

# The urge of the new: Fighting off tech hype in a corporate environment - a civilian's guide



**By Alexei Miller, Managing Partner, DataArt**

It's the Chief Technology Officer's job to 'know their stuff'; to know the latest trends in the tech space and how to evaluate them and, based on that knowledge, to take decisions that go straight to the heart of corporate success and survival.

It's the job of senior executives from the CEO to others on the executive team to question her or him from time to time.

For better or worse, making technology decisions forms part of a non-technical executive's job. While it is the smart move to trust your Chief Technology Officer (CTO) on most occasions - it helps to understand the implications of technology choices and question some of them. Inevitably, the issue of whether to use the latest and greatest or to keep with the tried-and-true comes up. How does one determine what's best for the business, regardless of hype or peer pressure?

**Don't be a fashion victim**

For starters, it is important to resist the sense of urgency and pressure to go for the 'latest'. The 'latest' changes at such dizzying speed, it's pointless to try 'stay modern' for the sake of it, unless you are prepared to re-engineer your entire technology system every 12 months. Besides some questionable bragging rights, it is unlikely to do much good.

The great technology democratisation of the past 10 years was enabled – among other things – by lower costs, easier access to information, better training and, perhaps most importantly, the open source movement. It has been a tremendous positive for the industry. However, democratization also enabled scores of less than talented engineers into the market and made it easy for them to publish and promote bad or half-baked technology.

### **Examine the eco-system**

One reliable way for non-technical execs to evaluate the merits of an innovative tool, framework, data platform or programming language is to investigate the size and staying power of the community around it.

Looking at what's happening on GitHub (the most popular place to collaborate on code) may tell you more about a tool's future use than digging into every last detail of what it actually does. Ask: Is there a large and growing community of commentators and contributors? Are there significant corporate backers? Is there a long term program of conferences, meetups and training - bringing enthusiasts and users together?

### **The 'after you' principle: Let others test the tech first**

A successful technology hype curve has two humps. Initial excitement by the early adopters, possibly in large numbers, is almost always followed by a sharp drop, when many move on the next big thing and some of the initial hopes are not met. While it's the end of the story for some tools at that point, sometimes it's not. Little by little, technology gets better. Community support grows. New use cases are discussed. Making a bet on something in the middle of that second hump is one of the safest choices to make. Jumping in on the first upswing is outright risky.

### **Don't get suckered into woolly, hackneyed concepts**

Articulating the business value of some technology choices is tricky. Executives will ask CTOs “what does it do for me” and unless a new tool or platform will make things faster, more secure or more usable, they are right to be alarmed.

There are certain populist concepts and rhetorics floating around the tech world that you need to know so that you can avoid them. These arguments are used far too often and get far more credit than they deserve. Key offenders are the aims of ‘flexibility’ and ‘sustainability’. Both are misleading and deserve to be ignored more often than not. But ‘flexibility’ is worse.

Flexibility is important but often leads to over-engineering and unnecessary complexity. ‘We need non-programmers to be able to configure the system’ is the most common rationale. This can easily add an extra 50% of development cost. Guess what – nine times out of ten it is programmers who end up doing all the tweaking, because business foils have better things to do.

### **Know that things will move on**

Sustainability, usually defined in terms of reducing future support costs or putting off new IT investment for longer, is an admirable and more realistic goal than the awful ‘flexibility’ idea. But many executives expect too much of it. Most systems will not survive beyond a few years. This is not because they were wrongly built, but because business changes so fast. It may feel counterintuitive, but investment into ensuring systems last longer is often wasted. The same dollars you could plow into the holy grail of ‘sustainability’ are sometimes better spent re-doing the work when the time comes. Things will move on. After all, we’re talking tech here...

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