

Teaching Case:

Leading Digital Transformation: Dilemmas of a Chief Digital and Information Officer

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Abstract

The female protagonist of the case needs to make an important decision on whether to ‘stay or go’ in her current role at Kappa University. She had been in the university as a Chief Digital and Information Officer for nearly three years but was not given a strategic status, leaving her out of important decisions; yet she is responsible for the biggest budget of the university. The case raises issues on the strategic importance of digital transformation but also the recognition that female IT leaders may or may not have within their organisation and their influence on decision making linked to digital transformation matters. The explores the role of digital leaders and their relation to senior management; the challenges they face when not given a strategic role and the impact that this may have on the organisation’s experience with digital transformation. Further, the case provides the opportunity to students to compare and contrast different employment arrangements such as contracting and permanent employment. The case can be used on courses on digital transformation, digital strategy and IT leadership.

Keywords: Digital leaders, digital transformation, strategy formulation, CDOs, CIOs, gender, contractors, university, higher education

Learning objectives and key issues:

To explain the strategic importance of digital transformation

- To recognize the role that Digital Leaders have in the digital transformation process, and the challenges they may face.
- Increase awareness on the challenges that female IT professionals may face in the sector.
- Develop understanding of different work arrangements and in particular contracting versus permanent employment and the opportunities that these may provide for individuals as well as for digital innovation initiatives.

The problem:

It was a nice sunny Sunday afternoon and Anisha Khan was enjoying her favourite Darjeeling tea in her garden, thinking of her work situation and reflecting on her career. The meeting on Friday with the senior management team did not go as well as she had hoped. She expected that by now, nearly three years in the post she would be an active member of the Executive Board, aligning the digital transformation programme to the university's strategy. The senior management's view was that the executive board should focus on education and research which are the core functions of the university. According to them, digital related matters should be discussed at a departmental level. Her view was that digital transformation had a strategic role and should be discussed at the executive board. Just the day before an old client contacted her offering her the opportunity for a freelance five months post on the company's new digital transformation initiative asking her to respond within 5 days. Did she want to return to contracting career, or persevere with the current permanent

role she got despite its challenges? Since Friday, she had been questioning whether her position at Kappa University as the Chief Digital and Information Officer (CDIO) was sustainable and whether she would want to continue working for an organisation where the executive board did not allow her to have a voice on strategic decisions. Wasn't this a waste of her talent and expertise which she had built over a period of more than 10 years?

Background

Anisha Khan though graduated from a university in her home country with an accounting degree, never practiced as an accountant. Instead, she began working on permanent, full time roles, with technology companies early on in her career soon after finishing university and worked on projects related to developing marketing and strategic alignment with information technology (IT). She worked on some of the most high profile IT companies in the UK and at a time when mobile technologies and mobile communication was growing. She also worked for the public sector and moved into digital transformation roles as an independent professional. As a contractor, she was typically on interim roles for up to a period of six months such as Digital transformation lead or a Digital transformation consultant depending on the project. The prospect to work for different organisations, to get involved with a diverse set of projects and roles along with mixing with different people were found by Khan to be positive characteristics of contracting. As other contractors in the field, she liked the variation contracting provides, the ability to work in different organisations, to work with different people, whilst having a saying where to work and the ability to maintain a work life balance were additional benefits.

In January 2019 Anisha Khan joined Kappa University as an interim Chief Information Officer (CIO) on a six months contract. The previous CIO was on a long term sick leave and the

university was seeking someone to lead the IT department. Anisha had previously worked as interim CIO and chief digital officer (CDO) in a range of organisations both in the private and public sectors. Following this, she agreed to take on a permanent position in the organisation when there was a job advert for a new CIO. She convinced Kappa executives to give her the title of CDIO as she saw this as an opportunity for her to promote digital transformation in the organisation. In doing so, she also persuaded senior management to integrate IT and digital services, with now both becoming part of the IT function:

'I have taken the university's IT function with the responsibility to build more digital capability within the uni, I am responsible for building the digital profession. This is quite an IT role in many ways but with much digital focus, if that makes sense. Where do I start? It involves the transformation of our infrastructure, putting in place data governance, the use of data for business intelligence, AI, data architecture, it involves defining our digital capability framework and service design standards for creating new digital products, so we are building new technology blueprint informed by digital thinking. They all come under one umbrella programme, the DT programme of the university'.

