Four corporate strategies for coping with triumphant digital platforms

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Menaced with extinction as a result of a presumably inevitable "uberization", firms have to speed up their digital transformation. This detailed study of approximately twenty French firms and organizations that have advanced toward this transformation shows that theories based on management fashions do not suffice to explain such a deep trend. The strategies worked out and applied by these firms are much more specific and thorough than specialists' vague strategic recommendations. The facts of these cases even lead us to question whether the scare of uberization is a valid explanation, since it is, as shown, possible to survive from Uber, Airbnb, Booking and even Amazon. Various strategies can be adopted: confront these platforms head-on (even belatedly), avoid them, negotiate with them or become their vassals. Returning to the work of drafting an in-depth corporate strategy would signal a break with the rudimentary, mimetic strategies that prevailed during the past two decades of globalization.

The rhetoric of corporate management and its discourses about investment center around the issue of the digital transformation.[1] Should this situation be analyzed by borrowing the theories about "managerial fashions" (or "modes")? Or does it shed light on a different sort of phenomenon? To answer these questions, the reports made of a series of debates organized with 20 French firms and organizations in the throes of this transformation have been examined. As we shall see, these reports do not hew the line that some consultants, opinion-makers and even academics have too soon adopted like a natural law of the digital age. Beyond any managerial mode, these reports attest to the much deeper work for drafting effective strategies for adapting firms to a new world order during the era of domination by the digital platforms, namely: GAFAM, NATU and BATX.[2]

The current changes driven by digital technology are ultimately having an unexpected side-effect. They are bringing back in-depth strategy-making, which mimetic approaches to management overlooked during the two decades of globalization. According to the prevalent discourse about management, it was necessary to do like everyone else in order to stay in the global race. With the rise of digital technology however, a firm must cultivate its specific characteristics.

[1] This article has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites were consulted in September 2020.

[2] GAFA: Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft; NATU: Netflix, Airbnb, Tesla and Uber; BATX: Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent and Xiaomi.

Toward the infinite firm?

Digital technology is no longer just a means for a firm to just sell more to the same customers in its usual field of business. It enables the firm to expand its scope of action, its business, infinitely. In "Gafanomics", Fabernovel (2015) has argued that this capacity for infinite expansion is the prerogative of GAFAM, one of their four awesome "superpowers". In fact, this superpower does not belong to GAFAM alone. The firms studied at the École de Paris du Management are also trying to draw profit from digital marketplaces.

Traditional entrepreneurs have always dreamed of using the confidence invested in them by their loyal customers to offer them new products or services (cross-selling or upselling), but they were aware of the limits of doing so in the physical world. So, it has not been hard for them to seize this opportunity offered in the digital realm. In fact, the twenty firms and organizations figuring in these reports are not stuck with their traditional business models. They know how easy it is to adventure into adjacent fields of business, which represent an opportunity for growth… and for the growth of competitors who might do as much and thus infringe on their territory. This is not the usual planned-for diversification or differentiation. It amounts to a generalized lowering of the barriers to market entry and thus raises several strategic and operational questions.

Digital technology has marvelously organized competition on a new, often planetary, scale. It has paid no heed to historical borders and barriers, whether those based on an out-of-date technolo-

Methodology

It is not easy to rationally explain why the phrase “digital transition/transformation” has met such success in managerial circles. The initial reaction is to place this phenomenon in the category of “*management fashions*” (ABRAHAMSON &FAIRCHILD 1999) or “*managerial modes*” (MIDLER 1986), an approach that suggests, by analogy, that we should analyze the discourses, or rhetoric, used by management.

The material underlying this research comes from reports of meetings at the École de Paris du Management, which, for more than twenty years, has organized debates on managerial practices. For these meetings, “practitioners” from firms are, following a strict protocol, selected and invited to present their point of view, a presentation followed by a wide-ranging debate with a small group of practitioners and researchers. A report of each meeting is then written.

The research presented herein draws on the twenty reports made of a series of conferences organized from 2016 to 2018 on *Transformations numériques [Digital transformations]*. These reports reflect as faithfully as possible the discourses of twenty French firms and organizations of various sizes and in different branches of the economy. What all them share is that they have undergone a significant digital transformation. To these twenty has been added a report (made in the same conditions) of a debate organized with the national secretary of the CFDT in charge of digital technology. This exchange with a labor union representative provides a contrasting view that crosses several branches of the economy. These reports are available on the website of the École de Paris du Management (www.ecole.org), and some are listed among this article’s references.

