Cultivating Your Opinion to Make Better

TECHNOLOGY DECISIONS

BY GRAHAM BINKS

Every business is a tech business today, yet few of us work in the tech industry. For most managers, the technology options are bewildering. If you're charged with growing any business, a robust knowledge of technology will help you make better decisions.

Lifelong learning is always easier when we're excited about the topics and can see the potential fruits of our research, consultation, and reading. Technology is a field where opinion is divided on everything from "Why doesn't it work?" to "How does this work?" In addition, while every business today relies on technology, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that only 5% of the working population is in the tech industry. Even for this minority, it's a massive field—there are over 100 career paths available in "tech."

You may be a leader with no interest in learning about the nuts and bolts of technology, a die-hard techie, or—most likely—somewhere between the two. Regardless, you simply can't make your best technology decisions without a solid understanding of the potential, based on your knowledge and the opinions you develop from learning.

BEGIN WITH A QUESTION

If the idea of mastering such a foreign field sounds bewildering, take comfort from knowing that the first steps are straightforward if you begin with the right question.

That question is twofold:

- In what ways do you need to improve your business?

- What is the best role for technology to play in this improvement?

"Improve your business" could mean having better products, better information around the design and delivery of those products, streamlined transactions, and a host of other improvements. As a general assumption, any improvement will only be valued when it is evident to your customer in some way: a better outcome when they buy; an easier process for finding, selecting, purchasing, and receiving your goods; or better assurance that you've got their backs if something goes wrong.

At the end of the day, this comes down to how the customer perceives your offerings, what outcomes you target, and how you get comfortable with a path to achieving those outcomes.

