

Striking the Right Balance

Partnering Technology and the Humanities



Keira Amstutz

Twenty years in the software and digital technology world have taught Mike Reynolds something: We can do better.

To literally illustrate his point, Reynolds grabs a marker and strides to a white board. He quickly sketches a graphic showing how software and technology have been generated for the last few decades.

The gist of what he draws with stick figures, boxes and arrows is this: Pretty much since the dawn of the computer age, engineers have discovered what's possible, created technology to reflect that possibility and then handed that technology over to product and marketing people to deliver it to the masses.

The problem is, the "masses" usually didn't understand the technology or know how to use it. And the technology often hit the market with flaws and weaknesses – especially in terms of usability. As a result, selling technology usually also meant selling training programs and, eventually, issuing updates (a process that gave our culture the once-ubiquitous phrase "version 2.0").

Reynolds' point? Users – those human beings who put the technology to work in their daily lives – seemed to be forgotten. Technology reflected what was possible, not what was useful or accessible. And, too often, technology became the point rather than the means to an end, he says. Firms would get so caught up in what they could do and how they did it that they lost sight of the "why."

New strategy

With his product agency, Innovatemap, Reynolds is taking a different approach, one that helps companies create, design and market digital products by starting with users. They get to the heart of what people want – from the most basic tasks to needs and desires they may

not even be aware of – before bringing these digital products to life.

It's an approach that Reynolds sees as setting his three-year-old agency apart in today's marketplace. But it's also one that he thinks should become commonplace.

Why? Because when that human element became overshadowed by technology, he says, something got lost. To bring that element back, he adds, we should embrace the humanities. However, Reynolds notes, he's not suggesting that we abandon our drive to improve education in science, technology, engineering and math, but that we strike a better balance between STEM and the humanities.

"The humanities are a strength that can be forgotten. They're about people and why we do what we do," Reynolds says. "Engineers are good at asking, 'Am I building the thing right?' The humanities help us ask, 'Am I building the right thing?'"

In Reynolds' view, future products will set themselves apart through their human appeal. As such, engineers, product designers and marketers must be equipped with an understanding of, well, humans. And that can be found through the humanities, those disciplines that help us understand ourselves and each other, and that help us express who we are and what we are about.

Time is right

So what's driving this shift from technology-driven products to humanity-driven products? Reynolds describes a few different trends.

For one thing, he believes that the opportunity to

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Mike Reynolds and the Innovatemap team help clients blend technology and human interaction.

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differentiate purely on technology has diminished. High-quality and well-architected technology that simply functions is now “table stakes,” he says.

As a result, he notes, the world is full of “great technology that nobody wants to use or buy.” What’s more, for each of those technologies, Reynolds adds, there is someone who thought it was a great idea and who might have pinned hopes and dreams to it – only to be disappointed because he or she didn’t realize there was no market for his or her great technology.

“Everybody seems to have an idea for an app. What they don’t know is whether or not there’s a broad need or market for that app.”

In addition, Reynolds shares, the marketplace’s ability to discover and adapt to users’ wants and habits is stronger than ever. Digital technology allows firms to constantly monitor product use in real-time

and respond instantaneously to problems or new discoveries in user preferences. The old process of launching a product, following up with lengthy market-research programs to test for reception, usability and problems and then, a few years later, issuing an improved, updated version are long gone.

Also, Reynolds contends, there’s a higher appreciation for design, a greater expectation for personal fulfillment and a genuine excitement around human – rather than technological – innovation.

With all of this in mind, Reynolds and his Innovatemap team have created a process that allows technology and the humanities to move out of their silos and function as collaborators. Their goal is to help firms hit the marketplace with digital products and services that are marketable, valuable and usable . . . and to help create a world in which we’re, finally, doing it better.