This article also borrows material from the summaries presented (in the same conditions) to researchers and several of these practitioners in early 2018 at the École de Paris du Management. This feedback vouches for the reliability of the reports.

The themes

This analysis has taken shape around six themes that frequently crop up in the “digital vulgate”. They are presented as questions in the headings of this article. Although these questions to which the cases under examination respond do not exhaust this vulgate, they do sufficiently represent the most strategic points for evaluating whether or not a firm or organization has developed solid responses to issues along most of the axes of the digital transformation. The final heading, the only one that is not a question, is of a different sort since it presents the hypothesis backed by this article.

The twenty firms and organizations

Webedia (Fimalac), DINSIC (SGMAP), AXA, SoLocal, Compte Nickel, EDF, Ordre des Experts Comptables, Pernod Ricard, Lippi, Ooreka, Kamet, G7, AccorHotels, Kolibree, CFDT, Valeo, GRTGaz, Meta Consulting, Lagardère, Groupe Casino.

gy or on national regulations. A restaurant that starts home delivery extends the boundaries of its business. Although new sells are marginal at first, they might then climb considerably. Little by little, some restaurants will be drawing more income from catering than from sales on location. Specialized companies like Deliveroo have formed to help restaurants extend their scope of business. There are now even restaurants without dining rooms. By undertaking the crucial task of redefining the extent, or scope, of their market, most of the twenty firms studied herein have redesigned the purpose of their business, their promise to the world, their sales pitch. They have rushed to seize these new opportunities for growth.

A first example is Pernod Ricard, with its unique portfolio of 300 world-renown brands of liquor, each with a strong hold on the imagination of its consumers, some of whom are experts and aficionados. For Alexandre Ricard and Antonia McCahon (2017), the Ricard Group no longer simply sells alcoholic beverages; it is now a “*creator of conviviality*”. What could amount to a fashionable marketing ploy refers, in fact, to very concrete strategies since the firm is now directly or indirectly involved in catering to, or even organizing, convivial gatherings. For example, it digitally tracks the movements of VIPs around the planet in order to be able to send them, at any time, the exceptional liquors, which cost several thousands of euros per bottle, that they would like to consume. Beyond this promise of service, the group has completely overhauled its organization by brand and product, a disruption for this traditional company.

SoLocal, formerly the yellow pages (Pages Jaunes), provides another example (REMY 2016). It initially sold advertising space in the popular printed version of telephone directories. It has now turned into a “partner of digital visibility" for brick and mortar stores, large and small, by selling, along with the usual local advertisements, digital products developed by Facebook, Google and other firms, and thus becoming a sort of marketing agency for its customers. The new promise of service is very important since Solocal is no longer a dominant media company selling advertising space but a service-provider that has to, first of all, enter into strategic partnerships with digital media of a global class — a radically different positioning of the firm on this market.

Lippi started out by selling wholesale panels for fences and gates (LIPPI 2017). This French manufacturer was probably doomed, until two brothers imposed an in-depth strategy for a digital transformation. The sales pitch, "*the free spirit*", now associated with the brand name Lippi, promises customers peace of mind by offering full solutions of security for the perimeters of their property. In this surprising turnabout, the company is also guaranteeing a quality of service to distributors and impeccable support. Its promise has been extended to very concrete products and business processes.

Like many hotels, AccorHotels sold "overnight stays" (NOWAK 2017), but it is now offering a new form of hospitality and is increasingly orienting its hotels toward their local environment via, in particular, the application AccorLocal. This app was developed following the acquisition of John Paul, a firm that offered high-end caretaker services. Once again, the company's promise of service has widened its field of action and even led to redesigning its acquisition policy.

Finally, Kolibree, the connected toothbrush on everyone's lips at the 2015 Consumer Electronics Show (SERVAL 2017), has now become a full-fledged player in oral hygiene. By entering the field of health insurance, it has potentially altered the way of paying for the device.

For strategic turnabouts of this sort, several prerequisites related to digital technology must be met. First of all, full, coherent, relevant information available throughout the organization must be provided to customers. This is usually an argument in favor of centralization. Secondly, the brand must invest massively in new digital "spaces" (social networks, websites with contents). This change can be likened to what firms experienced when television arrived, an event that marked the shift from "ads" to "commercials". Some firms, like Coca-Cola, made the shift successfully and thrived; others, like Dubonnet (the champion of vermouth during the era of printed ads), missed the boat and soon took on water.

