

The Digital Mindset

Learn From the Past, Challenge Assumptions, Lean into the Future



Contents

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Introduction.....	3
Focus on the Future.....	3
Make the Leap.....	4
Acknowledge Competition.....	4
Prepare for Change	5
Welcome a New Vision.....	6
Become Customer Centric	6
Ask the Right Questions	6
Maximize the Power of Data.....	7
Manage Risk, Experiment, Iterate.....	8
Incorporate the Minimum Viable Product.....	8
Structure for Success.....	8
Monitor Trends	9
Collaborate for Buy-in.....	10
Inspire Innovation	10
Provide Space and Safety.....	10
Recognize Accomplishments.....	11
Meet .orgCompanies.....	12

Introduction

Throughout history, people's inventions have changed the way that they work and, more significantly, the way that they think. Harvard Business School recently introduced a new program called ["Leading in the Digital Era."](#) The university promotes the course like this:

"... today's business leaders are neither digital natives nor technology experts, technology is critical to their ability to keep a business competitive and drive growth. They must be able to harness technology to build organizations that are agile, resilient, and sustainable. That imperative... demands a new level of strategic engagement with technologically enabled possibilities, a new level of collaboration, a new leadership model, and often a new organizational culture."

Harvard's initiative affirms that as technology reshapes business, it is also redefining culture. To successfully navigate this new environment, CEOs and their teams must think and behave in ways that maximize the use of technology to seize opportunities, address challenges, and solve problems. In other words, they will need to adopt a "digital mindset."

Focus on the Future



Today's leaders are the last generation of executives with a firm foot in the analog world.

A 2019 study by Korn Ferry found that the average age of CEOs across industries was 59 years old. That makes most of today's leaders the last generation of executives with a firm foot in the analog world.

Are we suggesting that this group needs to begin sharing on TikTok, typing with their thumbs, or coding HTML? Not at all. A digital mindset has more to do with attitude than ability. The way people behave is as important as the technology they use. It is even possible to maintain your personal distance from social media and still be a digital thinker.

.orgSource has studied the impact of technology on organizations throughout our 17-year history. During the last five years, [Sherry Budziak, CEO and Founder](#) and [Kevin Ordonez, President and Managing Director of Digital Strategy](#) have made positioning organizations for success in digital markets a priority. To grow expertise, they organized think tanks, conducted research, and wrote [two books](#) on this topic. In the process, they identified a constellation of skills we call [Association 4.0](#).

A digital mindset encompasses many of those attributes. It is a way of seeing your organization's activities that puts the focus on future potential over past performance.

Make the Leap

Before 2019, many organizations were not considering a digital transformation. Post-pandemic, there is almost universal agreement that up-to-date digital platforms are a critical component of doing business. On the other hand, some leaders are still unconvinced that success depends on changes that reach far beyond systems.

When .orgSource supports clients through digital transformation, the first discussion we have concerns the focus of the journey. We explain that adding software and skills and using that technology does not equal integration into the digital environment. It only gives you the tools to get there. There is a significant knowledge gap between being digitized and digital.

Gartner, the information and technology research consultancy, [makes the distinction like this](#):

Digitization is the process of changing from analog to digital form.

Digitalization is the use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities.

The end game of digital transformation is not to master new systems and software, it's to help grow relationships with members and your team in new, exciting, and cost-effective ways. A digital mindset provides the strength to make that giant leap.



Digitalization is the use of technology to change a business model.

Acknowledge the Competition

Never in the history of associations has competition for market share been more intense. New professional development companies, like [Udemy](#) and [HealthStream](#), enter the education arena almost daily. These competitors have the resources, the industry intelligence, and the technological expertise to pose a real threat.

Yet, there is still reluctance to adopt business practices that are compatible with besting this competition. In April 2021, [.orgSource surveyed over 100 association leaders](#).

Seventy-three percent agreed or strongly agreed, that the pandemic was accelerating trends requiring changes in the role of associations, their underlying business model, and their strategic direction. Also, 54% agreed that shifts in the environment might threaten the viability of many groups.

Here is the disconnect. A surprising number of participants were not considering any significant post-pandemic change. Just under half, or 40%, did not foresee any long-term revisions to their product

portfolio. Almost 60% believed their membership models would resume pre-pandemic patterns, and 41% saw in-person networking opportunities returning to the status quo.

“There is no safety in clinging to the familiar,” Budziak cautions. “The digital marketplace demands that you learn from the past, challenge assumptions, and lean into the future. Associations must redirect their reliance on tradition to an approach that is future-oriented and transformational. We can’t ignore the competition because it surrounds us, and we can’t apply outdated tactics.”

