

Human Service IT in a Post-Pandemic World

Context and Thoughts for an Uncertain Future

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Highlights of the presenter's resumé: Masters degree in Finance; years of successful sparring with New York State over reimbursement rates; Managing Director of a Special Education policy institute; Chief Technology Officer of a medium-sized human services non-profit for 25 years; winner of CIO Magazine award for "Intranet Innovation"; intrapreneur and now entrepreneur.

**Even in the best of times...
...non-profit technology is hard.**

...non-profit technology management is difficult. Manageable success in any endeavor can be predicted by: 1) Clarity of Vision; 2) Leadership Talent; and, 3) Financial and Senior Management Support. Real progress takes good vision, ongoing investment, a lot of time, and a steady hand. Have you priced a CISO lately? Finding people who can talk to both “business” and “technical” people is difficult. Technologists have their own language and some “weaponize” it to oversell themselves, also hiring can be complicated.

**“A pandemic is terrible. And, also,
a terrible opportunity to waste.”**

Here's the thing. Pandemics change the world. Our world has changed. Change is always a double-edged sword. But, nature abhors a vacuum. Sharp people will fill that vacuum with new thinking.

**Can we shove 5 years of
initiatives into 18 months?**

At least one person predicted that we could. And, we did. But...

The “Scattershot Effect” and the “Human Impact”

...we just did without a ton of thinking. But, doing so had a huge effect on people, both positive and negative. In both cases, eyes were opened.

What do we do now?

First we need to look at where we are.

**“Toto, I’ve a feeling
we’re not in Kansas
anymore.”**

Let’s see if we can find some context from which to develop ideas on how to proceed.

Four “Big” Ideas

1. The Theme of the Pandemic Might be “Suffering”
2. The Workforce Situation is “Fluid”
3. Data Should be Meaningful and Actionable
4. We’re All Technology Companies Now

Big Idea 1: Suffering

104,618,931

U.S. COVID-19 Cases

1,131,819

U.S. COVID-19 Deaths

**Deaths of Family Members,
Friends, Neighbors, Co-Workers**

The Impact of Guilt

**PTSD Experienced by
“Front-Line” Workers**

**Fear, The Adoption of a “Bunker
Mentality” & the Price of Separation**

**Children Have Lost Years of Social
and Educational Development**

Job Losses & Business Failures

The Shock of Who the “Essential” Workers Really Were

DSPs!!! Nurses. Grocery clerks. Delivery personnel. Anyone involved in food production. Emergency personnel. Many among the lowest paid members of our work force. A lot of the “working poor” turned out to be “essential”.

Loss of Community Engagement

Churches, Concerts, Sports Groups, Clubs, Theatre...

The Pandemic Response Became Political & Personal

This is the first time in my life a national crisis failed to pull us together.

**We Didn't Have the Luxury of
Starting from a Healthy Place...**

The Political & Social & Economic Divides...

...Were “Supercharged” by
Social Media...

...and Combined into a
“Collective PTSD.”

Income Inequality is as Bad or Worse than that of the Gilded Age

Extreme variances in financial equity destroy trust and one's sense of fairness, thus weakening our societal bonds. Uncorrected, this is a weakness that will destroy "us".

**American statistics on addiction,
suicide, and violence are sobering.**

And each were developing problems even before the pandemic, which only served to exacerbate the situations.

We Are Suffering

We are fundamentally “social” creatures! We’re broken.

It's Time for Healing

(and rebuilding at home, at work, and in our communities)

Big Idea 2: Workforce

Labor Shortages are Affecting All Enterprises, Large and Small, from Entry-Level to Professionals

Human service agencies have understood labor shortages (from experience) for a long time, the best for decades. My nearby carwash has a help wanted sign perpetually displayed at the end of their entrance. Our pediatric urologist friend is perpetually on-call and working virtually every day with patients of all ages as there is a urologist shortage in the Albany area. None of this is sustainable. Business failures due to staffing crises are well-documented.

Demographics Are Fundamental (and unchangeable)

Once established, demographics become immovable forces that define huge aspects of what is possible. Look at the European trough of youth in the wake of World War II (especially in Russia). Look at the American Baby Boom. The impact of Boomers was historical then. It's historical now. There will be a lasting impact as they exit the workforce. And, as has been the case throughout our history, and with complete disregard for how almost all of our ancestors came to this country, "we still don't like immigrants" even though they benefit us socially and economically in myriad ways.

We Built Suboptimal Compensation Practices

Let's start with what's happened to pay, at both the Macro and the Micro levels. Human service agencies participated in expanding the gap between entry level and managerial compensation. The Great Resignation is very real. Unemployment numbers are low, but a lot of people have exited the workforce.