Not only does digital technology make it possible to go faster and more efficiently expand the scope of business, it has also made all this eventually possible at a limited cost in terms of investments. Selling new products to customers without making a major investment and thus with limited risks is, for sure, a dreamed-of opportunity for any entrepreneur, not only for GAFAM.

In an economy driven by mass consumption, entrepreneurs were obsessed with economies of scale, which result from producing huge series of products on specialized machines. This source of competitive advantages led them to overlook what economists have called "economies of scope" with the possibility of creating a globally profitable business from activities that are not very profitable per unit. This can usually be achieved by increasing the rate of using the company's production capacity. With its emphasis on services, reactivity and consumer choice, the digital transformation makes economies of scope more attractive than at first sight. A taxi driver in a remote area can use downtime to deliver packages for DHL or medicine to pharmacies by simply joining different platforms at no investment cost. Digital technology can be used to, among other things, eliminate unproductive downtime and tap underused capacities. All this is, once again, evidence of the general lowering of market barriers and the expansion of the scope of business activities.

At a time when economists are worried about the indebtedness of nations and firms, the possibility of minimizing investments probably one reason why digital technology is so attractive. This is more than a passing fad; it makes us change our ideas about innovation. Innovation is now less oriented toward heavy investments, public subsidies, a technological disruption or the filing of patents; but increasingly turned toward disruptions in uses, the economic recycling of underused production capacities, or the offering of local (or even microlocal) services and solutions.

This dream of an infinitely expanding scope of business brings along several problems, economic and strategic. How much can a firm grow? How far can it expand its activities into new fields without losing its base? Will a single global player emerge in this defenseless, flatter world? Markets without entry barriers mean markets with margins that are narrow or even naught. Some pundits will see as a positive point in this situation the disappearance of rent-seeking, while others will point to the deviant effects (on innovation, for instance) as risk-taking becomes more difficult. Still others will emphasize how suddenly firms have adapted to the laws of this new marketplace, an adaptation that has invariably and concretely led to more flexibility or more precarious jobs in a gig economy.

The gradual extension of the scope of business, the breaking down of market barriers, the flattening of the world… all this naturally introduces a key player: online platforms.

Turning firms into platforms: Do or die?

By any criterion (market capitalization, growth, the power of brands, tax optimization, etc.), digital platforms (GAFAM, BATX, NATU…) beat traditional firms. To compete with these new dominant players, what can traditional companies do but become platforms and fight face-to-face with weapons of like sort? This is Jean-Louis Beffa's (2017) advice, which can be summed up as "Become a platform; do or die!" In agreement with this, Laura Létourneau and Clément Bertholet (2017) have even proposed uberizing government services before other players do so. Given that a platform of government services has become, in France, the core of the state's digital transformation, there is no doubt but that this advice has been heard. In addition to the two general, classically recognized strategies (costs/differentiation), has a third been found?

Let us recall three particular characteristics of digital platforms. First of all, an online platform is a dematerialized marketplace. More than thirty years ago, researchers at MIT were telling us that this would be the most efficient way to organize markets (MALONE *et al*. 1986). Secondly, it is SoLoMo: social (owing to the comparison of users' opinions, which builds confidence), localized (thanks to GPS) and mobile (constantly available via mobile phones). Finally and above all, a digital platform is decompartmentalized; it causes retailers, wholesalers and even nonprofessionals to enter into competition with each other.

As the following three cases show however, the idea that becoming a platform is the only antidote against uberization is a matter of discussion.

