How Covid-19 Accelerated Digital Transformation at Harvard Business School

CIO helped transition to new operating model in 10 days

By Richard Pastore

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 virus disrupted the primary business model of universities in early March, just as students left for spring break. The challenge was to resume classes as quickly as possible using a new, virtual teaching model. Harvard Business School CIO Ron S. Chandler describes a "brute-force digital transformation" that enabled a "minimum viable classroom" in just 10 days, with the potential to change the venerable institution's business model for years to come.

Ron S. Chandler has been CIO of Harvard Business School since September 2018. He had the same role previously at the UCLA Anderson School of Management. He brought technology into the classroom for the Los Angeles Unified School District and was formerly a management consultant and bank CIO.

RICHARD PASTORE: On March 10, Harvard University instructed students to move out of their dormitory residences by March 13, and not to return to campus. The same day, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker declared a state of emergency. In all, more than 2,000 MBA and doctoral students and 233 faculty would not return to campus-based classes from spring break. Instead, they would start online classes on March 23. Ron Chandler, as CIO, you had a little over one week to relaunch the semester as a completely virtual institution. How the heck did you do it?

RON CHANDLER: HBS classes are based on case studies and very interactive. Class participation, attendance, labs, all of that affects your grading and had to be reimagined and practiced in a matter of 10 days. We had faculty who had never taught online and now would have to teach everyday through technology. And, we had students connecting from all over the globe.

We were not trying to build the best experience from Day One, we just wanted to build, as one of my IT colleagues coined, a minimum viable classroom. The first week, we had some glitches. The second week ends today [April 3, the date of this interview] and it's gone really well. It's evolving into a much better product. Over time, we'll have a much higher-performing classroom.

MR. PASTORE: Still, how did you achieve this status in so quickly?

MR. CHANDLER: We crowdsourced a lot of the activity. We had everyone contributing, from faculty to staff to students, through an ongoing Slack channel.

We received suggestions for off-the-shelf solutions for training faculty and other resources that only required simple integration. We flattened the hierarchy so there would be fewer serial handoffs of information to get to a resolution. It enabled more shared decision-making. If someone heard about something relevant happening at another business school, and I knew the CIO of that school, I'd call and put the right people in touch. We exchanged and shared a lot of information.

MR. PASTORE: That sounds very organic.

MR. CHANDLER: It was, but we had some leadership structure around it, with multiple audiences and groups that we leveraged or were part of. At the highest level, there was a task force led by one of our senior associate deans. There were multiple workstreams – for example, IT and teaching – and each had a leader.

MR. PASTORE: Besides the compressed timeframe, what were the chief challenges and how did you overcome them?

MR. CHANDLER: Many of our international students never came back to the U.S. from spring break. They have to dial in now from across the globe, and some had issues with their connectivity. IT did everything from providing mobile hotspots to sending out student technology checklists. We showed them how to check the speed and strength of their network signal and did other things to help them get ready.

MR. PASTORE: How did you prepare the faculty and ensure that your own platforms would perform?

MR. CHANDLER: We have HBS Online and executive education programs, so rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, we tapped into the expertise of those groups and then formed a task force and a train-the-trainers model. We redeployed quite a bit of our existing staff and cast a wide net for volunteers from across the organization to support these virtual classrooms. And they needed training as well. So now, when a class is about to start, the support person will check that everything is good and then go check on the next class. If there is an issue, our techs are notified immediately using the Slack channel, and then they troubleshoot and remediate. On the infrastructure side, we're leveraging the Canvas learning management system. Video capture and distribution is done via the Kaltura platform. We increased our network capacity to 10 times its original size, and our VPNs by 5X. We increased our service desk capacity, as well.

MR. PASTORE: So, what happened when everyone looked up and realized it all worked?

MR. CHANDLER: It was very emotional because the pressure was so high. People in IT are traditionally very modest. Organizationally, we're sort of introverted and typically don't want to be in the spotlight. We couldn't help but be under the spotlight now. And I've told several people how embarrassing it has been to walk into a room virtually and get a round of applause.

MR. PASTORE: That is happening to IT leaders in many businesses. The investments you and your CIO peers have been making to improve agility helped you to respond effectively in this crisis.

MR. CHANDLER: That's true. However, I hope IT's business colleagues realize this wasn't just keeping the lights on. This crisis has compelled a "brute force" digital transformation that is positioning us for the new normal. The digital quotient of the organization has been elevated through the roof. We are now remote-capable. My IT colleagues in other industries are transitioning their companies digitally to prepare them to enter new markets or offer new products. It's not just rerouting the plumbing and keeping the lights on.

Once the coronavirus crisis ends, I'm hopeful that IT doesn't go back to being order-takers. It would be great if CIOs continue to have a seat at the table, but also get to help set that table, as I enjoy being able to do at Harvard Business School.

MR. PASTORE: It will be exciting to see how the School and other institutions follow up this remarkable transformation. Thank you for sharing your story.

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About the Advisor

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Mr. Pastore develops and delivers research and related resources for The Hackett Group's advisory programs, including IT. He has over 25 years of experience working with CIOs and their teams to apply thought leadership and best practices to help them extract the maximum business value from strategic investments in technology. Mr. Pastore has spent the last 10 years designing, implementing and managing IT and business transformation leadership programs, including best practices research, seminars, workshops and conferences, assessment tools and frameworks for Fortune 1000 companies. He is former editor of CIO magazine and vice president of the CIO Executive Council.