

Ted Souder, A Career at Google and the Importance of Digital Transformation #PART 1

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Get ready to learn from Ted's wealth of knowledge and experience in the tech industry. We interviewed Ted Souder, one of the first Former Senior Executive at Google, where he worked for over twenty years helping the

largest global advertisers transition to being more digital in their marketing efforts. One of the many projects he created over the years was the Google CFO Forum, a forum where the top CFOs in the world listened to Google's leadership on the opportunities that digital transformation can unlock. It was an incredibly successful program that was copied and run in other regions around the world. Currently, Souder is a member of the board at 1871, one of the top private tech hubs in the world and home to over 400 startups, and The Monthly Barometer, a company that provides data-based insights for businesses. Souder is also a globally respected keynote speaker, speaking on topics such as digital transformation, the "Google Playbook", the future of the CFO, and more.

INTERVIEW PART 1

Ted, tell us more about your career in Google.

I was incredibly lucky to join Google in October 2001 as one of the first Account Managers in the company. In that role, we helped businesses advertise on Google for the first time. There were only a couple hundred employees overall, and we were executing our founder's vision to "Organize the World's Information and Make it Universally Accessible and Useful." Over the years, Google gained traction along with becoming a verb and ultimately became a useful part of people's lives around the globe. I spent most of my time working out of our Chicago office, but I did spend a year living in Paris, France, where I was the Head of International Strategic Sales and Operations, SEEMEA.

Throughout most of my time at Google, I was focused on helping our largest global advertisers make the often difficult transition to being more digital in their marketing efforts. At first, it was primarily via Search ads, but over time, we offered other formats and platforms such as Display Ads, Mobile Ads, Video, and more. We would partner with the C Suite to help them leverage the latest technology, which was evolving at a rapid pace. By the time I left in January 2022, the team I led was working with some of the world's largest retailers, helping them utilize Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning to power

their ad programs and focus on profitability and scale as opposed to the old way of managing a campaign via bids and budgets. The programs we ran were incredibly sophisticated and on the cutting edge of ad tech.

At Google, no one has just one job; there is almost an unwritten rule that you should contribute way beyond what you were hired to do. Some people call it “20% time” or, as I liked to call it, “120% time”. One of the many side projects I created over the years was the Google CFO Forum. The concept behind it was we all had solid relationships with our customer’s Chief Marketing Officers. Still, in order for them to really embrace the large and complicated Digital Transformation programs we were offering, we needed to make new friends with added influence. Ultimately, we knew that it was important to influence the board of directors as our solutions often ended up being board-level discussions. I figured that if there was one person we should influence, it was the CFO as they owned the budget, had board exposure, and more and more these days, you see the CFO transition into the CEO role. The end product was a forum for the world’s top CFOs to come and hear from Google’s leadership on the opportunities that Digital Transformation can unlock. It was an incredibly successful program that was copied and run in other regions all over the globe.

Talk to us about your experiences to 1871, the No. 1 technology incubator in the world and to The Monthly Barometer.

Having been a part of a number of startups over my career, I believe very strongly in the importance of building for the future. If you look back over the past 23 years, the startups that were founded during some of the most challenging times globally have the biggest economic and technological impact today. I believe this trend will continue, and startups founded between 2020 and 2023+ will be the next great giants.

More importantly, the pandemic proved that digital is a baseline for any industry. Most businesses had a plan to become more digital and adopt new digital products and platforms. Well, the pandemic proved to be a “time machine to the future” where all of those plans are now a top priority for today.

Currently, I serve on the board at 1871, one of the world’s top private tech hubs and home to over 400 startups. Our mission is to offer a diverse and supportive community where early-stage, growth-stage, and corporate innovators can convene while they build extraordinary businesses. Within 1871 there are numerous vertical accelerators and a content offering that is unmatched in the industry. Our next growth phase is partnering with like-minded tech hubs worldwide to build bridges and help develop startups at all stages of their life cycle, regardless of where they are based.

In addition to my work at 1871, I am a part owner of the Monthly Barometer, a content platform and boutique advisory centered squarely at the intersection of geopolitics, economics, tech, climate, and wellness based in Chamonix, France. The Monthly Barometer has an in-person component called the Summit of Minds, where we bring together a collection of former world leaders, CEOs, entrepreneurs, investors, professors, and thought leaders to spend three days having immersive discussions on the most important topics of the day while also taking advantage of everything the French Alps have to offer. Over the years, we have expanded the Summit of Minds to Armenia and Canada and are looking forward to entering new markets like Wales, the Middle East, India, and of course, the U.S. in 2023/2024. We have found that many governments and business leaders are keen to host these types of discussions in their own market, and we are more than happy to develop a custom program that provides the most value to the attendees.

I have found that there is a theme that runs through Google, 1871, and The Monthly Barometer/Summit of Minds: the importance of talking through challenges and working together to find solutions that will scale in the future. Though I am incredibly pro-tech, I also believe nothing can replace having a face-to-face discussion. I have found that, generally speaking, people are excited about being back together in person and our Summit of Minds events are proof of that.

Given the rapid pace at which the world is changing, what are the leadership traits that are necessary for success?