We Built Suboptimal Workplaces

“People are our greatest asset!” Nobody wants to be an asset. Management “deeds” rarely reflect the intent of these “words.” We used educational achievement to narrow access to career growth. We became enamored with process at the expense of product. Toxicity in the workplace is rampant. The “full return to the office” is proving to be problematic for those organizations dedicated to it as many employees prefer more flexible arrangements, which are being maintained and offered by many employers.

We Built Suboptimal Jobs

The DSP competency requirements fill dozens of pages. Pay is entry-level. The “cost” of mistakes is enormous. The potential of experiencing a career-ending mistake is always a threat. We have not made this job attractive despite the enormous benefit provided by workers.

Workers “Opted-Out”

Workers either quit outright or “quietly” did so. “Disruption” has been the nature of the workforce throughout the pandemic.

A New “Compact” is Needed

I think the biggest long-term impact of the pandemic will be a fundamental rearrangement in “work”.

Big Idea 3: Data Rules!

“Know thy data.”

The most important task for Technology leadership in any enterprise is to identify the data that is most critical to the success of the organization.

Data Needs to Be “Actionable”

The resultant challenge is to apply the best technology available to make that data useful and easily available to those who need it. Technologies change quickly, but quality data models tend to be highly “sticky.” Build your IT plans around data, not applications (or apps). Apps are “easy” when the “data” is right.

**Basic “Data Processing” is
where we all started.**

Early IT systems used data that was “relatively” easy to model and use. Accounting and Payroll were the “low hanging fruit” for IT automation. The “trick” is that basic organizational data needs to be modeled differently for different industries. Even “basic” non-profit data modeling can require great care as its management can be surprisingly complex.

“Waste, Fraud, and Abuse!” Compliance Über-Alles!

For the past 15 years, policy-makers have dictated a tremendous amount of record-keeping so as to reduce spending that is “wasteful, fraudulent, abusive”, or some combination of each. The data ended up being relatively easy to model, but while it was “actionable” for regulators in order to achieve financial recoveries, it had questionable benefit for people despite the huge expenditure to collect and manage it.

**Fields That Cannot Demonstrate
“Effectiveness” as Well as “Need”
Will Be Outcompeted for Resources.**

Agencies in the DD field provide both “caretaking” and “development” services. They are different beasts, but agencies must show the ability to discern between the two and be “responsible” in their caretaking activities while being “effective” in facilitating growth in those with measurable potential. Refer to the discussion on “suffering” to understand where public investment is heading.

**AI is Coming! It Can Only Be as
Good as the Data it Sees.**

Artificial intelligence is in its infancy, but will grow quickly. AI essentially results from “Machine Learning,” which happens when machines become capable of advanced data pattern recognition and prediction within specific contexts. Human brains do this innately through their biological neural networks. Both biological and technical learning can only be as good as the data they see and recognize as valuable. Garbage-in, garbage-out still applies—probably more so with AI.

Programs Need a New “Data Paradigm”

Life and Action Plans are a start, but how do we make their results “actionable?” The trick is to capture effectiveness data with narrative notes containing contextual information so that “predictors” come to the forefront.

From “Data Processing” to “Social Media”

From once being the province of “wizards,” technology is now ubiquitous and accessible by and affordable for virtually everyone. Technology’s role in the world has increased at all levels: personal, professional, and societal. It now has less to do with data processing and more to do with communications. However, the yin and the yang is still truth and we have not learned how to achieve balance in our use of technological media. We are floundering.

“Social Data” is “Unstructured”...

...But Immensely Powerful for Services...

The data most “critical” to providing quality services isn’t being communicated through service notes, it’s ideally happening face to face from person to person, but is also flowing through email and text messages. But all of those means are mainly “private,” so the challenge is to find a way of making storing the service-critical information in a “public” place where it can be utilized for “longitudinal” program management.

...and Also for Culture.

The power of culture within any organization far exceeds that of any other force as “culture” underlies all of the decisions that are made without having to think about them. Culture is what happens “naturally” within an organization (or, society) for better and for worse. So, when “social” technology is a primary means of cultural transmission, it deserves attention and respect, especially with regard to its inherent shortcomings as a communications mechanism.

**Technology Profoundly Influences
Efficiency, Effectiveness, and the
“Energy” of All Organizations...**

...and it's becoming more pervasive!