TAP INTO THE CUSTOMER YOU KNOW BEST—YOURSELF

How does your customer perceive your products and services? When you spend all your professional time within your business, it's easy to lose the forest for the trees. You know the thought you put into improving that call center experience, how much you invested in the new online ordering system, and how often you asked customers for their feedback. You're so close to the details that it's easy to substitute opinion for the actual customer's voice.
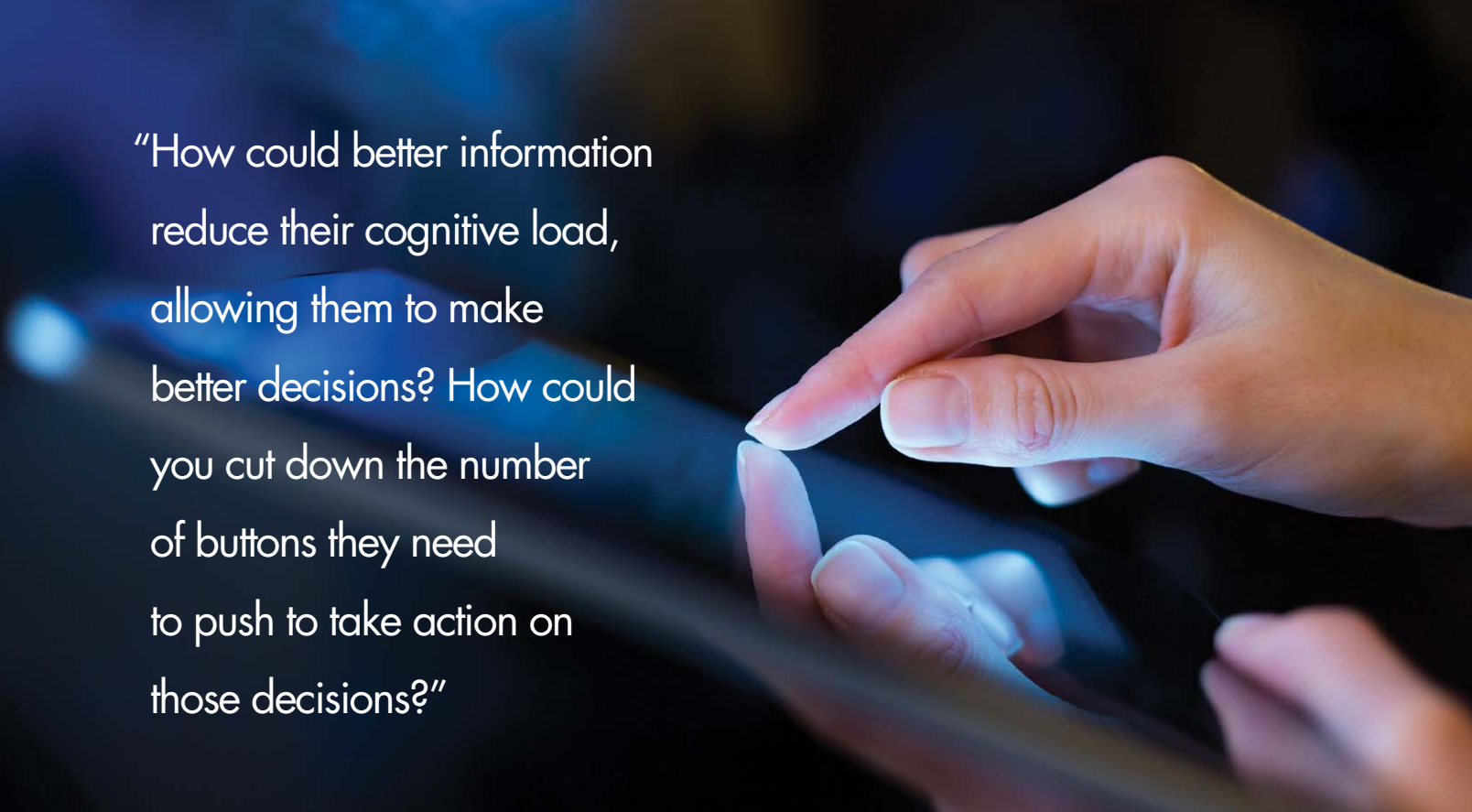
If you've ever been surprised by a customer's candid feedback, you need to be deliberate about removing your internal hat and walking a mile in your customer's shoes. Not once or twice a year, not at quarterly offsites, but every day. When it comes to understanding how technology can help a business upgrade, we all have a qualified opinion—because we've all been bombarded with technology solutions to problems we did (or didn't) have.

When you're seeking insight into how to change your customers' lives, try starting with your own experience. Pick up a pen right now and list out the ways that technology has changed your life over the past 5, 10, or 15 years.

Choose some routine daily tasks in your personal and professional lives and ask yourself how you do these differently now as opposed to before. Here are some helpful triggers:

- How do you communicate with friends, family, and colleagues?

- Where do you purchase goods?

- Entertainment?

- How do you allocate time throughout the day? What did that look like in prior years?

- What new roles exist in your business? What roles have ceased to be? Why?

When you've listed a few tasks, see if you can note the innovations that brought about these changes. Sure, you can start with your smartphone, but go deeper where you can,

> "How could better information reduce their cognitive load, allowing them to make better decisions? How could you cut down the number of buttons they need to push to take action on those decisions?"

such as new apps, fancier gizmos, equipment that wasn't previously affordable or cost effective, and so on.

If you were skeptical of my claim that "every business is a tech business," hopefully this exercise helped you realize that this is true.

Consider that technology does two things well:

• It channels information to generate insights.

• It enables efficient, somewhat automated action.

Take a look at your list. Which innovations provided you with more accurate, more timely, or more reliable information? How did this change the way you made decisions? And which innovations gave you a magic button that you simply push to complete some previously laborious task?

Now put yourself in *your* customers' position. How could better information reduce their cognitive load, allowing them to make better decisions? How could you cut down the number of buttons they need to push in order to take action on those decisions? (We're touching on the topic of usability here—a good area for your further reading.)

