

Higher Ed Web Development Gets Flattened Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the New World Order

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HighEdWebDev 2007
October 16, 2007

So what does the future hold for our profession? We live in scary, disruptive times. While the cold war days of Dr. Strangelove are over, a seismic shift is underway. Organizations as we have known them for the last hundred years are imploding and depending on your point of view, it's either life threatening or life enhancing.

The business world has been flattened. By flattened I mean run over. Call it outsourcing. Call it globalization. Call it what you want, but we are experiencing a new world order. When I first read the World is Flat I was stopped dead in my tracks when Friedman specifically mentioned how web programming would become a commodity and was a likely profession to get flattened.

The music industry is a prime example of an industry being flattened. Napster broke all the rules. And now we have Radiohead releasing their latest album called "In Rainbows" directly on the web, without a record label, and letting their fans choose what they want to pay for it.

Is Higher Education a Business and thus subject to the same forces that have flattened the business world? I believe it is. No, it's not about making a profit. But it is about running an organization efficiently. We are now seeing increasing competition for the best students, the best faculty and pressure to manage costs.

Consider the following from a recent survey on the rising costs of higher education:

- 64% of respondents do not believe higher college costs are leading to more learning on campus
- 44% believe that waste and mismanagement significantly factor into increasing college costs

The \$64,000 question is now the \$50,630 question which is the cost of tuition at George Washington University.

The second edition of Millennials Go To College talks at length about the price of higher education and the sustainability of endless tuition increases. No price can indefinitely increase faster than family income. Over the last 25 years, on average, tuition rose over 4% faster than the rate of inflation – every year.

The tipping point will happen shortly when stealth fighter parents will replace helicopter parents on college campuses. They will change the game completely. They will look at the college their children attend as a calculated market choice. They will view colleges as one of many providers in a large marketplace. New competitors will emerge providing alternative choices for much of what college provides.

They are not going to take it anymore. They will begin demanding that colleges re-examine their entire product from a price and value-oriented perspective. All of this will put increasing pressure on colleges to provide value and to focus on efficiencies. The option to outsource and/or automate services will become a viable option for institutions that want to control costs in order to stay competitive.

In the flattened world, organizations are putting themselves under the microscope, examining every department and function to determine if it a cost or a source of income. Is it a core competency, or something that anyone could do – possibly cheaper and better.

Soon higher ed will follow a similar path and break down their services to the component level to determine the value-added for each function. Anything not directly related to higher education's core competency, the actual teaching and research, can potentially be outsourced, web development included.

The functions of the web team can be disaggregated into its component parts and outsourced. So how can we prepare for the flattened world? One of the great things today about working in higher ed is that you don't have that constant pressure of needing to make money to pay the bills, including payroll. But that may start to change. To prepare - think of your department as a small, independent company hired by your college or university

Approach the management of the web department like it's your own business and you need to keep it viable. Think about the same types of things that go into a business plan especially strategic analysis, and operational and management plans. Understand the business and show how the web can be used to solve real business problems.

Focus on how the web can provide value and how it provides a sound return on investment. Using valuation methodologies like ROI provides the framework for prioritizing projects and accountability. Research has shown that web teams that employ ROI as part of their activities are more valued in their organizations.

Soon all university functions will be put under the microscope and examined from a cost and benefit perspective. Be ready. Understand all of your functions and the time and effort spent on each. While I don't like to spend too much time on administrative overhead, it is worthwhile because it helps you to better manage your resources.

Employ Covey's seven habits to create a highly effective web team. Be proactive. Take the initiative. Be a web evangelist by relentlessly advocating for the web "Put First Things First". Don't prioritize your schedule, schedule your priorities. As the Pareto Principle states, 80% of the results flow from 20% of the activities. Focus on Projects that bring value

Prepare for the coming Conceptual age by developing your right brain. Develop your high concept and high touch skills. Get good at the touchy - feely stuff. The MFA is the new MBA.

Anyone want to venture a guess on how important IQ is for career success? The answer might surprise you. It's between 5 and 10 %. I recommend reading Emotional Intelligence – why it can matter more than IQ. EQ is more important than IQ

So when is all of this going to happen? Sooner than you think. The singularity is near. We are seeing exponential change. For many of us, it won't be who moved my cheese but who took my cheese. Here is an old African proverb:

Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up.
It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will die.
Every morning in Africa, a lion wakes up.
It knows it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death.
It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle; when the sun comes up, you'd better be running.

I was asked by a colleague recently if I was concerned that the Mayan calendar abruptly ends on December 21, 2112. After living through the hype of Y2K, I'm not overly concerned. But I do know the world will be a much different place five years from now. I would like to close with a quote from Neil Young - it's easy to get stuck in the past - when you try to make a good thing last.