The firm G7 is the very symbol of a uberized firm. Should it have become a platform, and would this have prevented its uberization? Nothing is less certain! G7, which is sparse with communications, was already a platform before Uber was born. It was not a taxi company but a reservation center that coordinated the activities of the 8000 self-employed drivers in its ranks. These taxis were already geolocated; and customers' telephone calls were already being automatically processed without human intervention. G7's efficient infrastructure already combined telephone and computer technology. Furthermore, it had one of the very first applications available on iPhone for hailing a taxi; and Steve Jobs congratulated it personally on this in 2008. So, this company was an efficient, operational platform dominant in its market. This has not kept it from being the very example of a uberized firm. The argument "Do or die" is not, therefore, very convincing in this case, even less so when we examine how G7 has coped. It has concentrated its efforts on factors that, in the main, have little to do with digital technology. It reviewed its sales pitch, which used to be oriented toward the very profitable market of firms that had subscribed to its services (to the detriment of individual passengers). The brand was weak; and customer services were basic and inconsistent. G7 managed to rebecome competitive by mobilizing its 8000 self-employed drivers, who are strongly attached to their rights, in order to create a customer-oriented community of shared interests. It convinced the drivers to place an elegant band of colors representing the G7 brand on their cars; and it differentiated the services offered into a dozen types of use (economic, luxury, electric vehicle, car-pooling, etc.). In this de-uberization, the effort put into digital technology consisted of correcting the first application's tactical errors (for free versus for pay), rewriting the app (using Uber's standards) and drawing attention to its features. This rewriting of computer code did not represent a major effort given the experience previously acquired by the company and its already existing information system. Contrary to what is taken for granted, G7 is evidence that "de-uberization" is possible (even during a late stage). This did not mean becoming a platform, since existing operations already involved playing the highly computerized role of middleman or broker. Furthermore, when repositioning itself in the market, G7 managed to stake out a position as a reservation center in more than a hundred cities in France (4500 affiliated taxis) and several cities outside the country (17,000 affiliated taxis). While taxis suffered when Uber and car-for-hire services entered the market, the uberization of G7 was temporary and would ultimately be an advantage.

A second case is AccorHotels, a global network of 4000 hotels with various names and ranging from unpretentious to upscale. Among its many activities, this group operates a website for reservation in its hotels (NOWAK 2017). This site was already competing head on with big reservation platforms (such as Booking and Expedia) and with platforms for alternative accommodations (such as Airbnb). The digital transformation started with a "purification" of its reservation platform. The website was given a new, more suggestive name: AccorHotels.com. The Group then turned 25% of its hotels into subsidiaries in order to sell them off and recenter its business on a single task as an operator in the hotel business. This recentering strategy has little to do with the digital transformation since all the major American operators had done as much before the advent of digital platforms. A second — more offensive and much more ambitious — part of the Group's program was its general plan with 115 proposals that, reaching down to an unusual level of detail, were managed worldwide. This plan called for innovative services, novel "experiences of hospitality" and the opening of hotels toward their urban environment. AccorHotels is trying to be recognized as a leading player in local caretaker services thanks to its knowledge of local areas. This offensive strategy can be seen as a "deplatforming" of its activities with the goal of marking a difference with the dominant player, Booking.com, and other platforms. Nonetheless the Group has continued working with them — something seldom observed since a platform usually organizes competition among members but carefully avoids having another platform as broker. This mixed strategy combines being a platform with differentiation, the first of these probably being the easiest to develop and, therefore, to imitate and, eventually has less to do with differentiation.

The third example is certified accountants (SAPHORES 2017), a profession that, thanks to its efforts over more than ten years, has managed to standardize electronic transfers of bookkeeping data. These efforts led this profession to the United Nations and the drafting of international standards. It was thus easier for all French accounting services (banks, the French Treasury, etc.) to adopt these standards. Certified accountants have set up a platform (Jedeclare.com) where more than two million French firms upload and download information. The only problem is that this platform has not raised any income for its inventors, at least not yet. This example does not fit into the digital vulgate, which presents successful platforms as sources for generating considerable income.

Since a platform is a broker, an intermediary, if everyone sets up one, everyone will become an intermediary. What would be the sense of a world peopled with brokers but deserted by manufacturers? This question does not seem to bother digital pundits, even though industrialists in the panel were concerned with it. While highly aware of the platforms as a powerful business model, they had enough confidence in their ability to cope with the big platforms — under condition that competition not be skewed due to taxes and social regulations (different for platforms, as is the case in competition with amateurs without a professional status and with no constraints) and, too, that they organize their business so to be closer to customers and to attract and retain their full attention.

Capturing the customer's attention: The mother of all battles?

Capturing the customer's attention is an ever increasing preoccupation. By facilitating the solicitation of customers and augmenting their choices, digital technology has fostered the war for attention theorized by Herbert Simon. In 2009, 18% of purchasers on Amazon had directly started their product search on the Amazon website or via Google, which immediately redirected them there. In 2016, this statistic reached 50%, a result that leaves little room for anyone else. Attention has been said to be the ultimate stake in the digital economy (BOULLIER 2016), a point that firms, in particular those that have advanced the farthest toward the digital transformation, them, have clearly understood.

