The Digital Transformation of Church Communication

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Abstract

Society today is undergoing a radical reorganization driven by cloud computing, big data, the internet of things, and artificial intelligence, the latest instance of new technology driving massive change. The pace of this change requires organizations, including churches, to adapt at a rapid pace to remain relevant and impactful in this new world. This paper reviews current literature on the digital transformation, including an understanding of how scholars today understand what it is. It looks at how businesses are adapting to the digital transformation and the leadership elements required to successfully drive this change. It then considers the implications of the digital transformation for church communication and ministry in a contemporary context, offering support for the hypothesis that churches who embrace the digital transformation will attract and retain young adults at higher rates than churches who do not.

Keywords: digital transformation, church communication, young adult evangelism

The Digital Transformation of Church Communication

Business icon Jack Welch once said, "When the rate of change inside an institution becomes slower than the rate of change outside, the end is near" (Viaene, 2018, para. 1). Society today is undergoing a radical reorganization driven by cloud computing, big data, the internet of things, and artificial intelligence (Siebel, 2019), the latest instance of new technology driving massive change. The pace of this change requires organizations, including churches, to adapt at a rapid pace to remain relevant and impactful in this new world. Some organizations that did not embrace the digital transformation have gone out of business, a fate which will befall churches who do not themselves embrace this change.

This paper reviews current literature on the digital transformation, including an understanding of how various scholars today understand what it even is. While Holmström (2022) defined the *digital transformation* as "the profound transformation of organizational activities, boundaries, and goals to leverage the opportunities of digital technologies" (p. 330), other scholars offer different definitions, and there is no clear consensus on what the digital transformation actually is. This paper looks at how businesses are adapting to the digital transformation and the leadership elements required to successfully drive this change. It then considers the implications of the digital transformation for church communication and ministry in a contemporary context, offering support for the hypothesis that churches who embrace the digital transformation will do a better job of attracting and retaining young adults in their communities of faith.

Literature Review

According to Siebel (2019), the digital transformation currently underway in society is just the latest example of the widespread adoption of a new technological regime leading to a

rapid, radical reordering of society. He suggested that, historically, the most significant shifts in society do not occur gradually but in a flash of rapid change, as a new innovation interrupts the trajectory of a relatively stable society. Siebel cited many historical examples, such as "the discovery of fire, the domestication of dogs, agriculture, gunpowder, the chronograph, transoceanic transportation, the Gutenberg Press, the steam engine, the Jacquard loom, the locomotive, urban electrification, the automobile, the airplane, the transistor, television, the microprocessor, and the internet" (Siebel, 2019, p. 4). He also pointed out technologies that are currently influencing society: cloud computing, big data, the internet of things, and artificial intelligence. Finally, he pointed out many large, well-known corporations who missed the digital transformation and went bankrupt, such as Sears, Blockbuster, and Radio Shack. These are just a few of the more than 250 companies in the Fortune 500 who were acquired, merged, or went bankrupt since 2000 (Siebel, 2017). The digital transformation is a mass extinction event for organizations of all types—including churches.

Academic Study of Digital Transformation

The digital transformation as an academic concept is relatively new, and a common understanding among scholars is still being distilled. Shi et al. (2022) reviewed the current state of inquiry in the area and found only limited collaboration among researchers, with the most influential located in Germany and Japan. They highlighted the need to strengthen collaboration and further develop digital transformation as an academic field of study. Lyytinen et al. (2016) defined digital technologies as "products or services that are either embodied in information and communication technologies or enabled by them" (p. 49), making this a clear candidate for exploring in the communication discipline. Holmström (2022) described the *digital transformation* as going beyond just *digitization,* which he defined as "a technical process of

transforming analog formats into digital formats," or *digitalization,* "a sociotechnical process of applying digitizing techniques to broader social and institutional contexts that render digital technologies infrastructural" (Holmström, 2022, p. 330). Instead, the *digital transformation* is "the profound transformation of organizational activities, boundaries, and goals to leverage the opportunities of digital technologies" (Holmström, 2022, p. 330). Franke and Zoubir (2020) suggested that technology should be broadly defined as "a tool enabling the use of valuable resources such as time, food, health and mobility" (p. 4). As such, the digital transformation should use the widespread needs of humanity as a compass, in order to effectively meet both physiological and psychological needs.

