Journal of Management Information Systems & E-commerce
December 2017, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 1-3
ISSN: 2334-2382 (Print), 2334-2390 (Online)

Published by American Research Institute for Policy Development
DOI: 10.15640/jeds.v4n2a1
URL: https://doi.org/10.15640/jeds.v4n2a1

The Viability Triad: Desirability, Feasibility, and Sustainability as the New Strategic Decision Imperative

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Strategic decision-makingis critical to the performance of any organization. Winston Churchill described decision making in the following way, "A (person) must answer "aye" or "no" to the great questions which are put, and by that decision (s/he) must be bound." While organizational decisions aredifferent from the stakes Churchill faced as prime minister in a war, they are important to all organizational stakeholders. Increased competition, complex stakeholder relationships, and rising costs amidst budget challenges are just of few of the conditions that can complicate the process.This paper develops a framework for understanding the values involved in strategic decision making.

Desirability

Overzealousness could possibly have beento blame. Definetly, behavioral trends were misdiagnosed and misunderstood. While Apple has been incredibly successful understanding and shaping consumer preferences compared to the firm's peers (particularly during the last decade of Steve Jobs' leadership), the biggest failurein Apple's historyis almost entirely explained by misunderstandingand misdiagnosing desirability. When it was released in the mid-1990's Apple leadership expected the Newton, for which the phrase *personal digital assistant* was coined, to make handheld computing commonplace. By 1998 the Newton was completely removed from Apple's product line. Consumers could not see why they might need an expensive gadget that did not do the same job as well as the paper notepad. It was much too far ahead of the consumer adoption curve. Only the very earliest adopters were interested. Fast forward to the development of the iPhone and the iPad. While the iPad was developed first, it was the iPhone that leadership chose to lead with in 2007. Understanding behavioral trends at the time helps to describe why. Personal cell phones were already common when the first iPhone was introduced. What was uncommon was the sleek touchscreen interface and seamless vertical integration Apple popularized. Apple capitalized on the existing behavioral trend of cell phone adoption while radically reimaging the quality of that experience. The firm had found the ideal balance for introducing valuable innovation into a ready adoption curve. The market responded by making Apple the world's most valuable company. A similar effect takes place in other organizations across the industry spectrum. Leaders run the risk of diluting resources, unnecessarily increasing complexity, and disconnecting from reality when they support programs that are not grounded inrelevant behavioral trends. This can look like passively permitting outdated models or services to persist despite indications of their waning popularity. It can also take the form of embracinginitiativesthat don'thave clearly articulated launch customers and discernably interesting adoption size or impact potential.

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***Great Question* #1: Will it be valued?**

- Is it anchored to relevant behavioral trends?
- Will a lot of people want it, often? If not,
- Will a smaller segment pay a premium and depend on it?

Feasibility

Envisioning new horizons (and the necessary risk this entails) is different from committing resources to infeasible pursuits. The goal of the feasibility question is to determine if the intended outcome is technically possible, utilizing accessible resources, within a determined timeframe. Anything outside these characteristics is considered less feasible. The University of California's all digital online campus provides a compelling feasibility warning. By 2016 the already cash-strapped university system had poured nearly $10M into an initiative that returned only a fraction of its investment. While the MOOC system envisioned was possible at the base level, it struggled to provide (and depended on) an educational experience that would attract both matriculated and non-UC students. To be sure, the initiative did attract some initial supporters, however,but it largely failed to meet experience demands relative to its cost and non-UC student enrollment never materialized. The approach burdened resources that were already is short supply, relied on non-UC student demand was miscalculated, and comprised a timeframe that significantly overshot estimates. The university system finally absorbed the cost within its budget. In the ideal flow, feasibility stages are progressive: opportunity, validation, development, scale, and refinement. The converse tends to be emotionally charged and follows a regressive pattern, taking the form of: euphoria, concern, panic, disillusionment, blame. Leaders can look to each of these trajectories as helpful indicators. The feasibility lesson is to ground and validate an opportunity before euphorically committing resources better leveraged elsewhere.

***Great Question* #2: Can it be done?**

- Is the desired experience technically possible?
- Can the needed resources be accessed?
- Is there appropriate advocacy for adoption?

Sustainability

When Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes commented to Dr. Watson "You see, but you don't observe" he provided a valuable window into understanding sustainability. Seeing an opportunity and understanding that it is feasibleis not enough to determine viability. It is critical to understand what gives an idea staying power –an approach that generates attractive returns, is repeatable and resource responsive (physical, intellectual, and environmental), andis difficult to imitate (if unwanted). Leading organizations like Unilever, Toyota, Du Pont, GE, Patagonia, Johnson & Johnson, Henkel, IKEA, P&Ghave successfully positioned sustainability as a strategic imperative. This is largely due to two key insights. First, flipping the observation focus from how to drive down costs alone to how to improve efficiency has delivered the benefits of improved profitability, durable processes, and competitive barriers while utilizing less resources, in more responsible ways. Second, they set a tone in their value chains that ripples into the approaches of their partners and suppliers. A more agile, responsive value chain is better able to leverage resources and cut out waste. Encountering fierce competition, some are tempted to trade sustainability forshort-term (and short-sighted) returns. However, in the long run, this tends to produce inferior results. A laser focus on sustainability is more likely to result in significant returns in the long run.

***Great Question* #3: Should it be done?**

- Will it generate attractive returns?
- Is it repeatable & resource responsible?
- Is it difficult to imitate?

Clarity, Despite Complexity

An abbreviated definition of viability is *likely to succeed*. In today's economic climate, leaders cannot afford to approach decisions with anything less in mind. This does not mean they should cease innovating (or trying to innovate). The opposite is true.Those efforts should be done increasingly*well*. For his flaws, Churchill was quite prescient when he described the need for decision-makers to respond to the *great questions*. Three questions in particular bring needed clarity to what can seem like murky decision-making waters.

- Desirability / Will it be valued?
- Feasibility / Can it be done?
- Sustainability/should it be done?

Answering "aye" to all of the above is more likely to produce outcomes to which leaders will gladly be bound.