“At this moment,” Budziak advises, “the transition to a digital mindset should be at the top of every leader’s agenda.”



Technology and customer preferences constantly evolve.

Prepare for Change

Business as usual was never a strategy for peak performance. At best, it guarantees mediocrity. Technology and customer preferences constantly evolve. In a recent presentation at [.orgCommunity’s](#) Innovation Summit, Jamie Notter, Co-Founder at Propel, cautioned, “The toothpaste is out of the tube. We can’t look back. Reaching for excellence means studying the future.”

[.orgSource, Senior Consultant, Amy Williams](#) made this observation: “If organizations aren’t prioritizing tech and how their target audiences are engaging with the digital world, they are missing

tremendous opportunities to create brand awareness, grow revenue, and advance their missions. A digital mindset is an absolute imperative in today’s business.”

“Even [farmers are jumping on the digital bandwagon](#), using TikTok to educate people about growing crops!”

“There is a huge need to abandon the idea that ‘members don’t like change.’ It’s not true. What they don’t like is negative change. When you make beneficial changes, they love it. Look at the shift from paper-based to electronic renewals. I don’t think many members would prefer a return to stamps.”

Although change is challenging, reinvention stimulates growth and excitement. Organizations that adopt a digital mindset open a window to a fresh perspective and increased enthusiasm.

Welcome a New Vision

As part of the research for their books, Budziak and Ordonez interviewed over 50 leaders in the association community. Some participants were association executives and others were CEOs of companies that provide related products and services.

The authors selected interviewees based on their cutting-edge approaches to business and their use of digital strategies. One significant finding is that the same qualities that help entrepreneurs build thriving start-ups also characterize digital thinkers.

Both groups use the following approaches to remain relevant in the face of evolving industries.

Become Customer Centric

It's human nature to view the world through your own lens. That explains why it is tempting to jump to conclusions about what members want without evidence to confirm their actual preferences. In the days before technology made it easy to gather information about constituents, that narrow perspective might have been understandable. Today, it is guaranteed to stunt organizational growth, or worse.

Williams recommends, "Now, more than ever, the focus should be on meeting consumers where they are with the information they want. This is a big change for organizations. The best strategy isn't promoting what you want to share, [it's giving customers what they need](#) and preparing them to address the changes they face. Marketers have many tools available to take the online pulse."



It's human nature to view the world through your own lens.

Customer-centricity begins with data. This is an area where tools and behavior align. To discover relevant facts about members, user-friendly systems such as an AMS, LMS, CMS, and analytics and reporting software must be in place. Everyone in the organization, from the most junior employee to the management team, should be using those platforms for problem-solving and understanding member needs.

Ask the Right Questions

Training on digital systems is critical. But using data to understand your constituents depends on asking the right questions. Leaders must promote curiosity and reject boilerplate solutions in search of customized benefits, products, and services.

The most [powerful questions](#) ask "what if" instead of "why." Author, [Warren Berger](#), describes his concept of "the beautiful question" like this: "A beautiful question is an ambiguous yet actionable question that can begin to shift the way we perceive. . . and might serve as a catalyst to bring change."

A beautiful question can initiate a structured process of problem-solving, moving from exploration to action. The beautiful question prompts a business question which, in turn, reveals the appropriate data questions. For example:

Beautiful question--

What if we could provide ongoing, specific, personalized programs and support to our members to advance their careers and achieve their goals?



Business question--

How do we gain an intimate knowledge of our members so that we can discern and provide what they need?

Data questions--

What data do we currently have available?
What data would we need to acquire?
How can we secure that data?
Do we have the tools to evaluate and leverage the data?

beautiful questions initiate a structured process of problem-solving.

[.orgSource, Managing Director of Business Strategy](#), notes that the tools are available to everyone. "Associations may imagine that they don't have sufficient data in their current systems," Rice observes. "But most organizations have a wealth of untapped information, it's a matter of knowing how to find it."

You don't need a data analyst to begin this type of problem-solving. [Sharon Rice](#),

Maximize the Power of Data

Using data to solve problems and develop member programs based on objective information rather than opinion is the essence of digital thinking. Data-centered strategies keep organizations on track, even in volatile circumstances.

Faced with a difficult decision, or a crisis, using data to game plan [scenarios](#) is a powerful stabilizer. Rice notes, "Scenario planning fills you with information and an understanding of the possibilities. It gives you some control when the external environment is rapidly changing, and people are looking to you for leadership."

