

“Tell a good story.” Why utilizing storytelling benefits today’s technology students.



Every picture tells a story, what’s yours?

As we know, photographs capture moments for us to remember or reflect on a moment, but they also tend to bring with them a good story. With today’s social media, we are all citizen journalists to our own stories so how we choose to use them varies from the personal to the professional. In seeing myself to be both a teacher and mentor, the act of using story has become a valuable tool for the belt. Let’s be clear at the beginning, story in this instance becomes essential as it about more than a curious anecdote or form of social bragging by any means. This is here to praise the art of storytelling as an instrument of learning and problem-solving.

Author Martha Heller uses the phrase “Tell a good story” as a chapter title in her 2016 book, *Be the Business: CIOs in the New Era of IT*, and for information professionals today such a phrase is a call to action. The *story*, Heller suggests, is that information technology should always link to “vision, teamwork, and value,” three ranking imperatives associated with technology concepts, projects, and people.

Decades of rapid development and innovation have shown us that leaping forward on new technology, while exciting and invigorating, can be disruptive to business. This lasting effect leaves technology leaders and *integrators* in an often-unstable condition, so how they best

build a narrative, or *story*, is as critical an attribute in IT as in any other 'soft skill.' Though it may not seem relevant to some, today what is now known as 'business storytelling' has an applicable use in the technology field and is among a growing list of desirable skills of technology leaders. Shawn Callahan in his 2006 publication, "Putting Stories to Work" describes how (then) IBM's Cynefin Centre for Organisational Complexity focused collectively on what he refers to as "corporate anthropology". The Centre would curate stories from across the organization before distributing to others to help support the many culture-change initiatives from a citizen journalist type of approach to knowledge management. Since separating from IBM in 2004, the Centre now operates independently of IBM. Insights into the Centre including the path to existence is well validated through "[Managing for Serenity](#)" by Centre co-founder Dave Snowden. *At the very beginning of this work is the logical question of "What spreads fastest in your organisation, stories of failure or stories of success?" to which Snowden defends the "inevitable answer is failure and there are good reasons for this."*

So then, should storytelling apply to how technologists lead for or against the emerging trends in information technology? If so, how and why? Ten years ago, I joined the faculty of the Informatics program at Northeastern University through its College of Professional Studies. While I primarily teach the part-time, I have taught nearly every course from the Foundations of Informatics and business ethics, through to the rolling Information Security Management concentration courses. What I immediately appreciated about this technology-based academic program is that it clearly set out to meet certain objectives for graduates, one of which was to *adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to research and analysis*. The key qualifier in that objective is *adopt* and this speaks to an expectation that students will approach their learning ready to adopt, not adapt. This is important to point out at the forefront so that by the eventual completion of study, students will be prepared to act on their own calling for vision, teamwork, and value. My conclusion is that competency and confidence builds with students developing his or her storytelling abilities, and to be equally capable of reflecting critically on the stories of others.

Consider for a moment the very real threat posed to businesses from cyber-related information security threats. For most organizations, information security responsibility is entirely given over to information technology staff and divisional leadership. These specialized individuals tend to act as advisors or guides-from-the-side to executive and C-level administrators, though often left outside the board room. Is it the vocabulary or the story that keeps expertise on the sideline? Often, one or both are the issue. The impact of sheltering voices critical to the integrity of the business is a weakened reaction time to incidents and threats, both internal and external.

The reality of today's business is that every company employs technology concepts, and thus employs technology people. The level of expertise employed is a factor in how far and how well the company uses technology to support the business. Over the last two decades, we have seen advances in consumer-led technology influencing business on the inside and out, driven primarily by mobile applications and devices. Strategies such as BYOD, bring your own devices,

ultimately challenge the definitions of mobile technology as digital consumers of information operated anywhere and everywhere.

On any given hour, examine the workspace of fellow employees and one will typically find not only a computer workstation being used with a smartphone and/or tablet on the side, and in either instance it's possible neither device is owned and managed by IT. As knowledge-seeking workers, we are constantly consuming information as part of a daily routine, and on our own time and preferred place. Through the application of technology, business centers are distributing information to managers and divisional leaders faster and more often, empowering those to immediately produce as they transfer data into knowledge to grow and expand the business. Our need to consume information across all devices is universal, is both personal and professional, and will only increase as costs for devices and connectivity are reduced around the world.

Since the introduction of the Internet as a business and consumer technology, our recognition of corporate reputation in a now-globalized society has been changing, making the *story* from IT ever more important. Well before Myspace, Facebook, and YouTube, hundreds of known organizations grappled with protecting brand identity as the world discovered the 'Web'; only twenty-five years ago known brands from McDonald's to Pepsi nearly missed the boat in setting their WWW brand identity (see Quittner's 1994 article "Billions Registered" at <https://www.wired.com/1994/10/mcdonalds/>). This is not because the MIS or IS department wasn't aware of the trending information superhighway, but instead their voices were just departmentalized to data processing and terminal management, in other words operational and not strategic. Imagine the IS call center receiving word that the corporate identity was now owned by a teenager in another country. When we *adopt* new perspectives and *align* our expertise with business, there is no missed opportunity; no multi-figure payout to retrieve one's domain name from a domain-squatting opportunist.

A key attribute to a successful information technologist and business storyteller is *listening*. To tell an authentic story, the speaker must have too listened to others and validated their points of view. Technologists listen daily in service to others, either through technical support, to constituents as part of a software development cycle, to vendors and external partners offering augmented consultation, or to business leaders as they communicate the vision and direction of the organization. When we *listen* too, we see tasks as opportunities, incidents as inevitable but manageable. Without hearing the voices, how will technologists be seen as valuable advisors or leaders to the organization? Of course, listening is a technical term too, as network monitoring increases to better protect assets and reputation.

If given the question, "What are the emerging trends in information technology?" the easy response could list off any number of technology concepts in headlines and reports today. Certainly, cloud computing, mobile networking, e-commerce, digital transformation, and cyber security would all be part of such lists, and for good reason, as each has been influencing computing for the last two decades. However, as educators first, I see trends not in the gadgets we use but the philosophies we *adopt*. In taking a technology-first position in business dealings

across the board, attributes such as *story*, *listening*, and *problem-solving* each link to how and why information technology exists in support of vision, teamwork, and value in an organization. Whether from the enterprise to the small business to the household, the practical skills afforded by the critical study of these technology concepts return immediate value and benefits for numerous career paths.

Much like how Information Technology escaped the basement to the board room, online education took center stage with COVID-19. The courses that pivoted the best deployed techniques including narrative storytelling to engage with the students. There is a certain freedom in telling one's story in the classroom, for instructors and the students. Next to reflection, "storytelling" is ultimately an empowering act that can overcome some of the real-world issues outside of the classroom and keep us on track in our learning journey. Instructors now have flexibility in the modalities of their courses, from in-person to remote or hybrid, to make sure they're serving students in the best way over time and in the spaces where *they* learn best. The great part about all of this is that students and instructors alike will learn from one by aligning experiences with course materials. That's one of the lessons we're learning coming out the other end of Covid—we really need to know one another better in safe and nurturing spaces and tapping into the potential of using 'storytelling' as an instrument for learning, one just needs to confidently start with a *story* worth telling.