Fortunately, the reality of business is much more often "multilocal" than global. Uber is not actually global; and not all cities interest it, whence the possibility of niche strategies. For instance, G7, a Parisian company that had trouble attracting members outside the greater Paris area, has announced its presence in more than a hundred cities elsewhere in France (4500 affiliated taxis), which represents half of its network in the Paris area. In addition, it is spreading to parts of Europe. The fear of Uber seems to be leading self-employed taxi drivers to rally around G7 to survive.

This point is of special interest to the traditional firms that, for a long time now, have organized complex processes in order to tap the potential of local markets and of market subsegments. They are already equipped to implement complex, multiple strategies embedded in each other. However it is complicated to pursue a combination of strategies adapted to the roughness of the fields of operations, and even more complicated to explain it in simple language. This is a source of recurrent criticism, both in- and outside the firm. The big online platforms, many of them in a single business, are champions of "blitzscaling"; they make promises to customers that are easy to understand. Will they be capable of devising a more complex business model so as to position themselves on market subsegments? This might be the key question in the quarrel between the "ancients and the moderns".

Casino provides a fitting example (BOURGOIS 2018). This giant among retail chains includes stores with traditionally recognized names (Casino, Monoprix, Franprix, etc.) in suburban or downtown areas, upscale or discount (such as Leader Price) as well as online businesses (Cdiscount, its online subsidiary) that are actually withstanding Amazon. It comes as no surprise to see the Casino Group form a partnership with Amazon; but it is more surprising to see Amazon in a partnership that is based on the very core of its own business activities: logistics. Since September 2018, the customers of Amazon Prime in Paris can do their online shopping and benefit from rapid delivery for free by Monoprix. Monoprix sees to the last-mile logistics for Amazon, the champion in all categories of logistics. This surprising success seems to reach beyond the most optimistic expectations. Amazon, which was having difficulty on this market, came to realize that it could tackle certain market segments by forming a partnership with another, better qualified firm, even in the fields of competence where it excels, such as logistics. Imagine how much attention must be paid to details in order to study the opportunities derived from such a partnership and the ways to make it last. Casino, a group with stores of varied sizes, is used to this sort of unstable situation, while Amazon is learning to cope. Does all this come at the cost of a change to its strategic culture?

A technical infrastructure platform: An idea too evident?

A business platform model does not seem appropriate in all situations. Might this not also be said of the technology related to the concept of an "online platform"? To make business grow, in particular when the intent is to extend the company's scope of action, it is necessary to know your customers and, therefore, to have relevant, fresh, full, coherent data on them.

As Yves Caseau (2016) has pointed out, firms have long considered computer technology to lie outside their core business and, as a consequence, have subcontracted many information system activities; but this situation is now changing. According to this representative of AXA, all firms have to become software companies for a very simple reason: the ability to bring an innovation fast to the market now directly depends on the ability to code, either because the code is integrated in the innovation or because it is essential to the very process of placing a product on the market. The ability to produce an ongoing flow of software code in collaboration with other players in- and outside the firm means setting up a joint "vessel" — for want of a better word, a "technical infrastructure platform".

According to Alexandre Ricard, a firm absolutely has to have available consolidated data to expand the scope of its business to customers (RICARD & MCCAHON 2017). There is no doubt that it must strongly centralize these data. But how to proceed in a traditionally decentralized group? For Ricard, the solution is to use a cloud as a platform (technical infrastructure) where customer data are concentrated. He thus signed a contract with a specialist in this field, Salesforce, an American company. This argument is identical to the one used at the turn of the century to convince firms to adopt enterprise application software (EAS) for resource planning.

While questions can be asked about the need to turn a business into a platform, it seems inevitable and obvious that a platform has to be set up for the technical infrastructure. All reports say as much. Schmidt Group, which sells custom-made kitchens, naturally tends to sees itself as an expert in logistics who assembles elements furnished by its partners and suppliers (LEITZGEN 2016). The technical infrastructure underlying these movements or flows is essential to its performance. Lippi set up permanent interconnections between all its personnel via Google+. In all cases reported, coping with the digital transformation soon became complicated if the firm lacked a minimal technical infrastructure, one more or less resembling a platform. The modernization efforts made by the public administration (PEZZIARDI & VERDIER 2016) have also implicated it in developing such a platform, a technical infrastructure built around open data, APIs and freeware.