Kappa University: Moving towards Digital

Kappa University is a middle-sized university in the UK with approximately 12000 students and 2000 academic and professional services staff. Faculties include science, engineering, business and humanities programmes, with the university strategy being to develop an international profile excelling in teaching and advancing research that makes an impact to organisations and society worldwide. The university's core functions are supported by professional services which include student support, finance, marketing, communications and

IT. The latter had been managed by a CIO who had been in the role for a period of 20 years. He was supported by a team of IT staff who managed the university's computing services, training programs and provided technical support to the various departments. In 2018, the vice-president of implementation asked an independent consultant to do a review on Kappa's digital initiatives and identify opportunities for digital transformation. One of the recommendations in the report was that the university needed to address leadership on digital related matters. At the time there was no single person promoting Digital Transformation and innovation within the organisation. With the then CIO being on a long term sick leave, the university's senior management made the decision to recruit a senior leader on digital transformation. This new leader was Khan who started her role in January 2019. Below Khan explains her new responsibilities:

'I have direct line management of computing services but we are about to change the name and we are growing outwards so and we will absorb some people from other departments so for example just to be confusing about it, there is a digital team that sits in the marketing group; they are going to come and join my wider group. There are IT supporters who work in computer science as a faculty, and they are probably going to join us so we are in this process at the moment but at the same time what I want to do is to bring the faculties and all departments into this group so we'll likely have a senior role in each area whose job is to coordinate the requirements and to be the subject focus for their faculty'.

A few months after Khan started her role, she realised that despite an increasing emphasis among senior management on digital, digital was still nebulous, without a clear understanding and appreciation of the opportunities that digital technologies could provide to the core functions of the organisation. Further, it became clear to Khan that she was not going to be part of Kappa's executive team any time soon:

‘I have the biggest budget at the university and I am not part of the executive board. This is not an ego thing, it is an indication of where we are as an organisation’.

Acceleration of Digital Initiatives due to the Pandemic

As the Covid-19 pandemic hit in the first quarter of 2020, the university had to move to a new way of functioning. Academics and students had to quickly adapt with the majority of the practical elements of their studies to be restricted or cancelled, such as travelling, fieldwork, on some occasions, lab work and practical sessions. The Covid-19 restrictions had affected how teaching and learning was conducted and contributed to the acceleration of digital innovation within the university sector overall and Kappa in particular.

Specifically for Kappa, the pandemic gave the opportunity to increase wide acceptance of the IT function. According to the Khan:

“the pandemic arrived at a perfect time for us. We were able to seamlessly move everyone online with relatively few problems. At that point everyone was very forgiving. The institution has realised the power of technology”.

But was digital still nebulous within Kappa? Kahn’s response was:

“there is more acceptance of digital transformation post-pandemic. Our response was very good reputationally for us”.

During this period she also managed to join the Executive Board that she so much wanted. However this was through the ‘back door’. Despite these positive outcomes, this digital leader was wary about senior management’s attitude towards digital transformation and her own role in the organization:

“Digital transformation is still slow, not enough investment”.

She reflected on her own position in the organization. Pre-pandemic this CDIO did not have a place on the executive board even though she had the biggest budget in the organization. When she accepted the role she asked that the IT and digital services were integrated. She later regretted that:

“The mistake I made was to keep IT as part of my department. IT is like the repair shop. There is lack of investment in core infrastructure; there is also a recruitment and retention problem; there is big demand for IT skills and people go elsewhere.”

As a result of the pandemic, several digital initiatives emerged, though these remained small and isolated. Strategic back-up from senior management was still lacking, being interpreted by Khan as *‘there is still lack of trust for people like me’* and that *‘senior management is scared of making big digital transformational changes’*.

So nearly 3 years after joining, she still did not have a position as CDIO in the executive board and therefore issues related to digital transformation initiatives were not being discussed at the strategic level. Despite this she managed to gain temporary access to the executive board, through a different role she had –as a Chair of the diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) committee - a workaround practice from her behalf so that she had a voice on the board. Access to the board in this way was only temporary as her DEI role had only 18 months duration and the role will come to an end in two months time. After this time, she will be back to square one with no one pushing the strategic perspective of digital transformation at Kappa University.

To Stay or to Go?

Nearly three years after being appointed, Khan needed to make a decision on whether to stay as CDIO for Kappa University or return to freelance contracting. She admitted that she had come a long way with her CDIO role since she was first appointed at Kappa University with several digital initiatives being under way as a result. Did she really want to let go of these achievements?

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Do organisations need digital leaders to manage their digital transformation? Why or why not?
2. What are the challenges that Khan faced as a CDIO?
3. How do you assess her decision to integrate all digital related services under one roof, i.e. within the IT department?
4. What could have been other alternatives?
5. Would you have done this differently? How? and why?
6. What are the pros and cons for organisations recruiting permanent staff to digital leadership positions? For individuals?
7. What is your advice to Khan in terms of staying or returning to a contracting career? Explain your stance.

Note:

The case study presented here derives from the author's research dataset, though some of the case information is fictional in order to maintain anonymity.

Suggested Readings:

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