Digital Transformation in Business

The term *digital transformation* is most often applied in a business context. Indeed, Matt et al. (2015), in one of the first published papers to address this idea, wrote that the digital transformation has "a business-centric perspective," going on to state that "these strategies focus on the transformation of products, processes, and organizational aspects owing to new technologies" (p. 340). The scope of the transformation goes beyond just process automation and optimization and "includes digital activities at the interface with or fully on the side of customers, such as digital technologies as part of end-user products" (Matt et al., 2015, p. 340). They also wrote, "Digital transformation strategies … include changes to and implications for products, services, and business models as a whole" (Matt et al., 2015, p. 340).

Saarikko et al. (2020) highlighted the need for businesses to leverage digital technology to develop new business models and improve existing capabilities. They suggested five strategies for companies attempting a digital transformation. First, start small and demonstrate tangible benefits before attempting wholesale change. Second, team up with other organizations to

leverage brand recognition. Third, work to standardize digital technologies across the company.

Fourth, consider data ownership and the ethics of privacy. And finally, take ownership of the

change and foster commitment to the digital transformation across the entire organization.

Tekic and Koroteev (2019) developed a typology of digital transformation strategies used

by various businesses based on two critical dimensions: usage of digital technologies and

readiness of a business model for digital operation. They identified four generic digital

transformation strategies: disruptive, business model led, technology led, and proud to be analog.

In this typology, each strategy is characterized by specific motivations, leadership styles, skill

requirements, risks and challenges, and consequences of failure.

Several researchers have noted that leadership is important for executing a successful

digital transformation. For example, AlNuaimi et al. (2022) looked at how an organization's

leadership, agility, and digital strategy impacted the organization's ability to execute the digital

transformation. They found that organizational agility positively influences digital

transformation, and digital transformational leadership influences organizational agility. They

wrote, "Leadership is vital for improving firms' organizational agility through leaders' ability to

alter their business situations and organizations' readiness to reverse unsuccessful strategic

decisions" (AlNuaimi et al., 2022, p. 638). Viaene (2018) wrote about the responsibility of

organizational leadership to "ensure that their organizations possess an ability to routinely

explore and exploit opportunities faster than rivals" (para. 2). They suggested that to successfully

make a digital transformation, a leader must be *vigilant,* with the ability to "make sense of the

turbulence outside"; a *voyager,* harnessing people's creativity to turn abstract concepts into

tangible transformation; *visionary,* offering "an engaging aspirational picture of the organization

as it succeeds in the digital age"; and *vested,* working to move the entire organization through the complete transformation process (Viaene, 2018, paras. 8-11).

Correani et al. (2020) looked at three companies who successfully completed the digital transformation in their businesses. They found a crucial step is clearly defining the scope of the transformation and the expected results. They developed a framework for implementing a digital strategy that involves defining scope; harnessing internal and external data sources; developing a data platform; making adjustments to staff roles; involving partner organizations; adopting machine learning and artificial intelligence; clearly defining processes and procedures; transforming activities, tasks, and services; and finally, serving the customers for whom this digital transformation creates value.

Digital Transformation in the Public Sector

Going beyond the business world, Mergel et al. (2019) explored how the digital transformation was impacting the public sector, as government institutions attempt to utilize new technologies to enhance public service delivery and address challenges such as transparency and citizen satisfaction. They found areas undergoing this transformation included processes, services, relationships, and technology utilization. They also noted three external pressures driving the digital transformation: technological advancements, demands from private sector organizations, and citizen expectations.

Digital Transformation in the Church

While digital transformation has been primarily used in the context of business and government, there are some who have considered what the digital transformation might look like in a church environment. Orogun and Pillay (2023) pointed out, "The ongoing digital

transformation in our world has not only brought change to secular systems but also to how things are done in the mission and ministry of the Christian faith" (abstract).

Ugboh (2023) asked the question, "Can the Church innovate ways of using technology while maintaining the social aspect of the organism?" (p. 2). To answer this question, they propose a *techno-theology* that embraces both the ancient understanding of ecclesiology and contemporary expressions of technology. This techno-theology is

> a theological christening of the Church's use of technology as an avenue of Christian
> ministry. [It] invites the use of cross-fertilization of ideas, design thinking, divergent
> thinking patterns, innovative leadership and strategic envisioning capabilities to redefine
> the Church's ministry participation in a technologically savvy world. (Ugboh, 2023, p. 9)

They went on to state, "Every aspect of society experiences the impacts of new technologies. Families and institutions, including the Church, are impacted by evolving technological inventions necessitating new ways of thinking and accomplishing tasks" (Ugboh, 2023, pp. 8-9).

Orogun and Pillay (2023) considered African Neo-Pentecostal churches' attempts to digitally transform ministry in that context, looking specifically at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. They noted that the challenges faced by these churches were instrumental to successful innovation, requiring continuous engagement with digital technology. They also pointed out the need to balance online engagement with in-person encounters, writing, "Human physical interaction cannot be short-changed with alternative virtual innovations" (Orogun & Pillay, 2023, para. 44).

