

DIGA - Digital Innovations for Growth Academy

Adopting Digital – Digital Dilemma’s Encountered in the Entrepreneurial Context



Note:

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Disclaimer:

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Introduction – The Digital Infiltration

The digital economy is developing rapidly worldwide. It is the single most important driver of innovation, competitiveness and growth and it holds huge potential for European entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Tanuri 2010). New digital trends such as cloud computing, mobile web services, apps, smart grids and social media are radically changing the business landscape, reshaping the nature of work, the boundaries of enterprises and the responsibilities of business managers and owners. These trends enable more than just technological innovation as they spur innovation in business models; business networking opportunities; the transfer of knowledge and access to international markets; spark a new entrepreneurial spirit and provide increased choice for consumers and by extension a more intense competitive landscape for businesses. Given this, entrepreneurs and owner-managers in SMEs are pushed to adopt the role of e-leader to ensure their organisations are innovative and competitive. Le Cornu (2011) highlights the rapid technological advances made in the last ten years, most notably in the advent of social networking platforms, sharing, promoting and discussion about products and services on social channels to a wide community in real time. In fact, the cross-cultural effects and opportunities of the social hyper connectivity brought about by social media and mobile devices are often underestimated (Weinberg, 2009). New technologies are ever emerging which create a more complex and varied array of communication tools the entrepreneur or owner-manager must be aware of and engage with to have conversations with their customers. This is particularly the case in the small firm where the owner-manager is the business and is the primary marketer, sales person and company spokesperson.

Insufficient digital education amongst entrepreneurs in relation to eBusiness and ICT has led to uncertainty around its use and implementation (Nath et al. 1998; Chapman et al. 2000; Smith and Webster 2000; Moussi and Davely, 2000; Elsammani et al. 2001; Lewis and Cockril, 2002). This claim is backed up by findings by the Irish Chamber of Commerce (2007) who found that in many cases “companies ignore...opportunities offered by ICT”, “eBusiness is often confused with having a webpage”, “the opportunities offered by ICT are underestimated” and finally eBusiness is “not considered a priority and by entrepreneurs”. It is advanced that entrepreneurs in the main are not aware of the total range of services which can be exploited via digital. Due to the lack of digital knowledge, digital skills deficiencies and a lack of appreciation of the contribution that it can make to their business small firms require assistance in this area (Digital Agenda for Europe: A Europe 2020: European Commission 2010); (ACCA 2010); Williams et al., (2010); ICT, E-Business and SMEs (2006).

What lies in the midst of this digital evolution- digital jargon and applications?

Small firms must align the advances in digital technologies to a more dynamic and technically engaged consumer or buyer who are increasingly characterised as being a more ‘wired’ generation using technology that is evolving every day (Weinberg, 2009). Consumer

segmentation is based on a classification of the buyer on a spectrum from the digital native, the digital settler and digital immigrant or based on the speed of adoption of users to digital media 'digital leaders', 'digital laggards'. Overall the ever increasing 'net-generation' of consumers are so immersed in a networked world of digital technology, they behave differently, have different social characteristics, different ways of using and making sense of information, diverse approaches of researching and hold different expectations of what products and services should deliver, thus placing new pressures and challenges for small firms in terms of how they engage digitally or otherwise with the net buyer and influencer in the purchase decision. Digital is now the first touch point for the consumer and a channel where the consumer has greater control over what they see and when they see it. Moreover digital technologies facilitate and encourage consumers to interact with each other and influence non-customers (Sashi, 2012). With greater use of digital media there is a stronger need for the small firm to generate 'a digital footprint' which becomes known and accepted by the more 'wired' consumer.