Scenario planning should answer these six questions:

1. Why are we engaged in planning now?
2. What factors are driving uncertainty and how impactful will they be?
3. What are the potential short, mid, and long-term consequences?
4. What are the possible scenarios we face?
5. What internal and external key indicators will show that we are moving closer to a scenario?
6. What are the operating strategies for each scenario?

Manage Risk, Experiment, and Iterate

Scenario planning allows for calculated risk. But few strategies are perfect. It can be difficult to abandon an initiative that isn't working or has outlived its usefulness. Digital thinkers take a ruthless approach to freeloading programs that fail to deliver ROI. They have the courage to halt unproductive activities, despite political expediency, and the patience to experiment and iterate until they arrive at the right solution.



Ordonez cautions, “You have to ask whether the juice is worth the squeeze.

Digital thinkers take a ruthless approach to programs that fail to deliver ROI.

The excitement of acquiring new digital tools can cause people to over-engineer simple problems. But evaluation should always come back to the ROI, be it financial or cultural. Ask if the proposed effort will deliver a worthwhile return.”

Incorporate the MVP

The minimum viable product is a concept that digital thinkers and entrepreneurs use to keep new initiatives streamlined and promote member centricity.

The MVP is the brainchild of [Eric Ries](#), author of [“The Lean Startup.”](#) Ries turns product development away from outcomes and makes it a journey of discovery. He defines the MVP like this:

“The MVP is that version of a new product which allows a team to collect the maximum amount of validated learning about customers with the least effort.”

The MVP is the first of several iterations. It should be robust enough to attract users and demonstrate the product's value. Subsequent models will incorporate changes based on consumer feedback. The idea is that what you build gets validated by the marketplace and you invest resources where there is evidence of a return. This concept can be applied to everything from creating a website to developing a practice marketing manual for members.

Structure for Success

Any organization can use data, scenario planning, and the MVP to improve operations. But to realize the full benefits of digital thinking, structural changes may be needed.

“A strong endorsement from the top is non-negotiable,” Budziak observes. “The biggest barrier to digital thinking is imagining that anything ‘digital’ is owned by someone else. Every part of your organization has a role to play. The CEO must be the first digital evangelist. Leaders articulate the vision that compels teams to follow. Executives who defer this responsibility to the IT staff or the management team convey the message that digital thinking is compartmentalized and not a company-wide priority.”

A digital strategist, digital innovator, and digital driver are three other important roles. These responsibilities should be filled by employees who demonstrate an interest and ability in problem-solving, innovation, and discovering new ways to provide better member service. People who are



admired and respected across the organization are most appropriate for these roles.

- **A digital strategist** monitors emerging trends and technologies and envisions how to leverage these developments in the future.
- **A digital innovator** is a disruptor who explores new strategies for using technology to promote growth and increase ROI. Innovators have the charisma to overcome legacy mindsets and introduce improved ways of working and new business opportunities.

A digital strategist, innovator, and driver form the hub that drives the organization toward innovative technology.

- **A digital driver** builds trust and collaborates across the organization. Drivers act quickly and shift direction when needed. Ideally, the driver is also the head of IT.

Monitor Trends

This team forms a hub that drives the organization toward creative approaches to technology. [Dawn Briskey, .orgSource Vice President of Client Services](#), has guided multiple organizations through digital transformation. She described the digital team’s potential impact like this:

“In a constantly changing world, associations need staff and member leaders who are curious and connected to diverse groups, and who are using the most popular technologies. They need a process to share and vet ideas they see elsewhere, and consider how these concepts can be used to grow their organization. A digital strategy task force or committee can also tap into younger members to understand their perspectives and what is possible. They can brainstorm about what is successful outside of the association world and offer a channel for all voices to be heard.”

Filtering goals through the lens of overarching market trends can add purpose and depth to new initiatives. Current events and ideas empower strategy by putting it in sync with influences that are shaping the marketplace today.

“Watch what the for-profit companies and universities are doing to serve their constituents and be creative,” Budziak advises. “For example, many companies are using virtual reality, and the technology is gaining traction as an immersive collaboration tool. Try low-cost, quick-win solutions. If they don’t work, move on.”

Collaborate for Buy-In

This willingness to consider diverse opinions and ideas is a hallmark of digital thinking. If attitudinal and behavioral changes are a heavy lift for your group, one path to buy-in is to involve everyone in co-creating the process. Share your vision for the organization broadly and identify how staffers contribute individually to those goals. Then invite ideas and innovation. Don't limit creativity. Get everyone accustomed to brainstorming.

