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Adapting to Digital

Criticleye speaks to Joëlle Warren, Executive Chairman of search firm Warren Partners, about why resources, investment and communication are essential to executing a successful digital strategy

Businesses can spend swathes of time setting what appears to be a fool-proof digital strategy, but it won't work without the right tools.

This is something **Joëlle Warren**, Executive Chairman of search firm

Warren Partners, knows very well. She says the board and management team need to consider any cultural resistances that may occur and invest adequately in both resources and talent, not only to kick-start the strategy but also to keep it on track.

What are the challenges in creating a digital business model?

It can take time to build a culture that embraces digital media and multichannel capabilities. If it's driven by just one department – which is often sales ▶

and marketing, for example – when it tries to implement something, quite often it'll encounter resistance.

Must you have the right leadership to drive change?

Problems can occur if management fails to allocate resources to the right place. A board can be really sincere about competing in the digital space, but they might not understand that there could be cultural resistance. They should have a plan to overcome blockers once they have been identified.

Does hiring new talent make a difference?

We've seen clients hire bright digital directors, who may come from a marvellous technology company but they struggle to make the adjustment.

They plough on and try to do things as they had done within the culture of their previous, digitally savvy company and it doesn't work.

In certain instances, they perhaps don't listen to their colleagues and understand how to convince them to change.

Is it crucial to blend new recruits with existing talent?

You have to look at the skills that are already in the business. You're going to lose out on a whole lot of experience if you're not prepared to upskill employees.

This goes back to having the right resources, investment and making sure that ideas for change don't just get stuck in management.

“ It's a myth that only younger people are learning and developing in this area ”

It should cascade down the entire company. Everyone needs to be aligned with the new culture, and upskilling is a part of that.

You need to focus on key day-to-day behaviours in order to build the right environment. Leaders must model and reinforce behaviours by praising employees when they do the right thing.

Should there be a balance between influencing others and making clear, structural reforms?

The leadership has to be absolutely behind it, not just in what they say but in what they do. It requires a mix of informal approaches to reinforce behaviours and, more formally, through areas such as recruitment, remuneration and performance management. The incentives need to be in place to effect change.

How important is it for non-execs to stay up-to-date with the rapid pace of digital transformation?

I was speaking recently with a Chairman of a FTSE 250 company and he noted that the further he moved away from his

executive career, the more he needed to work on keeping himself current.

He recognised – and I think the best non-execs do – that they have to be learning all the time.

Actually, I think it's a myth that only younger people are learning and developing in this area. Older people won't get annoyed at being asked to do training, I think they welcome it.

Many executive and non-executive directors realise the importance of the digital agenda in order to gain a competitive advantage. It's having an impact on more business areas, from developing products and engaging customers, to reducing costs.

You can't afford not to embrace digital technology. ■

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Joëlle Warren was a speaker at Criticaleye's CEO Retreat. Find out more [here](#)



Joëlle Warren
Executive Chairman
Warren Partners

Joëlle Warren set up Warren Partners in 1999. She is now Executive Chairman and leads chair and non-executive director searches in addition to delivering Systemic Board Review services.

Joëlle splits her time between offices in London and the North West.

Contact Joëlle through:
www.criticaleye.net