Social media channels are many and varied, from websites to blogs, social networking sites (Facebook, Myspace), virtual social worlds (Second life), virtual game world; wikis; podcasts etc. Despite the foray of tools available digital marketing is not just about understanding and unlocking the underlying technology, but rather about understanding people, how they're using that technology and how it can be leveraged to engage more effectively with people, internally in the firm and externally in the marketplace (Ryan and Jones, 2009). Social media is part of the digital technologies that enterprises exploit to increase their presence on the internet, improve marketing opportunities, communicate and interact with partners, customers and other organisations, and to facilitate collaboration and knowledge-sharing within the enterprise to enable business to grow and innovate. The term social media is primarily linked with interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss and modify user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Examples for social media platforms include blogs (Blogger, Wordpress), microblogging (Twitter), collaborative wiki-projects (Wikipedia), forums (Harley Davidson user groups, Microsoft MSDN), professional networking sites (LinkedIn, Xing), and social networks (Facebook, Google+) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Cortizo et al. 2011). While the previously named applications are dominated by the use of text, further applications are dedicated to other forms of media, like photographs (Flickr, Picasa), videos (YouTube, Vimeo), or music tracks (last.fm, ccMixer). Social media today has also expanded into virtual worlds (Second Life) and online gaming (World of Warcraft, Farmville). Recently, a new field of applications in social media is based on the usage of mobile data and the fast adoption of smartphones (Nomad Social Networks, Foursquare). That said, it is important to acknowledge that digital technologies go beyond marketing and sales and the diversity of social media tools have potential to positively impact on all aspects of the business to radically transform and enhance the efficiency of traditional inbound firm process activities and outbound distribution and customer service tasks.

Digital consumers think of digital technology as something akin to ‘oxygen; they expect it, it’s what they breathe and it’s how they live’ (Brown, 2011) – so the challenge for the small firm is how to ensure the correct supply of oxygen is in constant supply, when and where consumers expect to breathe it in?. Therein lies the quandary for start-up and established enterprise how to constantly provide this supply of oxygen to the increasing heterogeneous digital marketplace and chose the most effective from the ever increasing selection of digital tools available. This decision is made in the midst of an increasingly cluttered digital media market characterised by technical jargon and discussed in a non- contextual manner creating many dilemmas for the owner-manager in terms of what digital to use and for what purposes. To make this digital decision and investment a more realisable one for the entrepreneur information must be sought on the issues which are at the source of the dilemma's in order to generate relevant polices on how to increase both the quality and quantity of digital engagement and usage in small firms.

The Digital Dilemma: Some Insights– An Empirical Cross Cultural Study

The Digital Innovations for Growth Academy operates as a Strategic Partnership from seven member states and is involved in the enhancement of digital competencies of entrepreneurs and owner-manager through the provision of appropriate small firm context digital training programmes. The development of such training programmes is underpinned by an informed understanding of the current status and practices of digital in the entrepreneurial context. To achieve this objective an empirical research study was undertaken with a sample of entrepreneurs and owner-managers to ascertain the predicaments they encounter in the adoption of digital and what their needs are in terms of addressing these quandaries. The multi country study (United Kingdom; Ireland; Slovenia; Spain; Lithuania; Bulgaria and Finland) incorporated the administration of an email survey consisting of a semi structured questionnaire to a sample of entrepreneurs. The semi-structured questionnaires explored how entrepreneurs and owner-managers engaged with digital technology, their digital practices, the dilemma’s encountered in using digital technologies, and if they considered they had digital technology (hardware) and/or digital skills gaps. The surveys were distributed through Survey monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) and 239 responses were obtained and the profile of respondents by country is presented in Table 1.0.

Table 1.0 Breakdown of Respondents

| Partner | Entrepreneurs |
|--|----------------------|
| (UK) The Women’s Organisation | 85 |
| (Ireland) University of Limerick | 36 |
| (Slovenia) EIM, HRDC – Economic Institute of Maribor, Human Resource Development Centre | 28 |
| (Spain) Inercia Digital | 38 |
| Social Innovation Fund (Lithuania) | 40 |
| (Bulgaria) Bulgarian Centre for Women in Technology | 12 |
| Total | 239 |

The majority of respondents, 56.9%, were in operation for more than one year, with 36.8% of those being in business in excess of four years and a further 20.1 % operating between 1 and 3 years. The average age cohort of the respondent is between 33 and 45 years and this varied slightly by country where the average age of the entrepreneur in the UK was 40 years; Bulgaria was 36 years; Slovenia was 45 years; Ireland was 39 years and in Spain the average age was between 40 and 45 year. Moving on to the profile of the enterprise, data showed that the majority of firms were categorised as micro (employing up to 10 persons) as was the case in the UK, Ireland and Bulgaria where the vast majority comprised of micro firms with many employing less than five persons. The Slovenian sample saw a more mixed cohort in terms of employee numbers where some firms employed over 20 employees and a few employing over 100 persons.

