Use Digital Safaris to Expand Your Innovation Horizons

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“Digital safaris,” or study tours, show what leading organizations are doing in digital innovation and transformation, and help executive leaders understand those initiatives deeply enough to adapt it to their own enterprise’s context. This note covers how to organize a digital safari.

Overview

Key Findings

- Executive leaders struggle to determine whether the enterprise has taken advantage of all opportunities for digital innovation and transformation.

- Staying competitive requires executive leaders to learn what digital giants, startups and other organization types are doing with digital innovation — not just the enterprise’s usual partners.

- Digital safaris (or study tours) offer a way for executive leaders to learn in depth from digital leaders about use cases, go-to techniques and best practices that are relevant for the enterprise.

Recommendations

Executive leaders who lead innovation management should participate in a digital safari by doing the following:

- Create buy-in for the digital safari by having crystal clear goals for, and target outcomes following, the digital safari and communicating the benefits to all parties.

- Prepare the participants to get the most out of the safari by setting expectations, arranging preparatory reading and encouraging a mindset of challenging canned presentations.

- Allow time for participants to digest what they learned by not overpacking the agenda; build in time for side conversations, serendipity and connecting lessons back to their job.

- Design, communicate and agree on the timing and nature of follow-up after the safari to ensure lessons are learned and diffused as quickly and efficiently as possible.
Introduction

Digital transformation and digital innovation are open-ended. It's easy to measure progress internally, but that may not be enough to keep the enterprise competitive. Innovation can be too incremental and suffer from groupthink.

To ensure their enterprises have taken advantage of all opportunities for digital innovation and transformation, executive leaders must educate themselves about what digital giants, startups and other types of organization are doing — not just the enterprise's usual partners. Digital safaris (or study tours) offer a way for executives to learn in depth from digital leaders about use cases and practices that are relevant for the enterprise. Digital safaris can help infuse the enterprise with unfamiliar innovations and innovation approaches.

Analysis

Go on Digital Safaris to See Digital Initiatives in Context

A digital safari involves visiting other organizations (in person or virtually) to learn about or engage in their digital initiatives and innovations. A digital safari gives executive leaders a deeper understanding of an initiative, innovation and/or systemic change than they could gain from reading about it online.

Each visit lasts anywhere from half an hour (e.g., a startup pitching at a VCs’ premises) to a full day (e.g., a tour of innovations at a digital giant, such as Amazon or Amazon Web Services). These visits may be conducted over multiple contiguous days (e.g., a one-week trip) or spaced out over time (e.g., every Thursday afternoon). Each visit may include presentations, demonstrations, hands-on experiences, Q&A and facility tours. Many large companies have facilities and teams dedicated to hosting such tours.

In this way, leaders get to understand not just the digital initiative or innovation itself but also the trends driving it and the thinking that went into its development. They also get to see how the organization innovates and learn its go-to techniques, how innovation fits in the business strategy and within the industry and what challenges have to be overcome. This deep insight enables leaders to better evaluate the relevance of a digital initiative and how it could be adapted for their own enterprises.

Design a Digital Safari Based on Seven Decisions

Digital safaris can take various forms. Executive leaders should consider their overall goal for a digital safari as well as six additional variables to tailor the safari for their particular needs (see Figure 1):

- Venues
- Target organizations
- Organizer
- Participation
The Four Typical Goals and Six Variables of Digital Safaris

The Four Goals and Six Variables of Digital Safaris

Goals

Typical goals of a digital safari include:

- Learning how to address a particular business issue or solve a particular business problem using digital means (e.g., best practices and go-to techniques for remote working)
- Learning about specific technologies or business innovations using technology (e.g., blockchain for traceability)
- Developing people
- More generally opening up the enterprise to new forms of innovation
Focus helps with orientation. Designing the study tour around a specific theme and guiding attendees around the key topics helps enrich learning and problem solving.

— Mohammed Khalid, global advisory director, Leading Edge Forum (part of DXC Technology)

There is a balance to be struck in digital safaris between laser focus on a narrow set of goals and designing in a little room for serendipity. A good rule of thumb is to arrange 80% of a digital safari around specific areas of strategic interest and allow 20% for random choices (e.g., unaligned startups or industries).

The other six decisions should be made based on the goals of the safari, the setup, and the participation cost and effort.

Venues

Digital safaris can be virtual or physical and may include one or multiple destinations. There are many physical hot spots around the world, including Silicon Valley, Seattle and Austin in the U.S.; Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing in China; London and Cambridge in the U.K.; Israel; and an increasing number of other locations. However, physical multilocation tours are harder to coordinate.

Physical and virtual safaris have different pros and cons:

- Physically travelling to companies and locations creates a more immersive experience, allows better demonstrations, and creates focus and discussion among a captive audience. But physical safaris are harder to arrange and require a big time commitment from participants.

- Virtual safaris cost much less in time and money for all parties, and they allow leaders to visit more locations. But the level of engagement and insight will be lower.

- Hybrid safaris can combine some of the best aspects of both.

Creating the right conditions helps with engagement. Allowing all attendees to safely explore their learning and test their thinking increases participation.

