Changing Attitudes in Tech

Transforming Experts into Businesspeople

By Maria Anselmi

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Nine of the top 10 in the Forbes list of the world's richest people are either engineers or have some form of technical education. The vast majority of start-ups are also led by tech specialists who have developed a business idea. These are people who not only understand business problems, but also how to fix them.

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I gained some personal insights into how real innovators work when mentoring the founders of a health start-up. This fledgling company's workforce consisted of just three people: a highly qualified medical doctor and two engineers. Exasperated by how time-consuming it was to perform a vascular ultrasound, they figured out a much quicker solution. They created a portable device that produced the same results by calculating the difference in pressure between specific parts of the body. This new process could be completed in just a few minutes in any location, without requiring the patient to visit a hospital. This small group of people had used their medical and analytical competences to identify both a problem and a practical solution.

What billionaires and start-up founders have in common is the ability to prioritize business orientation over specialization. In the tech industry, this is still a very rare trait, and companies that don't encourage it are ignoring hidden capital.

In the tech world, as in other domains, a permanent dualism seems to exist between specialists and generalists. Specialists are experts, while generalists are businesspeople. This division has its roots in the Industrial Revolution, when tasks were divided to make work more efficient and employees easier to replace – much like the parts of a machine. The more specialized people are, the easier they are to replace.

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Today our society is obsessed with hyper specialization and both employees and managers complain that their organizations are divided into silos. Nevertheless, most managers insist on defining roles and positions according to the activities they perform. This habit is so deeply ingrained that we also tend to label ourselves for the (real or imagined) benefit of others.

In reality, many studies have demonstrated that each of us has the capacity to either specialize or generalize. We could say that the space between specialism and generalism is a continuum of possibilities. Where we stand in this space is governed by the context.

It is also true that it is impossible to always be a generalist. All generalists are in fact serial specialists who move from one area of competence to another, driven by need or curiosity.

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In fact, the two roles even coexist in the tech world. Whereas an IT specialist tends to solve specific problems, a generalist finds solutions in the interactions between various systems.

Due to the very fast pace of digitization, we are progressively eroding the boundaries between technologies, products, sales and customers. Interactions between these areas are frequent and rapid and there is hardly time to follow a linear process. Increasingly, these previously distinct areas are represented simultaneously in project groups. Customers and managers can identify problems, tech support can find solutions and even turn them into products, and sales people can evaluate the impact and value of the solutions and put a price on them.

The process breaks down, however, when technical specialists are incapable of stepping into the customer's shoes, working on solution requirements together with product managers or envisioning the final solution in the customer environment. Technology is increasingly the bridge between products and customers, like the tailors in a haute couture atelier.

Our approach at Bisnode is to create an organization in which tech specialists need to build bridges with other functions. We work in combined product and data teams when developing new products or working on customer projects. Projects are initiated when a business need has been identified and the teams that work on them include specialists from various disciplines. For example, user experience designers provide input derived from customer interactions. This set-up allows everybody to work faster and focus on the business case. Every specialist is called on to contribute to a solution to a business problem that arises from the interactions between various systems.

It will be very interesting to see when or if organizations stop grouping people together just because they perform similar tasks. This will avoid the need for anyone to build bridges since they will exist from the outset, and also enable not only vertical but also horizontal careers.

If you have read this far but still aren't convinced that you need to be a generalist, just think about your private life. We all need to manage our household's books, but sometimes we also need to concentrate on cooking. In other words, we all need to be generalists at home – why should it be any different at work?

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Maria Anselmi
Group Director Data

Main Focus Area: Digitalization of Business Processes, Product and Data & Analytics

Background and area of expertise: Maria is Group Director, Data Organisation with a long background within Bisnode, as MD of Southern Markets for 15 years. Prior to Bisnode, Maria was one of the pioneers, digitizing financial media in and online advertising in Italy. She also mentors start-ups. Maria has a wide experience of how to manage transformation within a global company.

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