EPISODE 202: J. SINGH – AGILITY & DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

J. Singh

While you're doing the things you're doing today and you will continue to deliver value for your organization, the external pressures may change very rapidly on you. And if you don't have as an organization agility to respond to those pressures quickly, you may go out of business.

Female Voice

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Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. When companies and organizations discuss digital transformation, they often focus on effective ways to drive technology adoption and transformation. Our guest today says there's much more to consider. After earning his MBA at William & Mary, J. Singh has spent 20 years working at some of the world's most recognizable companies, including Target, McDonald's, and now Sport Clips Haircuts, where he's the Chief Digital Officer. His experience is in analytics, merchandising, digital innovation, and digital transformation. He says there are a number of elements to consider in terms of digital transformation, such as agility and speed, the competition, the customer, the employee, and more. He joins us today to talk about digital transformation and how companies and leaders should think about people, process, and tools as they move forward. Here's our conversation with the Chief Digital Officer at Sport Clips Haircuts, J. Singh.

Ken White

Well, J, thanks very much for joining us. It's a pleasure to have you here this weekend.

J. Singh

Thank you for having me here.

Ken White

Special weekend. You were just a part of a panel that you and I sat on about principled achievement and leading a life of principled achievement with alumni in the room. What'd you think? What are your reactions to that?

J. Singh

I think this is very good conversation to have. I think where we are all in our careers right now. It's important to think about not only what you're achieving but how you're achieving it. And I think, in my personal opinion, the leaders that I like to follow are the ones where there's achievement and also some principles and values behind it. And I think this is a very relevant conversation for folks our age in general and for leaders everywhere.

Ken White

So when you left William & Mary with your MBA, did Chief Digital Officer, was that on your radar?

J. Singh

Absolutely not. And I don't even know if Chief Digital Officer was even a title back then. I think they were just CMOs, CTOs or CIO, or even COO and CFOs, and so on and on. And I think the Chief Digital Officer certainly is a newer title, so much so that sometimes I get approached by recruiters for a Chief Digital Officer role, and their definition of a chief digital officer is very different than what I do. And I think I'm seeing sort of two flavors of it. One is really more driven by technology, and the other is more around the marketing element of it is the digital marketing. So it is a newer title. I don't think I would ever be driving or leading a digital team. So it's been an interesting series of events which brings me here.

Ken White

You didn't necessarily see yourself as a quote, tech guy, quote unquote earlier, right?

J. Singh

Yes. No, I do have an engineering undergraduate, but when we think about engineers or tech in our industry, we are thinking about folks who can write code. And I really never wrote a code, never an HTML page, not a Java page or any of that. The only code I ever wrote was VBA in Excel. And that's thanks to sort of my early days as an analyst at Cap One, where you had to get really good at Excel. But I never thought my career would be focused on how technology is either transforming or evolving organizations. And it's just a

number of interesting opportunities I got in my career, which now put me in a place where I'm driving technology adoption and transformation for organizations.

Ken White

Yeah. Can you get a little more detail? What does that necessarily mean?

J. Singh

In terms of what is a transformation using technology? Yeah, absolutely. So at the very basic level, I think the way I think about technology is it's more a response to our macro environment that we all work in as business. Right. So I'll take a bit of a theoretical approach to it, and then I'll explain sort of how digital transformation works there. So what we learned in our business strategy classes back in the day is for each organization to provide value, it has to have a unique capability. And the unique capability is a function of your people, processes, and tools. And technology is a part of that people, process, and tools. And whether you're a Target or a McDonald's or an energy company or a sport clips haircut where I work right now, your combination of people, process, and tools is a unique combination. And that's why you can deliver unique value and capture unique value. That's what makes one business different from the other. The thing about value, though, is it's not static. It evolves over time. It evolves because you're trying to save costs, and your CFO puts operational efficiency on the table, or your competition is doing something different, so you have to do something different, or your customers' demands changes, and you have to meet customers' demands and so on and on. Or something like COVID shows up, and you suddenly have to change the way you use your combination of people, process, and tools to deliver value and capture value. So the value is not static. It just keeps evolving. If you think about historically, think about Nokia. For example, as a company, they had more than 100-year history of providing value over time and delivering telephones. What ended up happening in the last decade or two their speed with which value evolved increased very rapidly. And as a result, if you could not match up the speed of how the competition is moving, or the customer demands are moving, or how the macroeconomic is moving, if you could not match that speed, if you didn't have that agility, you died. And that's a digital disruption. And so where digital transformation really works, and where technology really works, is at the end of the day, my job is to provide is to enable an organization with higher agility. And the idea is while you're doing the things you're doing today, and you will continue to deliver value for your organization, the external pressures may change very rapidly on you. And if you don't have as an organization agility to respond to those pressures quickly, you may go out of business. And the way you deliver that through digital transformation, it's really not just about technology. Technology is an element, right? Having access to your data rapidly real time helps you make fast decision that gives you agility, but it's also how you make decisions as an organization. Do you have an annual budget cycle? And so once you've allocated a budget to a project, and that's where you're going to spend your money, even if COVID

happens. I think just giving agility on governance giving agility on budget decision-making is part of the digital transformation. And that's where you hear about sort of this idea of working on two-week sprints. You decide what you're going to do in two weeks, and that will tell you what you need to do in the future two weeks. So the planning cycle has shrunk a lot, and that gives you agility. And the third element of it is we always keep a close eye on competition, right? What's happening with competition? What's happening with macroeconomics? We all listen to CNN and all the NPR, and we know what's happening economically. We've all been waiting for a recession for twelve months now.