**Big Idea 4:
We are all Technology
Companies Now!**

11 Largest American Companies

- Walmart
- Amazon
- Apple
- CVS Health
- United Health Group
- Exxon Mobil
- Berkshire Hathaway
- Alphabet
- McKesson Corporation
- AmerisourceBergen
- Microsoft

This list is dominated by technology, insurance, and health care firms. Exxon Mobil is the only company on the list in which deep technological embedding into the core business is not a fundamental property of the business. These companies don't make the Top 11 without massively successful investments in technology. Successful smaller organizations will have to replicate that deep embedding to remain vital. The scale and form may be different, but the basic model is not. The "big" fish eating "little" fish usually have superior "technology" and practices underlying their "competitive advantage".

What shall we do?

(here's a 12-step program)

It's not really a "12 step program", but 12 suggestions for managers to be mindful of, in no particular order.

**“Accept that there are
no silver bullets.”**

From the opening slide: “Real progress takes good vision, ongoing investment, a lot of time, and a steady hand.” Think holistically and trust in the miracle of unrelenting incremental progress.

“Quality is a management decision.”

These are the five most important words I learned in graduate school. Understanding them clearly within the context of an organization provides clarity and profound implications for direction. In this context they mean that we, as leaders, get to choose whether or not we want to respond to our challenges in a meaningful way. We don't have complete freedom and discretion with regard to our macro environment, but we do get choose much within the micro contexts we inhabit and we “own” the quality, or lack-thereof, of what we produce and/or inspire.

“Own thy data.”

Most of us will live with systems built and owned by someone other than ourselves. There is nothing wrong with buying (nor is there anything wrong with building, if you can afford it), but be smart! Never commit to a vendor who does not provide easy access to your data. Never believe a vendor that can “do it all.” Every organization is at least somewhat unique. In order to be of long-term interest to funding agencies and participants alike, your uniqueness will have to have demonstrable value. You need to be able to manipulate your own data to make it work for you.

“Recognize IT’s strategic value.”

Organizational Information Technology is every bit as valuable to an enterprise as are other “overhead” functions such as finance, accounting, personnel, and, quality assurance. It requires knowledges distinct from these other areas and should report to the Executive Director. Leadership of the function requires deep technical and deep business knowledge. It’s worth the investment, even if it’s done on a “part-time” basis.

“Organizations need an ounce of great vision and a ton of even better execution.”

Understand the impact of 2% annual productivity improvements. It is the story of why the majority of us no longer farm and it's also a big part of the story of the decline of total employment in manufacturing. The future is worthy of thoughtful consideration, but not endless obsession. The value of smart operations that continuously improve incrementally is priceless. Try small things. Evaluation often and fix quickly. Expend a light amount of high-quality time on the former; invest smartly and resolutely in the latter. Do so in every major function within the organization, including IT. Stop investing in “navel-gazing!”

**“The data integrator will
differentiate IT success rates for
the foreseeable future.”**

Know what will kill you. Know what will give your organization an advantage. Know how your people are doing and what works for them. Hire someone who can prioritize data correctly, choose systems wisely, and then cull and connect bits of data from disparate sources to provide actionable information.

“Unstructured data pervades the enterprise. Learn to hear it.”

“Everybody Talks” — *Thomas Friedman*

“Everybody in the operation except the plant manager and personnel director knew what was wrong. They spent a lot of money on consultants to find out the truth. They got the report. Then, they ignored it.” Know that “everybody talks” (and most “know the truth”) even in repressive situations. The quality of relationships define every organization. Trust is the most valuable currency in determining the quality of relationships. If you don’t have organizational trust, you never know the truth and, therefore, can never address “real” problems. Live up to your values. Ensure that you do by having others measuring you by your own values.

**“You forget, dear Charlie, that the
labourer is worthy of his hire.”**

from “Heart of Darkness” —Joseph Conrad

Income disparity sickens our society and our workplaces. My own analysis showed over two decades in one organization that average managerial and professional increases were 2.5% versus 1.5% for other (mostly entry-level) staff. Trending the allowable Direct Care reimbursement from 1988 at the rate of inflation would’ve yielded a livable wage. Direct Service Providers should not be the “working poor.” We need to reverse our behavior for the foreseeable future.

“Hire really good ‘real’ people.”

Technology hires should exhibit three traits in as much abundance as possible: 1) Competency; 2) Character; and, 3) Curiosity. Never hire someone with significant deficits in any of these traits even if they excel in another!

**“Manage as if your team were
‘paid volunteers’.”**

You'll never win the battle with compensation (the private sector will always outspend you for top talent). So, you better provide a really superb work environment that makes it hard for the “right” people to leave for more money (which will always be on the table for people with good technology skills).