Cooper et al. (2021) pointed out the current digital transformation is much more integrated into society that past attempts at online ministry. They suggested that while past efforts could be characterized as "online church," these fell short of fostering a rich community

experience (Cooper et al., 2021, para. 6). Today, however, the digital transformation offers tools to do "church online," with a malleability between digital interaction and in-person experiences (Cooper et al., 2021, para. 6). They wrote:

> Fluidity between the physical and digital representation in a worship environment enriches the complementarity of the particular and the universal further. Digital platforms have already taught us to expect highly personalised affordances and instant responses 24/7. The speed of digital, its reach, its interactivity and the quantity of data it can handle will continue to affect our behaviour. (Cooper et al., 2021, para. 4)

Mónika (2021) identified generational differences in the adoption of digitized communication by churches. Younger generations embraced online broadcasts during the pandemic much more quickly, having already experienced a hybrid form of religious community that included digitalized communication channels. They noted that these "digital natives … think differently about authenticity and authority in the digital space than their older counterparts" (Mónika, 2021, p. 15), and churches that do not transform their communication to the digital world will lose touch with these younger generations.

Finally, Witzel (2023) suggested that the digital transformation of ministry leverages the power of parasocial relationships to build bridges with people before they ever set foot in the church building. He specifically looked at how social media influencers foster parasocial relationships among their followers and how these might be adapted for use by a church attempting to reach people in a narrow geographic area. He also noted that most churches today remain "analog islands in a digital sea" (Witzel, 2023, 15:52-15:56), and that these expressions of church are foreign to young adults who have grown up as digital natives. Churches who

embrace the digital transformation have an opportunity to be beacons of light in this digital world to reach a new generation for Christ.

Hypothesis

Churches have many similar communication needs as other organizations, such as corporations and non-profit organizations, and the digital transformation is impacting them as much as other organizations. However, unlike most of these other organizations, the core product being offered to consumers is a faith community, for which communication is a foundational characteristic. Younger generations have adopted new digital communication technologies at higher rates than older generations and have integrated them into their daily lives. Because of this, churches who do not adapt to the digital transformation will not communicate as effectively with emerging generations and will therefore have a more difficult time attracting and integrating these young people into the life of the church. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis: Church organizations who embrace the digital transformation will attract and retain young adults at higher rates than churches who do not.

Methodology

To test this hypothesis, a narrative review of existing academic literature was conducted, exploring the theme of "digital transformation." This methodology is appropriate for surveying the current state of knowledge on a particular topic (Baumeister & Leary, 1997) and to help identify opportunities for future empirical research (Snyder, 2019). Using Liberty University's online journal search system, peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals were sought. Articles on the topic were identified and reviewed for clues that support or contradict the stated hypothesis, resulting in the narrative review of literature.

Results

Holmström (2022) identified the digital transformation as "the profound transformation of organizational activities, boundaries, and goals to leverage the opportunities of digital technologies" (p. 330), and Siebel (2019) pointed out that organizations who do not embrace the digital transformation will die. Cooper et al. (2021) recognized that the digital transformation can move spiritual communities from just doing "online church" to fully experiencing "church online," integrating the full range of digital communication technologies into the entire experience in a community of faith. Mónika (2021) noted that younger generations have embraced these technologies much faster and at higher rates than older generations. Therefore, the hypothesis is supported:

Church organizations who embrace the digital transformation will attract and retain young adults at higher rates than churches who do not.

Suggestions for Further Research

As a relatively new area of academic inquiry, there are many opportunities for further research on the digital transformation of church communication. First, case studies on churches who have successfully achieved a state of digital transformation should be written as roadmaps for other churches who want to do this for themselves. Multiple case studies would be important, because of the variety of digital communication technologies that could be adopted for different ministry contexts. Another opportunity is an empirical study comparing growth rates of churches who have embraced the digital transformation with churches who have not. Finally, a demographic analysis could also be done comparing digitally transformed churches with those who have not embraced the digital transformation.

Conclusion

The digital transformation is leading to a rapid, radical reorganization of society, driven by cloud computing, big data, the internet of things, and artificial intelligence. This is the latest instance of new technology driving massive change, and organizations must embrace digital technologies to improve processes and add value to customers. This transformation requires leadership and a focused strategy to execute successfully. Church organizations who successfully complete this digital transformation will attract and retain young adults at higher rates than churches who do not. As a result, churches who do this have an opportunity to be beacons of light in this digital world to reach a new generation for Christ.

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