The respondent firms across the survey and within each country predominately operated in the service sector and in the main in general retail (22%) followed closely by firms offering education and training services (20%). The depth of response on the service sector allows for assembling more comprehensive understanding of the issues relating to this broadening and increasingly important economic growth sector in all countries and moreover the use of digital technology is more pervasive and critical to the successful growth of small service firms. The majority of enterprises sell into consumer markets and secondly to commercial markets. Common trends emerged across respondents in the partner countries as to the concerns respondents held about using digital technology across the partner countries and these resonate on the personal or internal resources constraints and secondly with the technology itself and its functionality.

Dilemma 1: Uncertainty on and lack of knowledge on the emerging digital tools suitable for their enterprise.

In the majority of cases, respondents referred to the future of digital by listing individual tools and platforms which they were familiar with prioritising tools such as Twitter; LinkedIn; Facebook. To a lesser extent the cloud, mobile technologies, blogs, were mentioned as tools that would dominate and there was a notable absence of more integrated digital processes or systems for application across and between functions.

Furthermore, and in reinforcing the lack of understanding of the future of digital a number of respondents in each country also suggested that they 'were unsure' did not know' what ones would dominate their business over the next few years. Consequentially, the results demonstrate somewhat narrow interpretation as to the emerging technologies and their likely impact or benefits that they could potentially deliver to their enterprise. In addition to the above reasons were a number of citations which are linked to the lack of current status of digital in respondent firms and thus explain the lack of understanding of future digital trends - of 'not sure how to'; 'not yet'; 'time restraints' 'not relevant yet for my business';

'not very confident with social media'. This is an important learning from the results as it shows the need to increase the baseline level of knowledge and understanding of the applications of emerging technologies and how to leverage their potential to gain a competitive advantage in the entrepreneurial. These outcomes suggest that greater attention should be afforded to moving entrepreneurs from their comfort zone to the 'go digital' mind-set of exploring more of the emerging digital tools with a view to aligning and integrating them with existing ones to develop a cohesive and consistent marketing message.

Dilemma 2: Digital Skills and Capabilities Deficiencies:

Linked to and perhaps as a result of the previous point, challenges relates to the reliance of the entrepreneur or owner-manager as the primary driver or digital 'specialist' in determining the adoption or not of digital. This in addition to the lack of employee digital skills to develop digital content and to maintain digital platforms compounds the complexity of the digital decision. Of the 205 respondents to the question on training, 67.8% had not participated in any form of digital technology related training which is worth noting given the increase in planned level of activity entrepreneurs and owner-managers have for digital media. Some common trends and themes emerged in the results of the 32.2% who had participated in training, for instance most popular topics were Facebook; LinkedIn; Website development, where programmes were undertaken on a part time basis. Of the respondents who had participated in training, the most common mode of delivery was via a blended learning approach which combined traditional classroom and online and followed by traditional classroom and mentoring which indicates the importance of the one to one interaction of the participant with the person delivering the content. Generally, respondents were very satisfied with their experience of the training (37% rating very satisfied and 41% rating their experience as satisfactory). The training received was located and delivered primarily from the trainers or consultants own organisation. Of note is the trend towards individual topic or module specific courses as opposed to an integrated programme incorporating a suite of related digital technologies and their collective and interrelated use.

Dilemma 3: The type of digital tools adopted

Overall 69% of respondents had developed a website for their enterprise with the majority of respondents updating them monthly (32.1%) and secondly, 22.7% indicated that they updated their site sporadically. A near to an equal percentage of respondents indicated that they updated their site weekly (20.9%). So whilst responses on the content of the sites was relatively good and show that respondents are committed to having a website, the responses on the frequency of updating their sites is less encouraging.

