



Leading in the Information Age

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Over the last 30 years the world has seen one of the most significant shifts in human history - the shift from the industrial to the information economy. Like the shifts before it – from feudal to mercantilist, and from mercantilist to industrial – this latest shift has brought with it a sea change in terms of access to knowledge and information, in terms of what is valued as capital, how economic activity is structured and has impacted the basis of competition between nations.

This global information and knowledge society has been driven by the democratisation of the internet and the proliferation of computers, the “Cloud” and mobile telephony. These developments have profoundly changed how we conduct almost every activity in our daily social and business activities. Equally notable has been the steady decrease in the cost of computer hardware, mobile communication devices and broadband connectivity, not only for government and big business, but more importantly for Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and individuals. The result has been a paradigm shift in the way that communication between entities (individuals, businesses, governments) occurs and in the manner in which information is disseminated, accessed, manipulated and consumed. This shift has even a profound impact on social culture and introduced a multitude of new terms to the technology, management and business jargon, both in the academic and casual usages.

However, many leaders of public and private sector institutions, from middle management to top level executives, are not fully aware of the strategic opportunities that the current ICT paradigm presents. New ICT-enabled frameworks allow for the re-thinking of the borders of the organization, the revolutionisation of business models (think

Kodak vs. Flickr – when last did you go to a store to print a photo?) and the opportunity to effect multiple simultaneous transactions efficiently.

When persons in consequential leadership positions do not possess a deep understanding of the technology, or an ability to clearly communicate how the technology developments can enable the achievement of organizational goals or a national vision, sustainable development is put at risk.

As a case in point, let us look at the issue of natural disasters. The Caribbean knows well the cost of natural disasters, and the years, sometimes generations that it takes to recover fully from an event (think of the volcano eruption in Montserrat). Imagine the scale of the issue should there be an “internet disaster”. What systems would we start to try to put in place at that time when, (for e.g.) an external service provider – say Google or the Florida-based Network Access Point (NAP of the Americas) - denies service (due to say a natural disaster in the US); and a Regional Prime Minister is then unable to communicate with his / her Attorney General?

If we as nations, put our children on ICT learning platforms, but have no say into the platform (i.e. no meaningful understanding of the architecture of the internet on which the platform is based, and further no ownership stake at the state level of this basic infrastructure) - then we court disaster. What if the platform, through no fault or action of ours becomes unavailable? How do we begin at that point to think about starting to find a solution or an alternative?

ICT managers do not believe it within their purview to make those kinds of decisions. Disaster professionals do not feel they know enough about the strategic ICTs matters to

strongly opine. The vicissitudes of the political process and generally short timeframe in office has lead politically motivated leaders to shy away from taking decisions which have long term implications or impacts which cannot be seen within the political timeframe.

And so we collectively agree that no one is going to decide; to lead. In so doing, we collectively make a very definitive decision to court disaster. This cycle must be broken.

The time is now, while we have not yet had such eventualities to face, for business and national leaders to really think deeply about the priorities for the current and future development of our economies and about the competencies and assets that we must nurture as a people. We must be led by leaders who have applied themselves to understanding the times and can proactively lead our captains of industry and the state sector to think about... “what if”? We must begin to understand what are the costs of action and the consequences of in-action. Leaders must demand that we strategize a proactive response and eventually build capacity to turn these threats into opportunities for growth in the national and Regional interest.

This requirement is squarely in the lap of leaders, because such issues are not ICT problems. They are not challenges only for the disaster risk management professionals. These are sustainable development issues which require a bold and informed kind of leadership to squarely address.

Business Sustainability

We must recognize too that transnational undersea fiber cables represent market access highways which make it as easy for a domestic consumer to purchase product from a North American or UK firm as it is for that same consumer to purchase product from the

physical retail outlet around the corner. This means that there is a leak of financial resources out of our economies, particularly to firms who do not support our financial system through taxation, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives or employment.

Domestic businesses, on-the other hand, have not (by and large) taken up the internet challenge to make their goods and services available on-line. This places the domestic private sector at a significant disadvantage in the global competitive landscape and skews the benefits of technology development to extra-Regional, more established, non-domestic players.

The Regional Mandate

The Region needs to introspect and determine, from an informed state, what position and role

will technical connectivity of its islands and economies play in the vision it has for itself moving forward. What role will interconnectivity play in facilitating functional CARICOM integration? What role will it play in helping islands coordinate relief efforts post natural disasters? What role is there for technology and communication connectivity in enhancing intra-regional trade? What role will it play in helping to promote Caribbean cultural products (music, dance, literature and design) abroad?

Fully understanding the impact of the global change from the industrial society to the information society will require leaders to take the time to learn of the implications, opportunities and threats. It will require dedicated State ICT institutions that have greater permanence and are less subject to

the political vicissitudes of the day. It will also require a concerted and collaborative effort among telecommunications companies, banks, civil society (including international groups such as ICANN), traditional businesses as well as governments to make the change.

Innovative startups which bring to bear customized applications and platforms which encourage intra-Regional exchange also have the potential to make a significant contribution.

Finally this will take a significant dose of political will. It will require at least one nation in the Region to lead the way and define and implement pro-ICT policies at the business and state levels which the other nations can follow.

Leaders wanted.

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