

IDEAS AT WORK

How to Be Discerning With Disruptive Technology

Takeaways

- Identify the underlying problem
- Ensure you retain sufficient flexibility
- Follow the Rules of Deliberation

People often associate me and my football career with scrambling. But what people might not realize is that's not how I played in high school or college; I developed that style when I arrived in the NFL, and it came from a very specific need.

In my rookie season, the inaugural season for the Minnesota Vikings franchise, we played against the Chicago Bears late in the preseason – and they destroyed us. It was 30-7, and I'm not sure it was that close. I played in a traditional quarterback style, and the Bears defense was all over us on every play.

Sure enough, our first game of the regular season, just two weeks later, was against those same Chicago Bears. I knew that if I played the same way, I had no chance. Out of that problem, a new style of quarterbacking was born: scrambling. And it worked! We won 37-13 in a game no one thought we could win.

There are lots of new ideas and innovations out there demanding our attention. In this week's newsletter, you'll learn why you have to start with solving a real problem. Read on!



Jim Tarkenton

How to Be Discerning With Disruptive Technology

Everybody wants to be faster, more efficient, and more productive. But if technology's constant evolutions are persuading even tech companies to evaluate "disruptive" innovations before adopting them, then you could do with a pre-flight checklist, too.

Today, we're going to give you a handy reference sheet of questions that need answers, prior to the day you implement even the most promising new technology.



Our partners who successfully navigate integration of new tech agree that it's wise to begin with this question: ***What problem are we trying to solve?***

This might seem obvious, but you're better off answering this question than leaving it blank. How can you be sure you're improving, if no one can articulate the problem the technology solves? It's no good buying the sizzle if you're not hungry for steak.

First, get clarity that (a) the problem exists, (b) the technology can solve it, and (c) everyone can tell when it's been solved – by the technology. That's far preferable to making assumptions about either the problem or the solution. Draw a clear line between what some people *want* versus what the organization truly needs.



We should also ask, **Is there enough adoption, vendor reputation, and market acceptance?** Some disruptive technologies might seem to offer a solution to your problem. Perhaps they're even designed to do so. But if the technology is new, unrefined, or primitive in adaptive problem-solving, you run the risk of getting stuck with a clunky, ineffective, untested tool.

Suppose the technology is so new that there are only a handful of vendors – or only one. Do you have the flexibility to find alternatives if you need them? Would it put your company at risk if you committed to a single vendor who has no serious competitors? It's hard to overstate the case for contingencies, particularly when technology reduces or eliminates human input, oversight, or control.

Another valuable question is, **What are the risks?** Will you anger customers, demoralize your team, or impact relationships with trusted vendors? What do you need to understand from a legal perspective? What about things like privacy, data protection, and ethical issues? If the champions for the new technology struggle to answer these, then more digging is required. You'll get there eventually, but the best way to do it is by identifying all the potential risks so you can make appropriate preparations.

Don't forget to ask, **What's the difference between the hype and the function of the product?** This is useful if you or anyone on your team has abundant enthusiasm for breakthroughs and innovations. A technology's "cool" factor must also translate into (measurably) greater productivity, profitability, or cohesion.

Media hype is so loud and repetitive that it feels like election night: everybody wants to party before the official results are in. This skews the scalability and returns of the innovations they promote. While machines are always learning and improving, a fair, data-driven comparison is essential before you take the leap. Beyond the "cool" factor, what you're really after is a spike in KPIs. The only way to take an informed, calculated risk is to diligently examine the details.

Everybody's Doing It. Why Should I Wait?

To make decisions wisely, here is another round of questions any business owner or executive should ask:

- What is the opportunity cost? If we focus on adopting this new technology, will we lose time and focus on another initiative or priority?
- Are we buying because we need it, or because some “expert” says we do?
- Can we fix this problem *without* spending more money or buying new tools?



The digital age has an “urgency” to most of what we do. Whenever you feel pressured by this urgency, remember: the truth is more subtle. “Everybody’s doing it *right now*, and you’re missing out” is a compelling argument from an emotional standpoint. But we need to think detailed and holistically. There may be a lot of people doing something ... but the percentage of people doing it successfully is another matter. Don’t modernize for modernity’s sake and sacrifice areas where you’re performing well along the way.

Beware of adjusting your entire business model *purely* to look like you’re keeping up with the times – and incurring the wrath of your customers, who were previously happy. If you’re going to make a transition, do it for the right reasons, and in accordance with your personal and organizational values.



Disruptive technologies need vetting for bandwidth and capacity to support your organization’s needs. In some cases, doing a self-assessment might lead you to discover that the new technology will make very modest gains under present circumstances. Later on, some problems might expand to require new, technological solutions, when your current systems reach their capacity. It’s worth determining if this is a fix for a current problem, or planning for a future you see coming.

The Rules of Deliberation for Disruptive Tech

Business leaders face a daily tidal wave of information, content, and potential resources. You will run into marketing and advertising for disruptive technologies – even, it seems, if you’re living under a rock.

So here are the “Rules of Deliberation” we offer to partners:

1. Make a list of the risks you’re taking
2. Keep a list of common mistakes around the technology
3. Know your contingencies and backup plans
4. Know the things CTOs, CIOs and senior tech advisers fail to consider when they recommend a technology solution
5. Set clear guardrails for implementation:
 - Over-communication... all the time.
 - Detailed planning
 - Involve everyone, right down to the lowest / entry-level employee
 - Don’t micro-manage the implementation team
 - Provide healthy oversight: manage relationships, stay informed, know your team (what they’re doing and how they’re doing it), and work to maintain an intuitive sense of how much / how little you need to be involved.

A leader who insists on answering these questions, and adheres to the Rules of Deliberation, has everything to gain and very little to lose when the time comes to push the button on a disruptive technology.

If you could use some extra eyes on your strategy for discerning disruptive technologies, consider partnering with Tarkenton. Schedule a complimentary consultation with a member of our business development team today.



By: Ed Fox
Director of Technology, Tarkenton

Ed Fox works closely with partnership stakeholders and product leaders on business strategic planning, as Director of Technology. Ed leads the product and technology teams, directing operations while working with clients to ensure a successful development process and, when appropriate, integration with existing platforms. Ed’s specialty is aligning technology vision and strategy with product and business direction, and converting strategic plans into platforms that can grow in the market. Ed has been with Tarkenton since 2009, and has held positions in every aspect of the company.