

What is Your Tech Adoption Index?



The key to harness technology in retail is to imagine and think beyond what is being offered by the vendors

TECHNOLOGY BY ITSELF CAN SERVE A LIMITED PURPOSE. IT IS ACTUALLY THE END USER WHO COMPLETES THE BIG PICTURE AND IS NOT ONLY NECESSARY BUT PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF THE EQUATION. RETAILERS ARE THUS PLACED AT THE CENTRE OF THE TECHNOLOGY UNIVERSE. INSTEAD OF WONDERING WHAT ALL CAN THEY DO WITH TECHNOLOGY, THEY SHOULD BE ASKING THEMSELVES, “WHAT ALL CAN TECHNOLOGY DO FOR US”?

By Harminder Sahni

→ When I got to know that this edition of *Images Retail* would be focussed on technology in retail and how it is empowering modern retailers, my first thought was to take a summer break and defer writing in this issue. The reason was that while I am a fairly serious user of technology in personal and professional life, I have very little understanding of technology as such.

What goes behind the screen and underneath the keyboard is a complete mystery to me. I consider technology as something magical, thank God and geeks for giving it to us, and use it everyday to make my life easier and efficient. I may not be presumptive in believing that many

of you will echo my feelings and be smiling at them.

The next thought that struck me was that while God and geeks have indeed created information technology which has revolutionised the world in so many ways, haven't people like you and me made it a really worthwhile industry and profession? My interaction with some of the best IT professionals has given me some insight into the innards of their mysterious world.

I always wondered how do they come up with programs and applications that make things so much faster and better. Each one of them had their take on the subject but one element was common to the

explanation offered by all of them. And that was the absolute focus on what their customers really needed to make their businesses more successful, larger, and more profitable.

Their belief was that technology by itself is redundant and on its own can serve limited or no purpose. It is actually the end user who completes the big picture and is not only necessary but probably the most important element of the equation. Without the end user, technology would be like a beautiful painting that gave pleasure to the painter while he was creating it, but after that was left lying in the basement or attic unattended. This thought of me or us – the end users – being so

important in the world of information technology gave me the confidence to write this piece.

Now, if we consider that we, as end users, sit at the center of this universe, rather than wondering what all we can do with technology, we should be asking ourselves, What all can technology do for us? And thus taking technology as a given and at our service, we should always be thinking: “What more can I, as a retailer, make technology do for me?”

The necessary condition for this thought is to first have technology all around us. Once we have it at our beck and call, we then need to be absolutely ruthless and expect what may seem impossible. Magical gadgets like iPad and hundreds of thousands of applications out there give me a reason to believe that there is nothing we can imagine that is not possible, if we as retailers are



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willing to invest in technology. Today, a particular application is absent in the market place not because there is not enough technology available to make it possible, but because no one has conceptualised it yet. So the key is to imagine and think beyond what is being offered by the vendors or what you can see in use with other retailers. The pace and control technological advancement is in our hands. We as end users are the prime drivers of technology in the modern world and this gives us the power to demand more and probably get it.

Businesses need to stop thinking

about technology as merely an efficiency tool and start treating it as a necessary element of infrastructure to run their business. We today cannot think of running any business without a phone connection or electricity supply. Information technology similarly needs to be considered that fundamental an infrastructure to take full advantage of what all it has to offer retailers.

Considering anything as productivity enhancement tool is fraught with dangers of taking a “go or no go” call. Whether we need it or not? Are we productive enough or not? What is the ROI expected? A lot of questions, but do we really think like this about having a telephone anymore? I am more than certain that a few companies in the old days must have taken their initial phone connections after a careful evaluation of productivity improvement and getting their accountants to crunch numbers to calculate the ROI on a phone line.

More than the companies that adopted telephones, there must have been many more which would have rejected the idea. If I had access to information, I could have seen the difference between the success levels of the adopters of

telecommunication and its skeptics. Modern information technology is nothing but an extension and further advancement of telephony and need not be evaluated every day for its potential benefits, like we no longer evaluate a telephone connection.

The big dilemma that most CEOs face while considering or evaluating technology spend is related to “where” and “when”? Their concern is: “I should not be spending (though the right word is *investing*) too much too early and probably in a wrong department.”

I have come to believe that there is nothing like overkill in case of technology. If a particular technological solution exists and many others have already adopted it, then there must be a use for the same. However, the issue generally lies with the companies that may not be ready for the adoption of such technologies.

Like for everything else, in the case of technology too, there is a process of evaluation and maturity. While adopting technology, sometimes the mistake is to force the company or a particular department or team to start running before they have learnt to walk. Pacing is extremely important but if your company has started investing in technology quite late, then you either need to move faster than the rest of the world to catch up, or leapfrog the distance by adopting latest technologies and bypassing the older-generation applications. The information technology party has just begun for retailers and no one will even notice that you arrived late – and the best is, this party does not seem to be ending anytime soon.

So my suggestion is that all companies should always have an agenda on their board meetings and strategic break-outs to discuss the role of technology in their business. Each of them should devise its own Technology Adoption Index (TAI) that should measure their level of evolution and maturity in adopting technology all across the company. The CEO must report on the TAI to not only the board but also to all the stakeholders at least once a year, if not more frequently.

The dilemma of how much technology, where and when can only be overcome by saying “as much as we can afford, wherever possible and as soon as possible.” But the ultimate mission should be to say “all of it, everywhere, and NOW!” ❏

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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