A new frontier in digital technology is now opening before us. How to manage the mix of the physical world with the digital realm through a customer's "phygital" experiences, which profit from the best of both. The Casino Group recently launched a phygital experiment by installing Cdiscount "corners" in a few suburban Casino hypermarket stores. Customers thus benefit from the advantages of online purchases and neighborhood services: on the one hand, an infinite choice at the lowest prices and, on the other hand, the advice of the Casino salespersons assigned to these new spaces, where certain products in demonstration can be tried out and touched (DESHAYES 2019a). This experiment has been very successful, but it was necessary to establish communications between the information systems of these two businesses, which had nothing in common and have to remain operational in their respective fields. Bridges had to be built fast. The solution settled upon involved a platform of specialized software for connecting the two systems.

The recourse to a sort of technical platform seems necessary, but the devil is in the details. In fact, the technological principles to be used vary and are barely compatible with each other. Furthermore, they might hide quite different interests, whether in- or outside the firm. How to be sure that firms are sufficiently aware of the issues in terms of power? Or that they put in enough effort to work out a shared view of difficulties so as to attain the expected results? The popularity of the word "platform" might have a devious effect, by making us believe that everyone agrees on the target and on the way to reach it whereas too few options or features have been worked out in detail (DESHAYES 2019b).

Which strategy for the platform era?

This topic of online platforms has not yet been exhausted. If becoming a platform, as some pundits advocate, is not a viable strategy for all firms, what are the alternatives in terms of strategy? To compete with the new rulers of the world, many firms prefer strategies that reflect a probably more pragmatic approach. These ASTUTE players pledge a form of allegiance, tacit or explicit, to the new rulers and thus avoid direct confrontation. In contrast, other businesses accept to share with the platforms and become PARTNERS; while still others, CLIENTS, simply seek to protect their own positions by paying the new rulers. Figure 1 presents these various approaches.

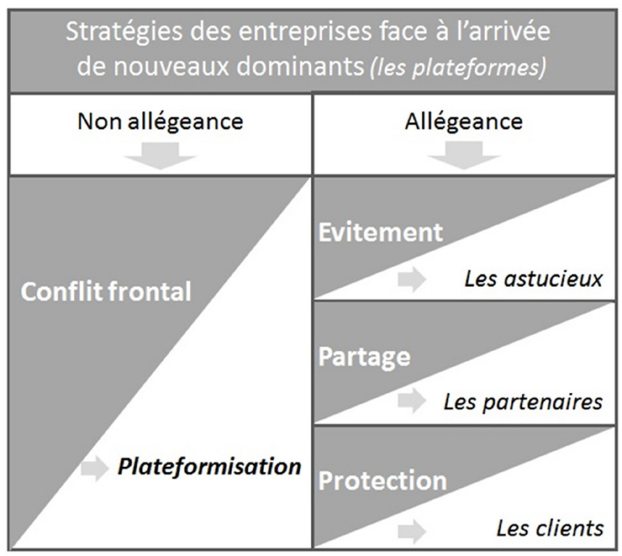

Figure 1: Corporate strategies for coping with dominant newcomers (online platforms)

The ASTUTE, like Webedia or Ooreka, eat high off the hog, since they produce contents for the purpose of ranking firms at the top of search findings, in particular on Google. Once capturing the attention of cybernauts, they resell advertising on their own pages to other firms. Their strategy is to gather the crumbs that fall from the tables of the wealthy lords of the Web, crumbs enough for them to thrive with two-digit growth rates. The only disadvantage: the platforms are no fools. Every eighteen months, they modify their algorithms to deal out a new hand of cards and keep these clever players from installing their image in the minds of cybernauts. The value of a French unicorn, Criteo, dropped 28% in two hours of trading on the stock market simply because Apple, by changing its algorithms, forced the company to overhaul its business plan. Véronique Morali (2016) explained how hard it was to put up with so much stress. The company's needs in terms of skills could not be assessed, nor could business models be designed for six months down the road. The solution? Powerful contents and extreme agility in both skills and strategies.

Partners, like SoLocal, AccorHotels and Casino, are too big to live on crumbs. They have chosen to enter into a compromise with platforms bigger than themselves. Owing to their strong (often local) positions in the physical world, they negotiate partnerships with the big platforms. These partnerships are grounded on a balance of power, which the platforms will try to erode. Pages Jaunes initially held a strong position based on its field network of a thousand salespeople. In parallel to its partnership with Solocal, Google is trying to establish a local presence with the help of other partners — a threat to Solocal's strong hold.