— Mohammed Khalid, global advisory director, Leading Edge Forum (part of DXC Technology)
Target Organizations

Executive leaders will get different insights from visiting different kinds of organizations. For example:

- Similar companies in other geographies or industries can offer pragmatic lessons about how to execute transformation or solve a particular business issue.
- Large technology vendors and service providers can exhibit their leading-edge products and plans but may incorporate a sales element.
- Venture capitalists, universities, incubators, accelerators and catapults are all great aggregators of startups and scale-ups, but only some of their portfolios will be interesting.

Safaris must be designed to ensure benefit to the hosting organizations as well. Renowned venture capital company Andreessen Horowitz participates in such a way as to create a win for all participants:

Over 10 years ago, we created our Executive Briefing Center (EBC), where we host leading executives in curated briefings with new and growth-stage technology companies. Thousands of our corporate partners have gained valuable insights, early access to innovative founders and groundbreaking technology. This has accelerated both the pace of innovation and the careers of our network of enterprise technology leaders.

— Stacy D’Amico, operating partner, Andreessen Horowitz

Organizer

Organizations may create and run their own digital safaris or use a third party, such as:

- Digital Leaders
- The Institute for Sustainable Leadership
- Leading Edge Forum
- Work Better Training

In addition, many top business schools offer study tours for executives. Third parties may offer different kinds of tours, and they have already developed relationships with the companies they visit. Enterprises that organize their own digital safaris often do so through their HR departments (see An Interview With Ageas’ Daniela Adaggi: “Digital Safari” Experience for Leaders).
Using external organizers helps broaden people's thinking around innovation, reduces groupthink and bias, and reduces the effort for the participating enterprise. But it does, of course, come at a cost.

Enterprises should do the organizing themselves if they need high levels of contextualization, if there are confidentiality concerns, or if building this capability will become a core, repeated part of the enterprise's success. Success here involves having or building connections with target organizations and high-powered event and logistics capabilities.

**Participation**

Digital safaris can be exclusive to one team or role in one part of one enterprise, or they can be open to many roles in many enterprises and in many industries — or anywhere in between. Executive leaders should choose the level of participation based on the purpose. For example, closed safaris support learning that is heavily contextualized for one enterprise or industry, whereas open safaris create a chance for making wider contacts and encountering unexpected ideas.

Leaders should also explicitly consider whether the number of people attending, and the attendees’ roles, will enable them to achieve the goals of the safari, including the diffusion of ideas through the rest of the enterprise. It is important to avoid any unintentional and unhelpful biases (e.g., including only senior people or those on fast-track programs).

More generally, there may be more appetite to attend than room on the safari. In these cases, the selection process must be handled fairly and openly. It can also be helpful if digital safari attendance is seen as part of a range of development opportunities.

**Timing**

Executive leaders should align the frequency of digital safaris to their purposes. For example, leaders who want immersive safaris might plan on a week visit every year or two for depth of insight. By contrast, some leaders may prefer a 30-minute virtual session with one company every week or two to gain exposure to a wide range of ideas. Working out which timing approach works best in a specific enterprise's culture may require testing multiple modalities.

**Format**

Executive leaders should arrange the format of their safaris based on what they want to get out of them. Most safaris center around presentations, demonstrations and tours given by the host company. This valuable content can be extended in different ways, depending on the resources the host is willing to commit:

- Leaders can receive materials before the safari to learn about the host company, which may trigger some questions so that time on-site can be used to go into more detail.
- The safari itself can include time for discussion and contextualization to explore deeper insights.
In general, those who participate in digital safaris often find that the downtime between meetings is at least as important as the meetings themselves for digesting and discussing ideas. In closed study tours, participants may discuss the applicability of the innovations they’ve seen. In open study tours, there is a lot of value in hearing a variety of peer perspectives on those innovations.

General Recommendations

Executive leaders planning digital safaris for their organizations should do the following:

- Have crystal clear goals for, and target outcomes following, the digital safari.
- Create buy-in for the digital safari by communicating the benefits to all parties.
- Prepare the participants to get the most out of the safari by setting expectations, arranging preparatory reading and encouraging a mindset to challenge canned presentations.
- Plan for contingencies (e.g., if a flight is canceled or a company becomes unavailable).
- Manage all confidentiality and privacy issues for hosts and attendees in advance (e.g., nondisclosure agreements, attendee anonymity and permission for sharing contact details).
- Don't overpack the agenda. Allow time for participants to digest what they learned and for side conversations, serendipity and connecting lessons back to their jobs.
- Design, communicate and agree on the timing and nature of follow-up after the safari to ensure lessons are learned and diffused as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- Remind everyone that a digital safari is just the “tip of the iceberg” in terms of achieving successful innovation and transformation. Lots of other culture, change, innovation and execution behaviors are necessary.

Putting all this into a business case will help executive leaders communicate the value of the digital safari with a clearly articulated plan and the anticipated return on investment, such as financial or operational benefits or lessons learned.

Evidence

This document is based on primary and secondary research into study tours, the authors’ personal experience and discussion with many stakeholders (e.g., organizers, participants, destination companies).
Recommended by the Authors

An Interview With Ageas' Daniela Adaggi: "Digital Safari" Experience for Leaders

How Executives Can Design an Innovation Process That Brings Ideas to Value

Combat the 9 Common Barriers to Innovation Success

Infographic: Use Case Prism to Learn Go-To Techniques From the Innovation Heavyweights