion so there will be more of an online presence, and IT gives us more opportunity with digital learning to tailor pricing to individual countries for example.

“In a former power station building we will be opening a residential global leadership centre in 2025 where c-suite delegates will be tackling world-scale problems to come up with a tangible, practical solutions.

“Our proposition as a business school is not to educate the next generation of management consultants but to develop the world's next generation of business leaders who will make a positive impact on society.”

“I mention this,” says Bramwell, “because it demonstrates why a different mindset then has to be applied to the implementation of technology. I oversee an IT development agenda to get the most out of our investment but really it's a business development agenda to deliver the IT which needs to be applied to deliver what is required for the school to achieve its goals.

“This is an eight hundred-year-old university, and you could argue Oxford came to be the institution it is by not changing, but there is a realisation that for an organisation to be sustainable, re-invention is a continual process with the customer at the heart of it. From an IT perspective, I see my customers as our students because they are fee-paying and have an understandable

expectation that the product – and experience – lives up to the reasons they chose our school. Of our MBA students, ninety-seven per cent are from sixty-two different, countries overseas with a fifty-fifty gender split.

“Of course the brand will always be a draw but to have that as your prime thinking would be likely to lead to complacency. The world is a smaller place now so a customer has more choice and is becoming more selective. They want to see an organisation investing in technology because it shows forward thinking, an up-to-date place to learn, which is what they want to be involved with.

“And increasingly those technologies have to be a seamless enabler; our ‘I Transform’ initiative is identifying how we can speed that up from strategy through to implementation.

“I would suggest our values – respectful, excellence, transformational, purposeful, collaborative, entrepreneurial – condition our thinking about technology. We look at IT through those lenses and then translate IT complexities into simple business language.”

[www.sbs.ox.ac.uk](http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk)



## About Foundation IT

Providers of a managed IT infrastructure service (IaaS) that helps creates and enables growth in uncertain times.

Our solutions include Managed Infrastructure, Secure Cloud Storage, Disaster Recovery, Managed Desktop & VDI, Managed Backup, Incident Management, Compliance Management and Security Managed.

A sample of the clients who trust our safe-hands infrastructure service include Enstar, Rackspace, Russell & Bromley, St John Ambulance, Cynergy Bank, Bam Nuttall, Applied Weighing International and Zoological Society of London.

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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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