Of the respondents who had a website, in the majority of cases the respondent themselves had an input to the development of their site but also employed external commercial website developers to complete this task. To a lesser extent assistance from family, friends or free sources of assistance in the development of the site was mentioned. A few (8

respondents) indicated that they used existing website templates such as Square Space, Smiling Wolf and Google templates as a means of developing their sites

In relation to the use of their site, the majority of respondents indicated that 'product service description' (65.3%) and 'company background information' (65.7 %) were the core pieces of information included on their website. This was followed by 'customer enquiry forms' cited by 42% and 'information on key personnel/owner-managers in the firm' was included by 33.9% of respondents. It was positive to see that 30.5% had incorporated 'testimonials from satisfied customers' which are an important and impactful source of selling and promoting the business. Overall, the information displayed or available on the websites was factual in nature and covered the key profile and contact details and given the nature of the markets and emphasis on the consumer would suggest that greater opportunities exist for more creative and active two way engagement in marketing, sales and customer research with customers and other external stakeholders. While taking into consideration the need to recognise cultural differences the analysis would suggest that the depth of use of the enterprise website beyond a promotional tool requires attention to ensure respondents address market needs and be competitive in how they showcase their business and, internally that they are recouping a return on the financial investment spent on engaging consultant to develop their website. Consistent across all firms was the low level of adoption of blogs, slide share and wikis etc. This suggested low level of usage highlights untapped potential that should be examined by entrepreneurs at any stage of business start-up and growth.

Moreover, these findings raise questions as to what is the perceived function(s) and capabilities of the website, and how strategically are respondents utilizing or leveraging all promotional, e-business; e-commerce; selling and researching functionalities and capabilities that a website can return to the small firm. They indicate the need for entrepreneurs to be educated to view a website with the ability to 'wear many hats' or act as a multifunctional marketing and selling tool. A website needs to not just exist, it needs to perform to attract visitors, educate them and convince them to purchase and become advocates for the product and business which necessitates integrating search, social media, content, blogging, and other social media platforms.

Dilemma 4: An absence of focus or clear objectives and targets for the outcomes of digital tools: The majority of respondents indicated that they did not have specific goals for digital media bar one exception where, in the UK 57% indicated they had specific targeted offline objectives. Responses in Bulgaria were evenly divided where 50% of respondents had objectives and 50% had not objectives for digital media. Whilst in comparison in Ireland 54%; Spain 67.74%; Slovenia 75%; Lithuania 72% of respondents indicated that they did not have objectives for digital media. The reasons for the lack of objectives were reflected in the following sample of comments: '*do not have time*'; '*we just decide on social media choices as we go along*'; '*don't know what to set or how to set targets as difficult to measure*

what we get from it'; 'follow competitors'; 'mainly sell via sales reps and attending trade shows'; 'haven't given it any thought yet as just at the early stages'; 'not sure how to'; 'not yet'; 'time restraints'; 'not relevant yet for my business'; 'not very confident with social media' which are clear markers of the practical time constraints and knowledge deficiencies of what digital and social is about that educators need to take cognisance of in the design and delivery of a digital competency programme. So it is reasonable to infer that without goals the activities and expenditure of resources may not be utilised in an effective or efficient manner and thus may not be returning the most optimum results for the entrepreneur. Moreover, given the lack of objectives it is problematic for entrepreneurs to benchmark or compare the performance of digital activities over time as a foundation or starting point is absent. This is a central function for entrepreneurs to spend time on and while the respondents are practising digital, using a range of platforms, engaging in social media and digital technologies for the completion of a range of promotional tasks, the results also suggest that this occurs in many instances in unstructured ad hoc manner without direction of measurable and quantifiable objectives.

Dilemma 5: Lack of integration of digital across and between functions.