Ken White

Sure.

J. Singh

But the most important stakeholder is really customer or the client. And one of the very important facets of digital transformation is becoming more customer-centric, which means every two weeks, you're making sure what you're doing your customers really care about it. So it's really, if you think about the customer centricity, the data, the speed of decision making, that's what combination gives you agility. That's what digital transformation is really all about, in my opinion. Digital transformation does not necessarily tell you the next big product to make. It tells you how quickly to evolve based on what your customer wants, what your data is showing you, what the competition is doing, what's happening macroeconomically. And if you don't have the agility, you always have the risk of dying with the next big change.

Ken White

That's excellent. That's great. Thank you. In terms of audience, you mentioned customer. Is that primarily who you're focused on versus maybe, say, employees, prospective employees, partners, vendors, and so forth?

J. Singh

Yeah, it's a very good question. So I think a lot of the organizations start with the idea of customers. Who are my customers? How do I make sure they have a greatest experience? What most of the organizations which have gone down this journey has quickly realized is your customer experience will never exceed your employee experience. So your employee experience is a barrier to how good of a customer experience you can ever deliver. So to deliver a great customer experience, you have to deliver a great employee experience. Great employee experiences, for example. Think about Chick fil a, one of my favorite organizations, right? Because they treat their employee in a specific way, the clients or the customers get great experience. And there are other organizations where the employees do not necessarily feel that great. Even though they have great technology, the customers don't have greatest experience. So I think the focus on customers make obvious business

sense. However, the path to achieving that is by starting with your employees, and that gets you to the outcome that you're looking for. And when we think about employees, and especially in the digital transformation space, your employees aren't traditional FTEs that you used to have, right? These are my people I've hired. They get wages from me every two weeks, and I do annual reviews. It's also the contractors that you cannot afford to hire full-time anyway. So your contractors are as much a workforce as your employees, but beyond that, your vendors as well. Because in the digital transformation, if I'm using, let's say, a combination of technology stack to deliver a CRM capability, I will written that code, and I will not know what's behind that code. But I need those vendor partners to deliver value for me, and I want them to evolve their product for my needs. And if I treat them as not my employees, a contract relationship, I'm going to kind of nickel and dime them, and they're going to nickel and dime me. That's going to become a barrier to a great customer experience. So you almost have to start thinking about your employees more holistically, everyone who is sort of working on your side of the fence to deliver a great experience for your customer. Whether it's your full-time employees, contractors, or vendor partners, they all are all on your team. And the better you treat them, the better you got the customer experience.

Ken White
Yeah, and we've talked about customer experience on the podcast. Yeah, it's so interesting. We all know everyone listening knows the companies that get it, and we all have examples of the companies that don't.

Ken White
We'll continue our discussion with J. Singh in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. This year the Financial Times, Princeton Review, US News and World Report, and CEO Magazine have all named the William & Mary MBA program one of the best in the US and the world. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, consider one that has outstanding faculty, excellent student support, and a brand that's highly respected the William & Mary MBA program. Reach out to our admissions team to learn which of our four MBA programs best fits you. The full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now back to our conversation with J. Singh.

Ken White
It sounds like you're also in the innovation world.

J. Singh
Yeah.

Ken White

Yeah. What role does innovation play in what you do?

