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What Makes a Technology Innovator?

By Thomas H. Davenport

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I am working on a new book about humans and automation that involves the role of technology innovators: people who decide that automation capabilities are appropriate for their organizations, and then lead the implementation of them. Whatever the technology, this can be a complex role involving understanding how the technology works, identifying vendors, financing the deal, designing new work arrangements, changing culture and behaviors, and modifying technology infrastructure. It's never easy, and it doesn't happen nearly enough in most organizations.

One of the people I have interviewed is Lou Ferrara, a vice president and managing editor for Entertainment, Sports, and Business News at The Associated Press. Mr. Ferrara also oversees the newsroom's delivery of "digital products." He has overseen the development of several technology-based innovation projects (including user-generated content, advertising tweets, and social media), but I was speaking with him about the automation of business and sports news for the AP. I have previously written about this here, so I won't go into detail about the particular application. But a quick update may be useful.



KIYOSHI OTA/BLOOMBERG NEWS A member of Japan's Chiba Institute of Technology works on a laptop computer as he makes an adjustment to an "Accelite" humanoid robot in Tokyo, Japan, April 16, 2015.

The AP is now using an automated story-writing tool called WordSmith from Automated Insights. The tool generates corporate earnings and sports stories. The arrangement started in 2014, and has been expanded since then; 3,000 earnings reports per quarter are written by the system, versus 300 per quarter by human journalists in the recent past. By the end of this year the system should generate more than 4500 reports per quarter. In sports, the system will soon generate stories about Division I college baseball, and Division 2 and 3 basketball and football, which will add thousands of stories a year for fans of those teams. The AP invested in

Automated Insights, and made a substantial profit on its investment when the vendor was acquired this year. The system is already generating substantially fewer errors than human journalists. Nobody's lost his job as a result of this system, and reporters seem not too disappointed to no longer write earnings reports, which were never the most scintillating business journalism.

My conversations with Mr. Ferrara about his background have helped confirm my belief that technology innovators are made, not born. And they can be born in mid-career. Mr. Ferrara spent the early part of his career as a newspaper reporter and editor, and worked for twelve years in my second hometown of Sarasota, Florida. Now Sarasota is a lovely place, but no one would confuse it with Silicon Valley. The *Sarasota Herald*

Tribune is a decent newspaper too, but it might seem unlikely that Mr. Ferrara would have learned much about technology innovation there.

But he did. The Sarasota newspaper launched a 24-hour news TV station around the time it launched its web operations in the early years of the dot-com boom, in the 1990s. By the time Mr. Ferrara left Sarasota, he was overseeing the TV and Web operations and innovating through multi-format reporting and publishing. He was building all-digital, non-tape video systems before they became the norm. His team began using emailed photos from hurricanes before most outlets knew the term user-generated content or Twitter existed.

Mr. Ferrara acquired an important attribute of technology innovators: he sees the big picture. When he looked at the AP's situation, he saw several factors that suggested the potential for automation, including scarce resources, pressure on margins, and a need despite these limitations for more content. The AP's customers may be constrained for newsprint space, but there are few if any constraints on online content volume. As Robbie Allen, the CEO of Automated Insights, put it:

The sign of a true innovator is someone that can look into the future and map a course from how to get from here to there. Lou understands the pressure on the publishing industry. He took a chance by implementing automated earnings reports with Automated Insights and it was a huge success. Now the Associated Press is well positioned to have broader coverage on a variety of topics that previously would have been unthinkable. Lou deserves the credit for making that happen. While the publishing industry isn't known for being the most forward-looking from a technology perspective, Lou has been a shining example of how to use new technologies to help the Associated Press adapt and gain new ground in the digital world.

The testimony from Mr. Allen suggests another trait of innovators: they build an ecosystem of partners and exploit it aggressively. Automated Insights isn't the only partnership that Mr. Ferrara nurtured; he also automated sports statistics from Stats Inc., which AP had invested in, and nurtured the relationship between the companies. He's worked with SNTV, a sports news agency AP also invested in. As an aside, ecosystem members tend to be connected; the AP sold its interest in Stats to Vista Equity Partners, a private equity firm; Stats and Vista recently acquired Automated Insights.

Mr. Ferrara has another attribute of technology innovators: he gets out a lot. He speaks at lots of conferences, including the most recent South by Southwest. He meets with venture capital investors and firms, as well as leaders of tech companies. He's quiet about it, but talks to a lot of people. You can't grasp the world of emerging technologies by sitting at your desk.

Technology innovators make sure the innovation is up and running before they move onto something else, but they don't hang on too long. Mr. Allen says about Mr. Ferrara that:

There are the inevitable hiccups that accompany any new project, but what impressed me most about Lou is he never wavered in his support. He has a vision for where the Associated Press needs to go and trusted his people and partners to make it happen.

Mr. Ferrara is still interested in automation, of course, but he's building an infrastructure of capabilities so he can pursue more strategic innovations. In March the

AP established what is probably the world's first "Automation Editor" role, one function of which is to look for more automation opportunities at the AP.

Finally, a good technology innovator doesn't take all the credit for successes; nobody likes a glory hog. In the work on automation, Mr. Ferrara credits his collaboration with Ken Dale, senior vice president and CFO, and Jim Kennedy, the AP's senior vice president for Strategy and Enterprise Development. They pushed forward the investment. And the implementation of automation involved a team involving AP Deputy Business Editor, Brad Foss, and Assistant Business Editor Philana Patterson.

Organizations need people like Lou Ferrara as much as they need external innovations from technology vendors. The journey taking an innovation from the external market to a successful internal project is full of roadblocks and potholes. Whether the technology involves automation, mobile apps, or cloud computing, it's the people who make technology innovations work.

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