Collaboration is a powerful tool for success. If the team isn't invested in an initiative, enthusiasm dies. Many factors contribute to positive engagement. An innovation study conducted by Amanda Kaiser found that the CEO's openness to new ideas has a huge impact on an organization's ability to change and adapt. Aligning employee goals with organizational goals is another way to motivate teams.



Get everyone involved in brainstorming.

Association communities are accustomed to working toward consensus. That skill is an advantage when innovation is on the agenda. The influence of the group can create the momentum necessary for change.

Inspire Innovation

Use the energy of an enthusiastic team, ready for a more deliberate and member-oriented approach, to make innovation a priority in your culture. Give teams the time and space for original thinking and reward initiative. Budziak advises:

“Teams that are encouraged to work creatively learn to confront disruption and solve unfamiliar challenges. During the pandemic, digital-first organizations were able to quickly realign priorities. For example, The [Society of Critical Care Medicine](#) has had a remote work policy for 10 years. Not only could they keep working during a crisis, but they were able to broadly disseminate information and coordinate doctors to be redeployed to New York City. SCCM has a digital-first culture and can realign easily due to the organization's infrastructure and policies. They didn't miss a beat serving their important industry.”

Provide Space and Safety

Time and trust grow innovation. Trust is the currency of effective leaders. When people believe in you, your leadership potential soars. A team that feels supported in their work and respects their leader will want to deliver outstanding results. Trust creates the psychological comfort for employees to bring new ideas forward. Making operational space is the other essential component for innovation.



Trust is the currency of effective leaders.

2020.

The hub, guided by Moss as association president, makes a space for vigorous discussion and brainstorming that is separate from the daily administration of the organization. Moss uses this analogy to describe the setup. “I and a group of members are tinkering in the metaphorical garage across the parking lot from the association.”

“We were looking for gaps in practice as well as seeking to identify exciting experimentation that was occurring in our community,” Moss notes. “Our goals were to speed up the product development cycle and to identify new thinking that would help our discipline leap forward.”

To keep operations moving smoothly, Moss created a “go team” to supervise activities such as courses, a coaching program, and the many virtual logistics related to the pandemic. Moving innovation into the garage allowed that headquarters group to continue seamlessly serving members.

Recognize Accomplishments

“To build a team of digital thinkers,” Budziak recommends, “create that metaphorical garage and begin the tinkering. Make problem-solving, creativity, and technical ability performance standards. Ask questions, use data, run scenarios, and take calculated risks. Above all, don’t allow fear of failure to trump bold experiments.”

“When your team meets a challenge with unique solutions, recognize and reward their success. Offer more than a thumbs-up. There are many ways to demonstrate gratitude. When you make your appreciation meaningful, employees will reward you with impactful results.”

“Our best source of sustainable competitive advantage is human creativity,” Budziak observes. “To give our constituents what they certainly will demand in the future, we must leverage that power. Digital thinking sparks innovation, and digital leaders have the vision to imagine and deliver the services members will need for success as their professions are reshaped by technology.”

Meet .orgCompanies

.orgCompanies is dedicated to supporting associations as they undertake transformational change. We offer strategic guidance, practical solutions, and access to a vibrant network of executives and education to strengthen associations and the value they provide. Three related organizations form the .orgCompanies brand:

- **.orgSource** provides strategies and data-driven solutions that reflect our deep understanding of the challenges that associations face and our knowledge about approaches to overcome them. Our success spans fifteen years and represents more than 200 client engagements. From developing an integrated strategic plan to supporting the implementation of significant projects and initiatives, .orgSource prepares associations for a digital future. The company's experienced advisors are ready to meet your needs. [.orgSource](#)
- **.orgCommunity** connects members to a vibrant network of executives, entrepreneurs, and strategic partners dedicated to shaping the future of associations. Members have access to collaborative events, small group learning opportunities, and peer-to-peer counsel with trusted allies, mentors, and friends who share a passion for excellence. [.orgCommunity](#)
- **.orgWorx** draws on our extensive knowledge of the association and nonprofit community to help employers identify outstanding talent. .orgWorx specializes in executive search, interim staffing, consultants, temp to Hire, and Contract/Temporary Staffing. Our team will plan, strategize, search, screen, interview, select, and create a job offer. For a fee, we will be your source for all your HR Recruiting needs. [.orgWorx](#)

Discover our philosophy of Association 4.0 leadership in our [books](#): *Positioning for Success in an Era of Disruption* and *An Entrepreneurial Approach to Risk, Courage, and Transformation*.

We're eager to share .orgCompanies' passion for designing customized solutions to meet the toughest challenges. Tell us your story.

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