This ad hoc and fragmented nature of digital practices is further explained when the results of how digital media are integrated with offline media are reviewed. The respondents suggest that they integrate online and offline media, for instance this was the case for 57% in the UK; 58% in Ireland; 58% for Bulgaria and 68% in Spain. In contrast, 52% of respondents in Lithuanian and 67% of respondents in Slovenia indicated that they did not integrate online and offline media. The lack of integration was due to *'the inability to do so, lack of appropriate hardware technologies to do so; insufficient time to do so; do not understand the benefits of integration or how it can be maintained'*. The results would suggest that digital for many respondents is viewed as a silo activity, but it's critical to align social and digital tools with specific enterprise objectives coupled with clearly defined metrics and measurement timeframes and timelines. Therefore as digital is, and will become an increasingly important component of firms' marketing strategies, it will also be more complex and time consuming and this requires a focussed and planned strategy as opposed to digital emerging or being reactive task to respond to competitive behaviour.

Dilemma 6: Don't know what works, why or how!

The vast majority of respondents indicated that they did not measure the benefits or impact of digital tools adopted in their enterprise. Indeed there was an overall low response rate to this question in each country which in itself infers that it is a topic not highly engaged with by respondents which is a concern and barrier to the sustained implementation of digital technologies endorsing the findings of the literature and policy documents. The area which had the higher rate of measurement included "hits/visits/page views" which represents the beginning of the sales funnel - awareness, but is not diagnostic of purchase.

Essentially, it would appear that 'one fits all' or a very general observation or scanning of the results of digital media takes place without a real interrogation or benchmarking of the

results to determine if they are cost effective and productive. These findings are important in the context of the lack of objectives as without objectives any measurement is problematic and it is difficult to understand what is being measured and what action can be taken that will have constructive learning and feedback to guide future more optimal digital decisions.

Demystifying the Digital Dilemma's – Some Suggestions

As advances in technology continue, so do the range of definitions that describe digital and its multiple applications, which can cause confusion for the non-technical person, who in most instances in the small firm is the primary influencer on the decision of digital. This leads to the challenge of identifying what digital skills or 'e-skills' and competencies are required for a small firm to effectively and efficiently adopt and use digital. In line with the every burgeoning mass of literature and articles on digital technologies is the myriad of technical phrases which can be daunting if a person does not have a technical background. These concerns are compounded by the lack of knowledge about digital technology, exposure to information overload and their ability to keep up to date with social and digital media advancements.

The opportunity for trainers and educators challenged with the role of enhancing digital competences in the entrepreneurial context is to create awareness of the broad array of digital tools relevant to entrepreneurs but not frighten them with information overload or too complex technical terminology when describing digital tools, but rather assist them enhance digital usage in a more effective manner and not dilute impact by using too many tools in a fragmented manner. Any competency programme should ensure entrepreneurs are aware of and equipped to best develop a suite of social and digital tools from an increasing array of choices. Further they must be able to balance the tensions between quantity and quality of tools to determine which ones are appropriate to the consumer needs and allow differentiation from competitors.

An interesting point emerges in relation to the percentage of respondents who indicated that they have a learning curve for digital technologies and this is cited by respondents who are more active in their implementation of digital tools. This could suggest that those who are engaged in and active in digital practices are open to learning more about digital technology as a business and marketing tool and indeed may more readily see the need for competency enhancement in this area, relative to entrepreneurs who are not as active in the digital practices. Consequentially, digital skills programmes should ensure programme content and outcomes are developed to cater for the different digital user profiles and not by firm size or sector characteristics as the primary criteria for participating in a digital competency training programme.

The following are some suggestions on remedies for consideration is to demystify the language of digital and its many components for the entrepreneur and ideas for the development of digital competency training and development.

Digital Dilemma Resolutions:

Addressing the digital knowledge gap: by providing an appreciation of the digital landscape and the array of digital tools and techniques relevant and appropriate for the evolving stage of the enterprise. This comprehension must include an explanation of the language, terminology and acronyms adopted when discussing digital. It is important that language does not cause a barrier or is viewed as a deterrent or results in a lack of understanding of digital as it applies to the small firm context.

