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Lessons from the US Election

In the recent Presidential election, President Obama was reelected by an impressive majority, even in those states that were most contested. The results came as a surprise to many—most particularly the opposition. Here's a comment from David Axelrod, President Obama's chief strategist, in response to a question from POLITICO regarding what it takes to win:

POLITICO: "What's the biggest lesson someone running in 2016 should learn from your campaign?"

AXELROD: "You need to understand where the technology is. In 2008, this campaign kind of reinvented campaigns by using the [best] available technology. But, we're light years ahead of where we were in 2008. We had to reinvent ourselves and think about all the tools that were available to us—tools that provided much richer data and much more surgical means of talking to voters. I would invest in people—they're almost invariably young—who understand where the technology is going and what the potential will be by 2016 for communications, for targeting, for mining data, to make precision possible in terms of both persuasion and mobilization."

When I first read this, I thought that it probably applies to any business just as much as it applies to presidential campaigns.

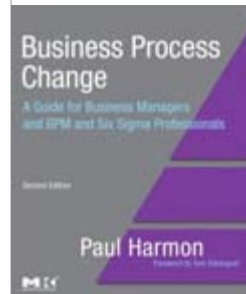
Broadly, I take the message to be as follows:

- Technology is evolving so rapidly that you need to stay abreast of where it is, where it is going, and how to use it, and the best way to do that is to hire the young and listen to them.

Ultimately, this isn't an IT issue—it's an innovation or a process improvement issue! You are trying to think about how you ought to be handling sales, or marketing or customer service four years from now. **You should assume** that in four years the technology will let you do things "light years ahead" of what you do now. And you want to be prepared to compete, or better yet, dominate your market four years from now.

Perhaps we should qualify the point. It isn't so important that YOU understand the technology and where it is going, however, it is critical that someone in your organizations does and that your organization pays attention to that someone. What is critical is that YOU understand that the technology is changing at a very rapid rate and that you need to be prepared to apply that technology to achieve your organization's goals and objectives.

The world population is 7 billion people today. In four years that number will be increased by 100s of millions and all those people will be demanding goods and services. At the same time, there will be many more scientists and entrepreneurs developing new products and services and hundreds of millions of additional smart phone and iPad owners will



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be using all the current social media apps as well as the next big thing not yet invented. All this guarantees that social media will continue to proliferate and analytic tools will continue to be developed to track and define all kinds of new market niches.

Let's be specific. In the 2012 election, the Obama campaign created a huge database that identified those individuals who said they were for, or tending to be for, Obama. They broke that information down by state, district and then by city block. Campaign field workers tell how they identified individuals, block by block—two people in one block, one in the next, and four in the following block. This wasn't the campaign of four years ago when campaign workers attempted to contact everybody within their district. This year's campaign workers knew which houses to approach, what messages to deliver and who needed rides to the polls. The Obama campaign was an example of just how good the massive correlation of information derived from social media has become and how much more effective campaign workers have become at implementing targeted marketing campaigns.

Ask yourself just how close your sales organization is to offering this kind of specific information to your field sales people. Or, ask how your marketing people are targeting the people they mail those costly promotional pieces to. Or, ask how quickly you could put together a team, with just the right members, to address the new challenges your organization will face in the future.

And another point—it's mostly the young who best understand the new opportunities. Most of the Obama field people were college undergraduates. Most of those in the offices running the software systems weren't much older. New employees may need help and discipline, but your organization needs them on process redesign teams and brainstorming groups as you try to figure out what new capabilities you will have in the future. In most cases, the young are already connecting with their friends in ways your more seasoned marketing and sales people only wish they could duplicate. Get the younger staff working with you, teaching you how to do it.

The most important thing to take away from from this is that technology is NOT a technological issue—it is a human issue and it's all about business performance. The goal is not to acquire new technology because it is "hot" or "new" or "more powerful." The goal is to acquire technology because it will allow you to target and satisfy your customers more cost effectively than you would otherwise be able to do. And, the people best positioned to help you determine this are not pure technologists. They are the people who are already exploring the uses and application of the new technologies.

These people will keep changing and this year's innovators will step aside making way for the younger generation to move in and explain the next step. Technologists will help you implement your solution, but deciding on the new approach—deciding how to innovate—is the key first step, and that's done by having bright, young people who think about how you could better satisfy your customer.

So, yes, you can learn from the US elections. They offer insight into the state of the art uses of social media, analytic software systems, and targeted marketing for communication and interpersonal action. But

hurry. In four years it will all be light years from where it is today.

Till next time,

Paul Harmon

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