Clients, like the Schmidt Group or Pernod Ricard, try to improve their online visibility through purchasing advertising spaces, keywords, etc. What threatens them is, quite simply, inflated prices. When a keyword attracts attention, bidding shoots up. For instance, a keyword bought at 40 cents a click two years ago is now worth four euros. An extreme case: the keyword *SOS-Plombier-Paris* is now worth 40 euros on weekends. At stake for these clients is to invest enough in contents so that they are sure references that the platforms have to list correctly without being able to force them to make the highest bid during auctions.

A control over social marketing and programming is, it turns out, the key to success (DESHAYES 2014). After having centralized its data and improved its knowledge of customers, Pernod Ricard's strategy was to no longer let out to communication agencies the procurement of advertising spaces and keywords. It was determined to exercise in house a control over marketing skills, the creation of contents, data analytics and the purchase of advertising spaces.

Whatever the positions adopted, firms all have to learn to swim among sharks. Platforms are on the alert to grab a valuable position, especially if it is held by one of their partners. Besides position-based strategies, there are, therefore, movement-based strategies (agility) — a sort of asymmetric coopetition with the overbearing players on the other side. Competition has grown in intensity; it is massive and generalized. Maurice Lévy (2014) said that he only met bosses who were afraid of being uberized. In the past, market barriers served to generate excessive margins that allowed for reinvestment in riskier activities. This situation is now vanishing. All markets are now lastingly driven by extreme competition. Traditional corporate managers are, understandably, ill at ease, since they have to keep swimming among the sharks. This menace has apparently reinforced, in many firms, their resolve to control and "insource" certain skills and domains of competence that are not pat of their core business. This contrasts with the subcontracting and outsourcing policies hyped during the 1990s.

Know thy customers: Behind all sorts of screens?

When a firm sells its products to distributors, it knows nothing about end users. The distributer forms a sort of screen between it and its customers. Digital technology offers all manufacturers the opportunity to get to know the consumers of their products via social networks, online communities, and the data gathered on purchases and uses. The manufacturer can thus skirt around distributors without upsetting them, this point being much more important to small firms like Lippi than to big groups like Pernod Ricard.

During each campaign for promoting its 70 brand names, Pernod Ricard used to hire an advertising agency to bring a sample of consumers together in focus groups, have them test various scenarios or concepts, and gather the consumers' opinions, all this part of a process for making the right choices. With the customer information accumulated thanks to digital technology, Pernod Ricard, now persuaded that it knows its customers better, has done away with focus groups.

The brand is also an essential element in a digital approach, as the shift is made from advertising to a plebiscite (DESHAYES 2014). On social networks, there is talk about contents, communities, even interactions with customers. Glenlivet, a brand of whiskey belonging to Pernod Ricard, made three special brews, each using a specific blend. The thousands of "followers" fond of whiskey were asked to come test these brews during events organized in their vicinity and post their comments on the social networks. Mustering the community of customers around a brand helps to strengthen bonds across the screens set up by distributors, search engines or, tomorrow, conversational robots like Amazon's Alexa.

Creating contents is definitely now an indispensable task that should be performed, at least partly, in house. It weighs heavily on budgets, especially in small and medium-sized firms (DESHAYES 2019b).

Conclusion: Back to strategy-making

One of the lessons drawn from analyzing these twenty reports is that corporate leaders are now directly involved in major maneuvers in the digital realm. During the debates organized at the École de Paris du Management in small groups behind closed doors, these leaders talked about their practices with regard to matters that used to be considered "technical". Their involvement in the digital transformation was confirmed by Marylise Léon from the CFDT (2017). The strategies they presented were quite unusual, subtler than the vague solutions mouthed by the many consultants and pundits who wield influence in the digital realm. This is evidence that these firms, which have advanced to cope with the digital transformation, have given thought to strategy-making.

This finding is not to be taken for granted after the decline for more than two decades in strategic thinking (BAUMARD 2014). This trend did not spare firms, where anything resembling a strategy seemed invariably turned toward globalization, standardization, massive outsourcing and so-called "good practices" regardless of the firm, its sector, environment or competitors — a heresy. Nowadays the focus has shifted to innovation, the customer experience, new business models and repositioning in order to cope with the new dominant players. This mimesis in strategy-making is ebbing in favor of the difficult, laborious tasks of introspection and projection, a prerequisite for drafting a strategy that is truly original, a criterion for judging its quality. This shift signals a break.

