Electronic signatures: Removing the last bottleneck to productive digital transactions

By: Geoffrey Moore, Author and Business Advisor

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Digital systems have become pervasive in today's world. Every activity in life has been infiltrated by digital interactions made possible by ubiquitous mobile devices, broadband wireless connectivity, web applications, and cloud computing. In response, industries must confront the technology adoption lifecycle once again and decide what to adopt and when. Over the course of this decade, processes will transition from old to new, like a cascade of dominoes.

Electronic signatures, or e-signatures, are a case in point. Although they represent a relatively small change, they have a great impact on the processes they help reengineer. They remove the last barrier between a hybrid paper-to-digital workflow to an all-electronic process, dramatically accelerating closure in any type of transaction that requires a contract—sales, employment and hiring, purchase orders, legal agreements, and more.

As such, e-signatures are poised at the boundary of old and new IT, like a turnstyle through one era to the next. Accordingly, this paper looks down the road to see where this new IT is going and what role e-signatures may play in that transition. It begins by examining how current IT propelled organizations to where they are today.

Systems of record vs. systems of engagement

Current IT built and today maintains the digital systems of record upon which all business, commerce, and government rest. These are the database systems that run accounting, human resources, order processing, inventory management, and customer relationship management departments around the world. Today at the enterprise level, they have consolidated around two large global vendors, Oracle and SAP, each of which offers a full suite of capabilities. Without them, the modern global economy simply could not function.

That said, these systems of record are not without their drawbacks. They are difficult to install, expensive to maintain, hard to learn, and awkward to use. Those who grew up with them take all this for granted. Members of the next generation, on the other hand, view them as a hardship.

This new generation grew up in the midst of a revolution in consumer IT, beginning with breakthroughs in usability led by Netscape, Yahoo!, AOL, Amazon, and eBay, all of which were then boosted by Apple, Google, Facebook, and Twitter and sent into orbit by a host of additional services like OpenTable, Yelp, Uber, and AirBnB. Collectively, these companies have created a new kind of IT, one focused on *systems of engagement*.

Systems of engagement turn computing power inside out, directing it away from data and records and pointing it squarely at the user experience itself. The massive adoption of mobile phones with ubiquitous access has driven this entire revolution. Mobile phones, and specifically smartphones, are amazingly empowering, and consumers love them. Indeed they have proliferated so rapidly and so widely that now it is a rare person who does not use a smartphone a dozen or more times per day.

None of the aforementioned has been lost on the enterprise IT communities that support business, commerce, and government. Nor has it been lost on end users, managers, and executives they support. Clearly, systems of engagement represent a much better way of meeting the needs of end users, and the sooner they can be incorporated into enterprise business processes, the better. But what exactly do they entail from the point of view of an enterprise IT organization?

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