

OPINION

Bridging the digital divide: Equipping Business School students for the future of work



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As we reach the midterm point of the semester, the experience of teaching a course on Digital Transformation at Texas A&M International University's A.R.

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School of Business has solidified an idea I find critical. In today's highly dynamic business landscape, where technology is reshaping every aspect, understanding digital transformation is not just a prerequisite but a survival skill. This is particularly true for business school students—our future business leaders, innovators, and entrepreneurs.

In an era marked by perpetual change due to rapid technological advancements, understanding the complexities of digital transformation has transitioned from being an optional area of expertise to a fundamental skill set.

Interestingly, the business landscape is shifting from a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) framework to a BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) framework. While VUCA focused on the challenges of speed and lack of predictability, BANI introduces nuances that underline fragility, anxiety, and the inherently chaotic nature of our modern ecosystem. In this BANI context, digital

transformation serves both as a coping mechanism and a strategic instrument. It enables organizations and individuals to become more resilient, reduce anxiety through data-driven insights, manage non-linearity through agile methodologies, and make sense of the incomprehensible via analytics and Artificial Intelligence (A.I.).

Understanding digital transformation is more than just one more class to be completed for business school students looking to become the next generation of business leaders, entrepreneurs, and

innovation drivers. It's a critical tool for survival and success in a world increasingly defined by BANI challenges. Therefore, the curriculum must be designed to inform and empower students to be marketable and adaptable, equipping them for a world where change is the only constant.

What is digital transformation? To clarify, it's not merely integrating digital technology into all business areas; it's a foundational change that aligns business, technology, and strategy across the board to deliver optimal value to customers and stakeholders. While teaching this semester, several key themes have emerged, such as exponential technologies, methodologies, the role of leadership, and the importance of digital governance and data management. Among these, the urgent need to close the digital skills gap is evident. The talent pool must be diversified and upskilled to meet the increasing demands of the digital age.

Methodologies play a pivotal role in successfully implementing digital transformation projects. Understanding the basic principles of digital technologies like cloud computing, A.I., or blockchain is essential, but it's only the starting point. Methodologies such as Business Model Canvas, Lean Start-up, Agile, and Design Thinking help you apply these principles to create effective, impactful, and actionable projects.

These frameworks provide students with the tools to identify opportunities for digital transformation, align them with key performance indicators (KPIs), and formulate a strategy that coordinates with the mission and objectives of an organization. Each methodology offers its unique approach, from Lean Start-up's emphasis on rapid prototyping to Agile's focus on iterative progress, Design Thinking's human-centric problem-solving to the Business Model Canvas's structured framework for developing new or documenting existing business models.

Digital governance and data management are increasingly becoming the backbone of agile, secure, and efficient organizations. They go beyond just IT policies; they deeply interlink with an organization's overarching strategy, risk management, and ethical positioning. Take, for example, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Compliance isn't just a regulatory requirement but an opportunity to enhance consumer trust and bolster brand reputation. Likewise, data governance is critical for ensuring ethical and secure data usage, permeating every department and process, and facilitating cross-functional collaborations.

Poor data management can result in costly breaches, just as the absence of digital governance can lead to failed digital initiatives, costing money, consumer trust, and long-term sustainability. Therefore, boards and executives must evolve governance strategies to adapt to this rapidly digitizing landscape. They should ask specialized questions concerning digital assets, data management protocols, and cybersecurity to provide a holistic, enterprise-wide view of digital and data-related risks and opportunities.

Leadership is another pivotal principle for digital transformation. It's not just about knowing the tools at your disposal but also about developing the leadership skills to deploy them effectively. A toolbox filled with cutting-edge technologies and methodologies is only as impactful as the leaders driving them. Effective leaders must navigate uncertainty, make data-driven decisions, and recognize when to pivot strategies based on new information or changing circumstances.

Leaders in digital transformation must also excel at embracing change, encouraging innovation, and promoting a culture that values both results and the journey of experimentation and discovery.

These skills are particularly crucial for steering organizations and human resources through the complexities of a digital age defined by perpetual change.

Future leaders graduating from business schools should be well-versed in using digital transformation as a strategic advantage. In an ecosystem rife with disruption, these individuals must be prepared to drive change effectively. Failing to teach these skills could leave them ill-equipped to face the challenges and opportunities of today's business environment.

To bridge theory and practice, student groups in my class are assigned to develop a comprehensive Digital Transformation Strategy for a local business as part of their final project.

They will specifically look for companies in the initial phases of their digital transformation journey or those that have yet to start. This project offers students a unique opportunity to apply the theories and methodologies they've learned and provides businesses with actionable insights for optimizing their operations and achieving strategic alignment. In this win-win setup, students get real-world experience in digital transformation projects, and local businesses get a step-by-step plan to improve their digital operations.

As we transition to a post-Pandemic world, the importance of digital transformation continues to escalate. For business schools, the goal is clear: continually update the curriculum to equip students to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving digital landscape. The sooner we incorporate these changes, the better equipped we'll all be to handle future challenges.

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