It would, therefore, be wiser to use the plural and talk about "digital transformations". This might help keep us from thinking that there is only one method or one tool for coping. The plural form has the advantage of suggesting that we stand back from the theory of managerial fashions (or modes) in the sense of Midler (1986) and of Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999). In effect, these twenty firms, already engaged in the digital transformation, do not answer to the criteria used by these authors. First of all, what is at stake is not a management tool as such but rather a (very imprecise) goal to be reached. Secondly, this phenomenon is not transitional but has lasted, under various names, since the simultaneous advent of the Web and mobile telephones more than twenty years ago. Thirdly, and independently of the twenty firms studied herein, 100% of firms now claim to have started their digital transformation. This claim does not, however, correspond to a major characteristic of fashions, namely that the first to adopt a fashion starts to give it up when the masses start following it. Finally, and once and for all, the corporate strategies studied herein are much more elaborate than what the digital vulgate has suggested. This is evidence that strategies are being customized, if only in the rhetoric or discourses, evidence that does not conform to the standards typical of fashion victims.

Far from being fashion victims, some managers are, as the literature has shown, using popular tools cynically or pragmatically, without any illusion about their efficiency, in order to rally around a common set of specifications the staff (GILL & WHITTLE 1993) or stakeholders, including shareholders (STAW & EPSTEIN 2000). This use of "management fashions" by corporate leaders is more political than operational, as we can see when leaders brandish the digital transformation like a standard for mustering forces or as a symbol of protection.

The digital transformation has been continuously advancing for two decades now. It has ultimately been used as a self-evident symbol of continuity, a link between past and future. The king's standard rallies troops, both his own and those of allies who march under their own banners, and, too, the mercenaries in his pay. In the cases under discussion, the firm can be seen like a greater corporate area encompassing its ecosystem. Raising the standard of the digital transformation is crucial for reassuring the troops and mustering support in the financial markets. Some big French groups have recently sought to raise billions in order to speed up their "digital transformation". This signal to the market has been well received! Not only do investors expect strong resolve on this topic, but also they do not tend to look closely at a firm's plans and characteristics. Besides, the CEO does not want to say much about them — CEOs, like politicians, are disappointing when they announce too little. For them, these billions are no more binding than a promise made by a politician. They fall into a huge bag that, given the wide-range and imprecision of the phrase "digital transformation", can cover almost any corporate expenditure. Even the concept of an investment seems relative, a matter of convention.

Like the "energy transition", the digital transformation (or transition) tends to serve as a standard for management to raise. CEOs brandish it to tap important resources and ward off, at least for a while, criticism. It is not certain that they are all convinced about the actual effectiveness of hackathons, bootcamps, design thinking, flex offices, agile methods and organizational agility in general. Nonetheless, they do not hesitate to bring these topics under the protection of the standard they bear. What is the goal? To sustain an impetus, in- and outside the firm, an energy to be tapped while the demanding, difficult work of introspection is having an effect. After all, business has to carry on during this process. As a symbol of stability, the standard thus raised is a source of legitimacy for the leader. This has another political advantage for managers. In effect, this standard — by waving in the same way over various operations in the digital transformation — blurs the glaring contrast between current management fashions (agility, collaboration, innovation, customer experience, platforms, data centralization, artificial intelligence, etc.) and those of the recent past (value creation, performance, governance, core business activities, management by objectives, business processes, scorecards, cost-cutting, etc.). Yesterday's fashions will never be evaluated, and no one will mind that. The standard of the digital transformation is not unrelated to making this shift gradually and painlessly.

This political usage might ultimately place the digital transformation in the category of managerial fashions in a broader sense, inside (GILL & WHITTLE 1993) or outside (STAW & EPSTEIN 2000) the firm. However it must not be shut up in that category, since it is apparently a very useful key of interpretation for the firms that sincerely want to try to understand how the world is evolving and to adapt to new social and societal aspirations in order to find therein a source for their sustainable development.

Those who wave the standard of the digital transformation only as a political flag risk being unequipped to cope once the time saved (after taking account of all the time wasted in pursuing fashions such as artificial intelligence or blockchains — pursuits poorly controlled and poorly articulated with a strategy) reveals to everyone the lack of depth of the transformation actually accomplished. Solocal is of interest in this respect. The aforementioned CEO has, since 2016, been forced to resign for several reasons, in particular because his strategy did not deliver the predicted benefits. But the digital transformation is still on the company's agenda. His successor has assumed the same strategy of partnership with big platforms but is apparently delving into the details of how to execute it, this being the ultimate criterion for assessing whether a strategy is the right one — but that is another story than the present study of corporate discourses and rhetoric.

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