Establish the timely and internal firm context and readiness to adopt Digital: this necessitates the completion of a review of the personal (entrepreneur and employees) and enterprise (stage of development and vision) perspectives. This review will ascertain the digital skills objectives for the enterprise and should be directed by the ethos of the entrepreneur, where they want the business to go and within what time frame. The completion of the internal firm digital knowledge awareness audit should include the completion of a digital knowledge, language, skills and practices needs analysis. Once a vision has been established and future skills requirements defined, the enterprise needs to conduct a self-assessment of their existing skills. The aim is to compare existing skills levels to desired levels of proficiency and determine the skills gaps - entrepreneur and enterprise level

Creating a digital focus and set of objectives: small businesses need a road map outlining the integration of an effective digital strategy into their business model which is guided by a clear set of measurable objectives and targets. In a fast-changing digital environment, businesses need to consider very carefully their priorities and business goals and how digital can be leveraged to enable the achievement of these objectives. In essence objectives for digital need to be guided by and embedded in and analogous with each other.

Create a Road Map - with a digital strategy enterprises increase the probability of success, return on investment will be higher and it enables the entrepreneur to forecast and measure performance on a continuous basis. If small firms engage in digital without a clearly defined and time framed digital strategy they are in danger of losing market share and diminishing brand value and lost sales opportunities. The process of developing the strategy is an important learning experience for the entrepreneur and owner-manager and will guide a more focused and targeted investment in people, digital resources and time. Ultimately, a digital strategy provides direction on how to maximize the business benefits of digital initiatives in line with the enterprise vision, goals, and opportunities.

Manage Monitor and Measure: These results indicate the need to educate entrepreneurs and owner-managers about the ultimate value (financial and non-financial) of digital for their business as a means of achieving a competitive position, generate knowledge on how to establish objectives and determine what kind of tracking measures are required to implement before the commencement of a digital media campaign. Objectives may include

generating revenue, reducing customer service costs, shifting brand sentiment, improving operational efficiency, cultivating customer relationships or gleaning an insight into target markets. The reality of the imprecise science of digital tools measurement must be communicated to entrepreneurs and that while they may not be able to predict the final outcome of the digital activities, they should define the scope of components of the process of developing and implementing and monitoring the digital tools. For many owner-managers the value of adopting e-business strategies is contingent on their being able to see direct benefits from any investment in such technologies. This is particularly the case for very small firms where the expectation is in immediate increases in sales or reductions in costs.

Concluding Comments

Entrepreneurs that do not embrace the digital technological revolution are unlikely to maintain their competitive edge and may struggle to survive. This may impact some industries more than others, but it is unlikely that any business will be able to ignore digital technologies over the long term. The ever changing digital marketplace and a more digitalised consumer places pressure on entrepreneurs to scale up on their digital skills in order to compete in an increasingly highly digitalised consumer marketplace. There are many low cost digital and social media tools available to entrepreneurs which if used in an integrated manner provide beneficial customer relationship management (e-CRM) systems that can secure a competitive advantage and enable positive customer advocacy and customer responsiveness strategies.

However, such tools must be managed and supported with a well-considered integrated digital strategy that is part of and is supported by the broader business plan or strategic plan. That said with the benefits come dilemma's and fears which are embodied predominately in a lack of knowledge and understanding of the array of digital technologies available, their functionalities and applications and the benefits accruing from them or the return on their investment. In addition to the lack of knowledge and perhaps as a result of is the accompanying scarcity of digital savvy skills and competencies on how to apply, implement, manage, monitor and measure the results and benefits of digital technologies.

The first stage in overcoming the many questions entrepreneurs possess about the adoption of digital technology lies in the demystification of its language, technical jargon applied and the perceived complexities associated with digital. Subsequently, digital awareness is about developing skills and knowledge in digital technology as a process and thus the instruments or array of digital technologies per se are not as important as what they are used for (purpose) and how they are used to effectively achieve that purpose. In the small firm the purpose resonates around a determination on how they can enable owner-managers can connect with consumers, to build relationships and ultimately drive sales

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