At Google, we had access to some of the greatest business leaders around the world, and a couple of the traits, among many, that seem to be the most common in those whom we would describe as “digital leaders” were the following:

- They ensure C Suite alignment. Everyone needs to be on the same page and focused on the same north star. If you don’t have full buy-in, then an uneven, siloed structure is going to hold you back. Over the years, we saw countless examples of half of the C Suite bought into digital transformation while the other half were skeptics. Ultimately silos, internal politics, and indecision proved too large a block to overcome and their digital transformation journey stalled. On the flip side, when everyone is moving together toward one digital goal, things move quickly, and more often than not, success follows.
- They view digital transformation as an “always on” effort as opposed to being viewed as a project to be executed in a set time frame. Digital transformation is a mindset that defines all your efforts moving forward. Technology is always changing, and so is the adoption of strategies and tactics.
- They see fast decision-making and testing the unknown as a strategic advantage. Instead of waiting for something to settle and become mainstream, digital leaders get ahead of

technology, make decisions quickly, and do whatever they can to stay ahead of the competition instead of being conservative with their efforts and time.



We would love to know your advice for all those starting out as an aspiring entrepreneur?

There are a million things one could say here. Still, if I had to pick one, I would probably advise they plug into a strong and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem in their community. That could be at a local tech incubator, a university system, within a larger corporate environment, or simply just a co-working space. Being an entrepreneur is difficult work, and it can get very lonely so having a support structure around you is very important. Being surrounded by people who have already gone through what you are going through is key, as they can guide you when you need it most. It is also helpful to have direct access to people with skills you may lack, such as sales, fundraising, legal, etc.

I also believe that great businesses can be born anywhere, so don't feel you need to move to the Bay Area or London to grow your business. The pandemic showed us that remote work can be successful and that there are smart people everywhere.

Who do you believe has been the biggest source of motivation in your daily life?

I am incredibly motivated by the idea that technology can be used as a force for good. Having spent the past 25 years working in the tech industry, I have seen an incredible amount of change, and I have come across countless examples of smart and creative people leveraging technology to impact others around the globe positively.

Lately, I have been focused on thinking through how the development of a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem will have a material impact on a city, state, or country's ability to accelerate out of the pandemic and into a bright, digital-first future. Over the past couple of years, we have learned that job creation today is going to come via digital growth, so now is an amazing time to partner with an existing entity like a Chamber of Commerce and bring together some specific stakeholders to build the foundation for a digital-first future. It's an exciting project and is something I believe is applicable anywhere.



How do you define digital transformation?

I have always liked how Salesforce describes it: "Digital transformation is the process of using digital technologies to create new — or modify existing — business processes, culture, and customer

experiences to meet changing business and market requirements. This reimagining of business in the digital age is digital transformation.”

One area of digital transformation that I believe gets less press is the idea that being slow to adopt digital can have a negative impact on your brand and your ability to attract new customers who might be your next generation of loyalists. The same goes for your ability to hire strong talent. Workers today want to work for companies that are forward-looking and not resistant to digital change.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 marked an unstable year for the global economy. On top of its negative economic effects, including increased pressure on healthcare systems, repeated recessions and a crumbling tourism industry, the COVID-19 crisis also served as a great accelerator for change. Digital adoption, for example, saw an unprecedented increase, as e-commerce and digital communication channels multiplied their number of users. What will be the future of retail?

When speaking to big and small audiences around the globe, I emphasize that “we aren’t going back to 2019.” Leaders today need to recognize that and embrace the idea that digital transformation is in their immediate future. At Google, we found that the leaders that had either embraced digital transformation prior to or during the pandemic are the ones that are accelerating the fastest out of it.

Leaders today need to be curious about the “what if” that comes from embracing technology. Recently AI-powered programs like **Dall-E2** and **ChatGPT** have exploded onto the scene. With every comment like “wow, this is incredible, I can see how this stuff is a marketer’s dream,” there is a counter comment like “There is no real-world application here; this will quickly fade and become a niche gimmick.” The same goes for the Metaverse, crypto, Blockchain, etc. Having a healthy skepticism is fine, but if you remember, the same negative comments were made decades ago about the need for personal computers and the Internet.

Leaders today need to be curious and assign resources to new technologies to try and understand them and see if an application makes sense for them. Leaders can’t wake up in a couple of years and say, “ugh, how did we miss that...”.

I think a good example of this is Gucci’s efforts in the Metaverse. Set aside the fact that it is difficult to find an agreed-upon definition of what the Metaverse “is.” What Gucci has done is they have recognized that experimentation is going to yield more data and insights into the future of retail, product adoption, how their customers interact with the brand, and what the public perception is in real-time. There is also a level of “tech cred” that jumping into the Metaverse gives their brand. What is the future of retail in the Metaverse? I have no idea. I know that when there is some sort of normalized experience in the

future, Gucci will be far ahead and gleaning more insights from the elevated level of data they are analyzing than their competition.

What is the most influential digital technology in implementing digital transformation?

So, I get this question a lot, and the easy answer is “Cloud.” Moving your business to a Cloud environment makes so much sense on every level. Once you are working with a Cloud partner, you can leverage their capabilities to up your level of privacy, security, storage, AI usage, and more.

The better answer, I think though, is before you adopt some new technology or platform, you as a leader need to recognize that the world has changed, that we aren’t going back to the way things were, and that digital transformation is part of our future. From there, understand if your business is ready for digital transformation. Do you have the right mindset, structure, employees, etc.? Understand how your customer’s expectations have changed. They likely have an elevated expectation for how you interact with them (digitally), so are you ready to exceed those expectations? Next, know you don’t need to do this alone, so visit your local tech hub or bring in someone to talk you through this change. Finally, gather the right team and come up with a new five-year business plan. Any business plan created before 2020 is outdated.

Can we define digital as the primary business model and data analytics as the new gold?

Well, digital should definitely be at the core of any business moving forward. As far as data analytics being the new gold, I would say it’s more like the new oxygen. If you are a business, your 1st party data is your most important asset. The opportunities lie in understanding the data better and deploying it to benefit the business. Smart business people will then figure out how to add to the amount of data and how to better analyze it in order to deploy it more effectively and so on.