The Power of the Intelligence Revolution

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Over the past couple of months I've introduced the Intelligence Revolution and put it in the context of the broader Information Age. Last month I provided this working definition: The Intelligence Revolution will help us better understand the world around us; will improve our decision making to enhance our health, safety, and peace of mind; and will enable companies to better serve us based on the correlation and analysis of data from the interrelation of people, things, and content.

Every new technology introduces new capabilities that enable us to do things that previously weren't possible or practical. As technologists, our job is to capture this new power for our organization. But every new technology also creates new potentials that represent risk to ourselves, our families, and the organizations that we serve. As technologists, we are also called on to manage this danger. This month I'd like to explore the power that is available from this Intelligence Revolution, and next month I'll address the danger.

Setting the Context

When I think, write, or speak about the major technology revolutions, I usually say things like "this revolutionized how we, as individuals, interact with the world around us, and fundamentally transformed how organizations/businesses operate."

In hindsight, it is easy to look back and see how the introduction of the personal computer transformed how churches and ministries operate. It is similarly easy to see how the Internet has transformed how churches and ministries operate.

When we look at the Mobility Revolution, it is easy to see how mobility has revolutionized how we, and those we serve, interact with the world, but the examples of how mobility has transformed how churches and ministries operate are harder to find. I don't believe that is because the Mobility Revolution is less transformative for Christian organizations than it is for the business community. Rather, I think it's a reflection of the limited resources that those of us in ministry are working with, and the greater challenge we have in making investments in new technologies compared to businesses who can easily calculate the ROI (return on investment). As the technology becomes more ubiquitous, and the cost of implementing it comes down, and the expectations of those we serve that we are leveraging the technology increase, in time I believe that mobility will be as transformative for our churches and ministries as it has been for most businesses and industries.

In the same way, and perhaps even more so, I believe that it will be many years before the Intelligence Revolution has a transformative impact on how our churches and ministries operate. However, the impact on ourselves, our families, and those we serve will be much more immediate and, in fact, is happening today. With that as context, this article will deal more with how the power of the Intelligence Revolution plays out in the relationships between businesses and us as individuals. I believe that, in time, these same relational impacts will play out between our ministries and those we serve, so perhaps this article can plant a future vision for how your ministry can capture the power.

What Power Does the Intelligence Revolution Unleash?

At its core, the Intelligence Revolution is about having more information and being able to do more with it. Data scientists probe, manipulate, correlate, and analyze vast amounts of information from a variety of sources to extract "actionable insights." What do I mean by "actionable insights?" I mean new understandings of reality (insights) that can lead to decisions to take action in order to accomplish our objectives.

Each business exists to provide a product or service that people want or need. While the most measurable objectives for a business are financial (e.g. revenues and profits), these objectives are only sustainably met when the business is doing a great job of meeting its customers' needs and desires. Therefore, the real power of the Intelligence Revolution is achieved when a business analyzes data to gain new understandings of reality in order to better serve their customers. When that happens, it's a win for the business and a win for us, their customer.

As a very simple example (with a lot of complexity behind it), when I turn on my television, I have hundreds of channels and thousands of shows (over the next 24 hours) to choose from. It is overwhelming to me to find something I want to watch. As a result, I only turn on the television when I know there's something on that I want to watch (in my case, that's usually a sporting event). Even then, it is a struggle to browse through all those channels looking for my show.

However, data exists that could dramatically improve this product for me. Out of the hundreds of available channels, there are probably fewer than a dozen that I have watched in the past year. Of the thousands of shows, those that I have watched have a very limited set of characteristics (maybe 60% sports, 30% news, and 10% movies or other entertainment), and the specifics within each of those fields could be narrowly defined (favorite sports, leagues, teams) simply by observing my behaviors.

Similarly, data exists that indicates with whom I associate (Facebook friends; e-mail, text, and telephone conversations; organizational associations, etc.). And the data exists to indicate what these people generally watch and what they are watching right now. Also similarly, it is relatively simple to identify other people who like to watch the same things I do, and to identify what other things these people watch and what they are watching right now.

This isn't much of a stretch from what many companies do today. Amazon recommends products to me based on what others that have similar tastes as mine have bought and recommended. LinkedIn recommends contacts to me based on common associations. TripAdvisor recommends hotels to me based on what my Facebook friends enjoyed.

Theoretically, when I turn on the television, the Intelligence Revolution should allow my cable company to present to me the very small number of shows that I might actually want to watch, rather than forcing me to wade through a sea of unpalatable

choices in hopes of finding a hidden gem.

Although the above example appeals to me as a consumer, it is important to point out that the Intelligence Revolution is most clearly playing out today in industries where the consumer is not the paying customer, but rather is the product. Security expert Bruce Schneier may have been the first to make the point that - if you aren't paying for a product/service, then you aren't the customer, you are the product.

Google and Facebook are examples of companies that do a great job of making billions of dollars in profits by translating the information they have about their users (us) to provide a more valuable service (often targeted advertising) to their paying customers. To be fair to these companies, they actually have what is called a "two sided business model." Although we are the product, it is critical that they keep us happy so that we keep coming back in order to sell our "eyeballs" to their advertisers. Both these companies do a great job of using "actionable insights" to improve the quality of their service to us, their end users. Google's search algorithms are a great example of how the Intelligence Revolution has already transformed the way that we, as individuals, interact with the world around us.

In time, it is my hope that Christian churches and ministries will find ethical and God-honoring ways to leverage "big data" to better serve those around us and to advance God's kingdom here on earth. It is my hope and prayer that these articles will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. As 1 Peter 4:10 teaches us "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

Russ McGuire is a trusted advisor with proven strategic insights. He has been blessed to serve as an executive in Fortune 500 companies, found technology startups, be awarded technology patents, author a book and contribute to others, write dozens of articles for various publications, and speak at many conferences. More importantly, he's a husband and father who cares about people, and he's a committed Christian who operates with integrity and believes in doing what is right. Learn more at http://sdgstrategy.com