At this point, you may have a list of blue-sky ideas about the use of technology in your business, things that you can't see a path to achieving.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS MAY NOT SEEM REALISTIC—YET

You base your definition of blue-sky on the things you've seen work in the past. Your opinion on what is feasible will only be shifted by evidence of success. Tech can be scary—remember that 95% statistic—so it's natural for many leaders to be wary of aiming high.

Technology is a platform for our ideas, and big ambitions and lofty goals don't have to be the preserve of Steve Jobs, James Dyson, and Elon Musk. Thanks to those pioneers who took the risks (and the arrows), tech is littered with inspirational success stories.

Take confidence in the simple fact that every business can be improved by adopting technologies and techniques that have been tried and tested elsewhere—in other industries, perhaps in competitive businesses. Proven technologies are ready for you to deploy without having to take those same arrows. Your opinion is enriched by becoming aware of these successes (and failures), then being able to adapt the underlying concepts to your context.

Another aspect of ambition-setting lies in the distinction between solving a problem and pursuing an opportunity. Problems arise when some element of your business ceases to perform in the way that it used to. This drop in performance can be explained *only* by a change somewhere in the system. Find the change, and you can restore the original performance. Problem solved.

But there's another way. Why not at least consider the problem—a fix that has been forced upon you by circumstances—as an opportunity to improve on the original performance if that would strengthen your business.

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A product fails in the market—create a new product. An old transaction process breaks—replace that process with a more efficient, lower cost alternative.

Problem solving leads to incremental thinking. I call that +1 thinking.

But if you adopt an opportunity-first opinion, you're more likely to find whole new (to you) ways of improving performance. That's 10x thinking. (Even if you only achieve a 3x improvement, how much better is that than simply restoring old performance?)

Whatever your expectations, you still must have confidence in success before embarking on your plan. Which brings us to: Where to begin?

TECHNIQUES BEFORE TECHNOLOGY

If the proof is in the pudding, how do you get comfortable with the path to achieving these ambitious outcomes?

When we embark on something new, there's a blend of anticipation and anxiety. The higher the stakes, the greater your fears. If you're going to put your reputation on the line, you'll want to have seen evidence that similar initiatives have worked elsewhere and that you can replicate that success in your context.

I have good news: Not only are proven technologies available, but there's also a library full of techniques for choosing and implementing technology that have been developed (tried, tested, failed, refined, and succeeded). You can master these techniques in your organization. They don't guarantee success at the push of a button, but they offer a path that many have followed in that direction.

Here's a little secret: Don't begin with the technology. Instead, gain an understanding of the techniques that tech winners have in common:

• Reduce risk by adopting proven technologies first. You might win on the bleeding edge, but it's rarely required.

• Thing big, act small. Approach your outcomes in small, testable steps involving the customer as often as you can.

• Build your team's confidence with a series of small changes, some wins, and some lessons learned.

There are many other techniques—consider reading up on Agile techniques, design thinking, usability design, and information science—but the underlying objective is to create a culture that is confident with change, encourages informed experimentation for the purpose of learning, and recognizes that no experiment fails as long as it answers a question.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE TECHNOLOGY?

I began by saying that 95% of us do not work in the tech field. Mastery of technology for non-tech leaders does not require a tech degree. On the contrary, it calls for an appreciation of how others have used technology to further the core business questions we should ask every day:

• What do my customers need next?

• How well can we deliver on that need?

• What's our path to success?

If you learn more about—and stay current—on the topics discussed, your well-informed opinions will equip you to make balanced, risk-sensitive decisions on how to enrich your customers with a better experience and your business with a more loyal customer base. AQ

Graham Binks is CEO of primeFusion and helps his global client base make better use of technology. Over the course of three decades in tech, he has worked with over 250 businesses ranging from name brands like NIKE, P&G, and JP Morgan to many small/medium-sized businesses across North America, Europe, and Asia. He is the author of three books, most recently Trusting Technology: Mastering Technology for Non-Tech Leaders *(Post Hill Press, 2019).*