

Business beyond 2020

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Angle: How the board identified technology as a competitive advantage and survival of organisation - Pan-ASIA perspective

Many of us have residual memory of the day an earthquake and tsunami struck Japan in 2011. But, for Global Schools Foundation it was an unforgettable event. We were in custody of many students in both our campuses in Tokyo when the incident occurred. We faced a major responsibility of communicating with worried parents on the safety of their child, but we were confident of our capabilities, thanks in no small measure to our decision to be adopt

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newer technologies for competitive advantage.

Way before this calamity struck, GSF had totally embraced the power of technology in the modern, 21st century world, and implemented it effectively to stay in touch with our stakeholders. This first mover advantage proved to be very useful on the day of the quake, with communications - both intranet and internet - being carried out in a smooth and effective way, and ensuring that each child returns safely home.

This did two things: It built a strong trust among the parent community about our ability to communicate effectively with them, and it convinced the stakeholders that the school is doing the right thing by using technology to gain competitive advantage in the field.

Over the years, many challenges - as severe as the Japan crises - have hit our shores like a tsunami. The SARS outbreak, the MERS outbreak and more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic have all tested our ability to carry out the functioning of the Foundation as smoothly as possible. We passed each of these tests with flying colours, because of the far-sighted outlook of our Board on identifying Technology as the

one big competitive advantage which will sail us through the 21st century challenges.

Knowing the Advantage

So what is competitive advantage and why is Technology at the top of its list? To answer this question, let's take a step back and look at companies like Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Tesla etc and what they have in common.

These companies, more or less, offer similar services in terms of their products, technologies and business models. In Asia, a handful of such companies make the cut - like Infosys, Alibaba, Samsung, Toyota etc., who have the first mover strategy of using information technology to develop new products to improve their services in existing markets.

According to a recent study by the Institute for Business Research (IBR), introduction of information technology as a resource allows companies to maintain an advantage over their competitors. While it plays an important role in the design and development of new business models, technology also influences and adds to the value of

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these activities. In the bargain, it enables companies to gain a competitive advantage by exploiting changes in the scope of competition.

When the Board looked at the structural implications for the Foundation, weighed its benefits and prepared for consequences, it came to the conclusion that new technology will be effectively used to Engage, Impact and Sustain Interest of our stakeholders.

How we Engage

Singapore senior minister Teo Chee Hean made a very interesting observation earlier this year. When Covid hit Singapore shores, the government adapted a few ideas which have proved to be very effective in curbing the spread of the virus in the island nation. He called this strategy 'Just in time, Just in case' and it involved embracing processes with long term sustainable value which will help build longer partnerships as against short term benefits.

When we apply this same strategy and logic to Education, we see unlimited benefits not just to our student/parent community but also to employee/staff as well.

A good adaptation and implementation of tech-savvy ideas in our everyday framework has not only given students exposure to newer and more interesting ways of learning, but has given our staff faster, effective ways of conducting everyday operations that saves times, energy and gives quicker results.

A case in point being the 'Blended Learning' infrastructure which was put in place in the campuses as part of our Education Continuity framework. When Covid struck, this very idea of smartboards, wifis and audio-visual systems for better learning, became a necessary tool with which students could continue the process of learning, in the most effective way. Not to mention the additional benefits of better student-teacher collaboration, peer-to-peer

interaction, deeper subject-matter interest and knowledge accumulation.

Investing in digital strategies to engage with stakeholders, let to a stronger interpersonal relationship and a deeper loyalty towards the institution from our beneficiaries.

How to Impact

Our 'Just in Time, Just in Case' strategy - although we did not articulate it as well as Senior Minister Teo - came into force more than a decade ago, and has borne us fruit since. And it is not just to combat and deal with natural and artificial outbreaks in the last 20 years.

The Foundation had deliberated and designed their vision in such a way that it stayed with the times (sometimes ahead of it), and sailed the organisation through internal and external risks at the right time. For instance, GSF Board was hands-on when it came to adopting newer ways of imparting education as well as embedding it to all aspects of teaching and learning. This included providing infrastructure to all, and giving adequate training to make sure that the infrastructure is effectively put to use.

Smartboards with wifi for access to unlimited learning material was paired with training teachers in the use of student-friendly internet tools and apps for their maximum benefit; non-touch technologies like Facial Recognition was used for attendance and security of students, which was the most effective safety tool during the enforcement of social distancing; and lastly implementation of virtual apps like Zoom, Google Classroom, Trengo etc helped into interpersonal and intrapersonal communication between all students, parents, teachers and staff.

These tools also gave us an advantage in terms of effectively communicating with everyone during lockdowns, and keep the fountain of knowledge flowing, by taking our activities online. Thorough training of staff ensured that the Board functioning continued like clockwork,

and interactions remained dynamic through social media channels.

How to Sustain Interest

Having said and done all this, the Board realised that competitive advantage is not just about thinking ahead of the curve, but also about anticipating and dealing with evolving consumer landscape. That is a huge part of the sustainability ecosystem.

In the new post-Covid era, there is a possibility that Work-From-Home and Social Distancing will be here to stay. In this new normal, sustaining what is already in place, and making way for newer ideas is definitely the way forward. This includes mindful steps like offering workstations and communication infrastructure in residential set-ups, and offering social distancing measures in office spaces.

Considering innovative ways to deploy Artificial Intelligence for the progress of the staff as well as the company will benefit all. Researching on how to help stakeholders through AI will go a long way. Integrating machine learning capabilities and artificial intelligence in academics will help us deliver meaningful insights to students to improve their accelerated learning.

For example, for students have online examinations will help save valuable travel time and possibly reduce stress, while for employees, WFH will increase quality of their output.

This will change the student-teacher and employee-employer relationship and engagement in unprecedented ways, hopefully for the better. The employer will have to be mindful of mental health and well-being of the employee, while the employee may witness blurring lines between personal and professional space. At such time, the Board can have a competitive edge when it comes to nurturing human capital in ways that were never envisioned before.

Future Outlook

Adding to the ensemble is the Board's decision to invest in a large way in Data Analytics, which is adding to our competitive advantage in more ways than we can ourselves determine at present.

Implemented in large organisations, this could be a great way to allow us to retarget strategies based on valuable and insightful data pertaining to stakeholder engagement, influence and benefit.

The Board plans to further strengthen partnerships between teacher and student, and make the learning journey more seamless by rolling out personalised and digitalised content.

Through integration of insights and goals, the Board plans to import systems from trusted third parties, and manage learning transactions on single platforms for a seamless experience.

For example: Apps are a good way to engage with the young. Adapting these tools to connect with the new generation will help us impart our services better, while students will be able to access learning services in an easier and desirable way. It will ensure speed, accuracy as well as safety - a triumvirate so essential in today's new world.

The Board is aware of the challenges we have to face in the coming days. The trick is to bundle the new with the old to

have a complete balance in our framework. With an effective competitive strategy in place, it will help us develop, improve and use advantages in our long-term approach for the benefit of stakeholders.

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