J. Singh

Yeah, I think the topic of innovation, to be honest, is I would say this is a complex thought. And the reason I say that is a lot of the times, innovation is seen as just doing something different. And I think if we as leaders don't define innovation for ourselves really well, I think we land in trouble. Right. So what I mean by that, for example, I just love this two by two metric where you think about you have assets that you use today, and you have this operating model that you use today, and if your assets that you're using don't change, but you're just changing the way you use those assets, it's sort of what I'd call sustaining innovation. You're kind of just evolving a little bit, making a few changes. Maybe you're entering a new market where the financials are different, but you're not necessarily changing your assets. But if you don't change your operating model and just change your assets, maybe you're just upgrading. You used to do things with manual paper, now you're using Excel, now using SaaS, and so you've changed your assets, but you haven't really changed the value that you deliver. My favorite example is cloud. People think about cloud, and a lot of the time, you think about cloud as an innovation. It really is innovation for the companies that deliver value through cloud, as in the Google's, the Amazon's, of course, and then the Microsofts of the world. They have walked away from servers to cloud. But I, as a consumer of cloud, I as someone who actually gets cloud implemented in my business, there's no innovation there. I'm doing the same exact thing. I've just upgraded my asset. I don't have the in-house servers anymore. I'm just doing everything on the cloud. I've just upgraded my technology. But I'm doing exactly the same thing that I used to do before the technology change. So if you think about that two by two, real innovation happens when you not only change your assets but also change your operating model. Great examples. Airbnb, they use people's home as assets, and they change the way you pay for those, and they change the entire operating model for that. That's innovation. That's Uber, right? So when you think about innovation, you have to kind of really, in my opinion, as a leader, define what you think innovation is. So going back to your question more directly then, how does digital impact innovation? I think in a big way, but I think if you stay true to the idea that I'm driving innovation by not only changing my assets but also my operating model, then you have to give that team a different set of rules to play with. Right. If, for example, and one of the things that I have seen not work really well, at least in the organizations I've been in, where we try to kind of tell everyone, hey, innovation is everyone's job. You guys know the business. Go figure out what the next big thing is. You do get some operational benefits, you get some adoption of new technology, but you really cannot get to this kind of the idea of innovation. So, in my opinion, the way I've seen innovation work best is you have a select group of people where you kind of have almost this idea of bets, and you may have grand challenges, and you ask them to look internally and externally and find ways to get to those outcomes.

And it doesn't matter whether our existing operating model works or not. It can be a new operating model. It doesn't matter whether the assets we have today work or not. It's a new set of assets. And then I think if you have a group like that, that's where digital, the idea of customer centricity, the idea of sprints, the idea of data can really help you be innovative. But you almost have to separate them from sort of what I call the exploit, which is the rest of my business. And this is my explore, and I have to get my explore folks a different set of rules to play with because if they're playing in the same rules as exploit, then they're not going to give me any innovation. They're going to give me a slight improvement in whatever I'm doing.

Ken White

Yeah, interesting. This is obviously in your wheelhouse, and everybody's talking about it. I have to ask you about LLMs Chat GPT. Where's it going? What do you think?

J. Singh

Yeah, I think this is a space I'm watching very carefully and very closely. I do think it is a very, very interesting technology. And I'm looking for use cases, at least within my organization, to figure out where does it work really, really well and where we can apply it for real value. I think there is this initial tendency, I think, of figuring out, hey, is it a huge deflationary technology? And a classic example is, let's say you have this huge call center, and you have a lot of people taking calls and answering questions. Could a generative AI solution do that for you at scale much more effectively? And I think there is probably some application there, but I do believe that the folks on the call center who do problem-solving for our customers or clients. They have to use their brains a little bit more than just knowing what we've done in the past and what generative AI does. It knows what we've done in the past. So it's almost like maybe a combination of your actual call center individuals and a combination of generative AI that can help you get there. So I think there is this idea that it can save a lot of cost, and I'm waiting to see the real applications of those that are really impactful. I think it is also, at least initially, being explored as a way to have a companion who can crunch data for you, look for ideas for you, don't miss the obvious sort of an assistant for you. Whether it's in the legal space or medical space, or even as a writer, you can get inspiration. So I think there are some of those use cases where individuals and specific professions may find some unique value as a coder. What's wrong with my code? You can always use them as an assistant to what you're doing. I think there are probably some use cases there that can generate value. I'm going to wait and watch approach right now.

Ken White

Which area of an organization of the company should have its eyes on this? Is this the technology space? Is this marketing? Who should be looking?

J. Singh

I think it's a combination. I always feel where we get the most benefit from emerging technology is if business comes to the table with something they want to solve. If the business has a problem statement, I want to do this in a better way. Like my CMOs tend to be great partners in pushing the envelope on. I want to be able to reach a customer and do XYZ with them. Can you help me do it? And that's where someone from technology team can come to the table with a set of technologies which can allow you to do that. COOs are also a very good partner where they look at their entire organization and operating model, and they have some challenges and struggles. They come to the table and propose. I'm having this particular challenge with this particular group where I cannot get this thing to be done without errors. Do you have technology solutions? Right. So I think that's where it becomes really helpful. It always is a partnership. Whenever technology team tends to take a lead on this, then it becomes a solution looking for a problem. And while that can sometimes lead to great value, it's a lot of throwing it on the wall and see what sticks. And sometimes, that can get exhausting for those individuals internally who are trying to champion that technology. And I've seen that happen in multiple organizations that I've brought on, where the champion of the technology just gives up because nobody in the business is listening. And I think it's that initial partnership with the business to kind of explore areas where the business needs help and then bringing the right technology to the table, I think, is probably could be a slower process, maybe not that innovative, but it leads to better outcomes.

Ken White

That's our conversation with J. Singh, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program, offered in four formats the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, J. Singh, Chief Digital Officer at Sport Clips Haircuts. And thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

We'd like to hear from you regarding the podcast. We invite you to share your ideas, questions, and thoughts with us by emailing us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks for listening to Leadership & Business.