# Achieving Digital Growth Hacking Through Micro-Operations

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**Digital Transformation.  Digital Service Provider.  Agile Monetization.  Business Agility. DevOps. Microservices. Automation.** These are words that represent many great approaches and that propose a superior end state for communications service providers (CSPs) striving to be digital service providers capable of operational agility and bolstered by successful digital transformation. The above concepts and approaches are the lead-ins for the many products and services that will get CSPs to where they want to be in terms of digital services.

But there are heavy risks of proceeding with one or more of these approaches if a CSP has not properly assessed and planned for how operations will handle entirely new business models — models that will bring drastic changes during and after they have been implemented. The allure of having an expanded product catalog robust with a wealth of new digital revenues, not to mention the possibility for substantial operational cost aversion, should only be considered once a newly designed agile organization is actually implemented.

We have all seen many transformation projects fail to reach their destinations because some new technology, approach, or strategy variation, as well as organizational gap, forced either a recalculation of direction or of destination. Many CSPs that have missed the operational redesign step have set sail only to never be heard from again.

One of the best investments any CSP planning to digitally transform can make is to place the entire organization in front of the mirror in order to truly assess how internal teams are functioning. Are they functioning as mini-businesses as opposed to functional parts? If they are not able to constantly evaluate and adapt in agile fashion, supporting bottom-up, top-down and other customer-inspired directional changes, then implementing a transformation — let alone becoming a completely new *digital* company — will result in continued operational inefficiencies. That means coming in second-place.

The better approach is to change the business organizational design into a "growth-hacking machine," the process of rapid experimentation across product development that enables organizations to arrive at their intended destinations and to create urgently needed outcomes.

What is a truly agile and growth-supporting organization and how can leadership prepare, mitigate, and build in measures to handle such changes and adapt to an unknown future?

A new approach for successfully achieving true operational agility for digital companies is to change to micro-operations: a culmination of the latest digital tactics that recreates the entire business operation so that the business processes operate as one harmonious machine, with many micro-operational groups operating autonomously. Each group runs as a unique business process and communicates through predefined agile mechanisms to serve specific business goals. By combining microservices product designs, growth hacking go-to-market principles, and applying process methodologies to the entire organizational structure, micro-operations can deliver a digital growth hack of efficiency and effectiveness improvements.

# The Reality

Notice how I continue to use the term 'change' and not 'transform' or 'evolve." This is due to the many cases during which required changes are initially unknown, sometimes requiring complete replacement of the traditional thought as well as existing capabilities. Steps include replacing some traditional IT products, and legacy approaches and roles with a completely new middleware layer, new architecture, coding designs, management practices, and job descriptions. They must all be supported by a new underlying micro-operations practice.

It is important to understand why so many businesses are not successfully addressing the overall operations goals residing on their transformation to-do lists. For one, there seems to be a belief that to become an agile digital business you need only integrate the latest new IT products and systems, implement agile project best practices, write up some new marketing slogans and then take to new digital ways. There is a gap that exists, as many anxious businesses only look at how existing successful digital companies deliver at a customer-facing level (engagement, delivery, and customer support). Though part of the solution, those components alone will not enable truly constant delivery with speed, efficiency, effectiveness, and intelligence, nor will they enable a company to achieve the holy grail of actually delivering new digital products that consumers actually want.

Successful digital companies have been designed to operate exceptionally well as autonomous entities that support coexisting holistic goals, which is the real reason they have become so successful so quickly. They are tech companies that know how to develop in real time new approaches that leverage unique operational practices to assess, design, and implement digital solutions. Their products are secondary to how they operate and innovate — critical in the digital world.

That said, many non-digital companies need to face reality. Most are not tech companies and do not develop products; rather, they are simply connectors, integrators, sellers, and call centers. One example is in the telecommunications industry, where an important first reality is recognizing whether a CSP wants to be a true "communications services provider," or more simply, a "connection service provider."