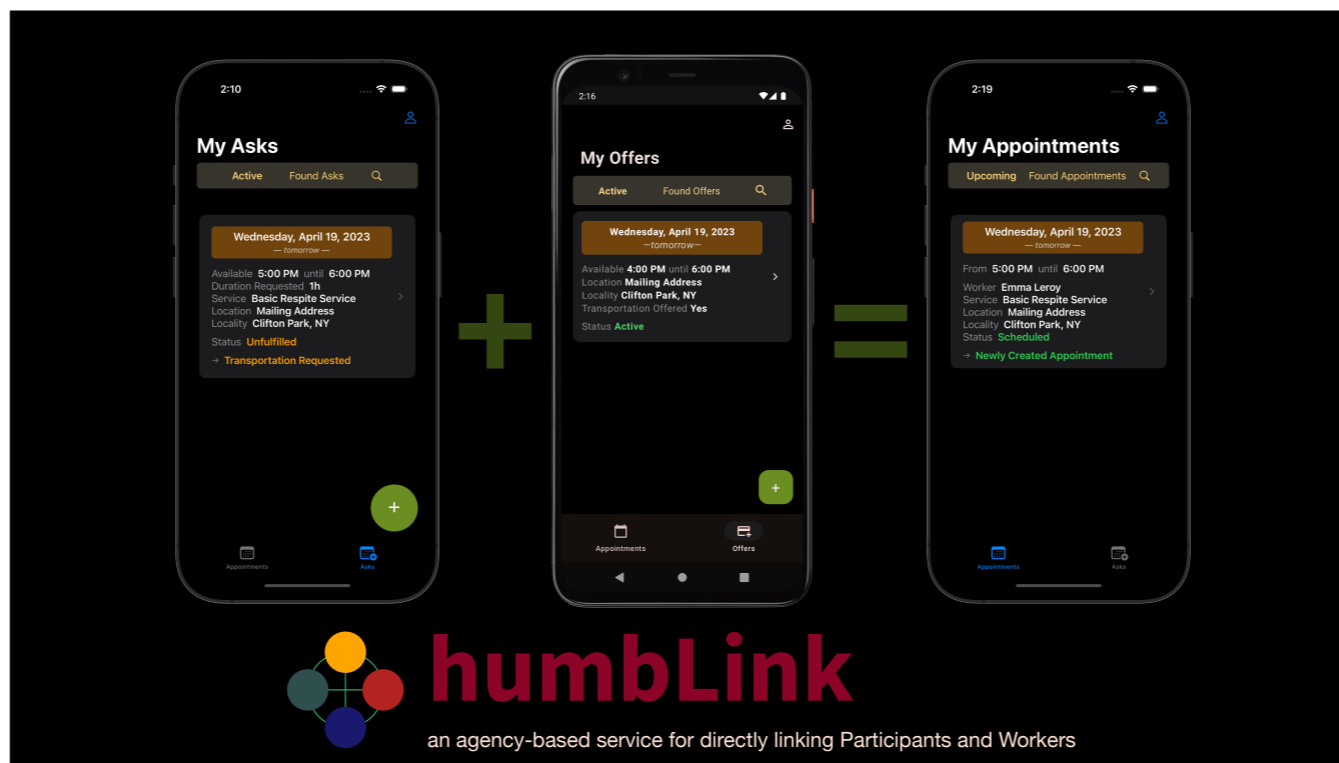
**“With malice toward none with
charity for all with firmness in the
right...”**

—Abraham Lincoln

Society's many ills can largely be explained by the simple observation that we have forgotten how to treat one another. We need to apply Lincoln's same dictum for healing to our issues today.

“Connect people as well as systems.”

My company's primary service is called "humbLink." Its name derives from the thought, "humans be linked." We need systems that connect people in such a way that the end product is face to face interaction. Technology, which often immensely useful, provides no equivalent to people being physically together. We are "wired" to need "real" human connection often. Be a facilitator of connection!



Shameless plug for humbLink, our forthcoming service (99% ready) that brings an Uber-like model to services like Community Habilitation and Respite (within an agency context where workers are properly vetted, of course)! Built expressly for non-profits and priced that way, too.

There is Hope!

We have never had more potential as a world or as a species than we do today (despite our deep challenges). Technology has, throughout history, been a requisite factor for enabling rising living standards for people. When combined with progress in human rights and equity in opportunity, it can be an unstoppable force. We've never had more or better technology than we do right now. But, all technology can be used for good or for bad. We can either squander its (our) potential, or we can act wisely and use it to make things better for everyone. We have the opportunity to do amazing things! Be firmly "in the right" and trust in the creativity of your people!



Thank you!