# Converting a Failed Past Into a 'Win'

As we all know, many CSPs missed their opportunity after the dot-com crash to evolve their communications products properly and have thus been little more than pipes during the first digital wave. It seems that the current reality for some might be the same, as some CSPs are on track to repeat the same mistakes with the next wave where 5G, VNFs, and IoT are going to become mainstream. They will lose out to the likes of Whatsapp?, Facebook, Amazon, Google, and the thousands of other companies creating products that generate revenues for innovators riding over operators' networks at no cost.

Though they have been building significant omnichannel strategies as well as building exceptional new network services, many CSPs are only evolving past products or reselling third parties' digital products. They are not truly " changing" how they operate at the developer, operational, and executive level in this time of building and selling completely new sets of digital products — many of which they don't even know yet.

The CSPs' biggest challenges should be viewed as its biggest opportunities. With vast amounts of talented operational teams, data and resources, and the expertise around one of the most important components in digital services — communications among "things" — CSPs have what it takes to drive innovation.

The critical issue as they mature in the truly digital and constantly connected era is one of consumers' shifts toward engaging in lifestyles and experiences versus shopping for products. Consumers click and focus on the outcome, possessing zero understanding of what happens behind the scenes to achieve the desired end result. In order to ensure that all the services roll up into lifestyle solutions that work, products must communicate exceptionally well with each other. And that includes a vast number of successful operational steps, which must be managed by an entity that can orchestrate everything in the digital services landscape. That entity should be the CSP, which has done it all when it comes to communications. Those that leverage and monetize that history and expertise can thrive in the digital landscape.

# The Solution

To achieve the ability to support optimal digital outcomes, CSPs must change their operations so they can think, act, and deliver differently than they did as only integrators and project deliverers. The management priority list should shift from finding the next amazing digital product to enabling and empowering operations to deliver innovation — from sales to development to customer support to the executive layer. This will in turn produce product advancements at a rapid rate.

Implementing a new micro-organizational design with integrated processes will be mandatory once CSPs begin to shift from a strategy of primarily stealing away customers from other CSPs to stealing customers away and defending the encroachment of existing digital businesses.

New advancements in microservices, middleware/API, and DevOps design have empowered some of the existing digital leaders to continue advancing their products at an astonishing rate, regardless of size or scope.

Implementing new best practices in delivering digital application delivery, they incorporate continuous improvement through microservices architecture, automated middleware, and the elimination of organizational silos, as well as ensure automated testing happens alongside continuous software delivery. Innovative digital operations and micro-operations have allowed innovators to achieve the holy grail — true growth hacking.

Businesses either need to operate at two speeds in order to manage their legacy revenues separately, or at three speeds (or more) to redesign their organization and operations so that each "service" runs as needed through support by an overall service practice. This will help ensure they begin to tear down superfluous systems that hamper the success of new ones. Each service practice will have its own business goals, agile technology designs, and strategy to deploy and scale at their own pace, while supporting the underlying common business objectives.

Large organizations will be broken down into smaller, more independent groups that work together. That is different from organizations in the past, which drove teams to run on strict predefined budgets, preset corporate goals and expectations to "figure it out with what you have," assuming the top-down directive approach would ensure success while treating everyone the same. In the micro-operations environment, what used to be just functional units become businesses operating within the business, each living and breathing separately, but delivering on common goals.

In addition, incorporating microservices product architectures that are universally accessible through freely operating middleware and APIs, and their interconnection throughout the organization, CSPs must ensure everything is connected harmoniously — operations and products.  This is critical for where CSPs are headed in that they will have many different projects, products, and initiatives unrelated in one aspect, but absolutely related from a digital perspective. This will allow each to "do one thing and do it well," while allowing all their 'things' to do it all well together.

These organizational and technology approaches to changing their operations and architecture designs into micro-operations and services is now a critical step when planning to truly transform into a "digital services provider." These approaches will also help non-digital businesses that wish to become leaders in the next wave of the ever-more-connected digital world. CSPs can win using these approaches. After all, CSPs are "in our pockets" 24x7x365. There are enough examples of success using these approaches to galvanize changes in the way they operate. It is now their time to win or lose.