

Infra technology – donkeys led by geeks

Angus Leslie Melville

24/04/2020

If the coronavirus lockdown has taught us anything, it is that we're more reliant now on technology than we ever have been to fulfil our functions... and you better believe this reliance is going to grow in the coming months/years.

Few people we talk to do not envisage some sort of scale-back on office space in the near term as a direct result of the coronavirus pandemic as CEOs stroke chins with calculating glee at the notion of slashing office costs.

However, the direct result of this will be that some of you dinosaurs will have to stump your way out of pre-history and join the evolution as a new age of technology dawns for us all.

At the start of the Covid-19 enforced lockdown, the lack of technical know-how was never more apparent than in two separate conversations with infrastructure professionals – one of whom would comfortably wear the title luminary, while the other is more of a stalwart.

The stalwart was insisting that he would have to go into the office because he had work to do... and it was impossible to do it from home. So – hey ho, off to work (he mistakenly thought) he would go.

The other was a mobile phone call that involved a chat on technology and how journalists are – by nature of the work – only too comfortable with working remotely. Conversation turned to Microsoft Teams which he said he was getting to grips with.

In a flash, an Outlook invitation was winging its way to said luminary which was duly accepted.

"Oh wow," quoth he. "I can see you."

Well yes, and I can see you too, that's how this works... and, if I might say, what a lovely hoody you're wearing, and... are you working in your garage?

At which point he failed entirely to put his finger over the camera and, my wife (who is well known to many of you) and was working next to me at the time looked over, saying: "I really hope that's his finger."

Two examples of monkeys and typewriters with not a glimpse of Shakespeare in the offing.

Well, they had better get with the agenda – not just on a WFH level – but with digital infrastructure as an asset class that will rampage its way from being cutting edge to an established sector in our daily working lives in the blink of an eye.

Anyone who doubts that statement should look back to very recent history and see how the community went from sucking teeth to biting hands off with the likes of offshore wind and energy storage – to name but two.

Digital infrastructure

For all that none of us are leaving our homes, it's a curiosity that the world continues to change at such dramatic pace.

Looking across the news this past week, there have been a few developments on the hydrogen front:

- funding for [research in Finland](#)
- potential for use of [hydrogen in Singapore](#)
- a falter in the step for [plans in Germany](#)
- Gasunie joining a [Dutch hydrogen venture](#)

On the transport front, funding was raised for rather interesting maglev R&D work in Poland that will (hopefully) lead to [future deployment in hyperloop](#), while in the Netherlands BAM Infra Nederland has built and commissioned the world's first fully-electric 10- to 12-tonne road roller (heavy stuff).

These are just a handful of exciting developments in the last week that shine a light on the potential for greater inclusion hydrogen as an energy source and an uptick in technology in the delivery of infrastructure. This points to how you will have to re-focus your skillset to match the market shift.

Think back – those of you who were there – to the great infra rebranding of 2008 when all the European bankers and advisers suddenly changed their LinkedIn profiles to include renewable energy... and in a flash, they were no longer PPP people.

While it's not going to be quite such a dramatic reinvention of reality, you would be well-advised to start skilling up now because you'll be trying to convince everyone you're an expert in this new wave of infra by the end of the year.

To help with this, we will shortly – in partnership with our old friends Matthew Garver and Dr Bill Cox of Management & Excellence Global Inc. – be sending out a survey on digital infrastructure to build a picture of market perception.

From our side, in recent months, we've been shifting the editorial focus a good bit to bring digital infra into the mainstream:

- setting the scene for [a new asset class](#)
- battle lines being drawn for [cutting-edge technology](#)
- challenges facing the deployment of [5G technology](#)
- issues being faced by Smart Cities – [Waterfront Toronto](#)

But for you, it's time to change and it's a bemusing subject to get your head around and every project seems to be taking a different direction and it is being led by the big tech companies that will drive agendas to fit their ultimate goals.

What we have here is a massive venture capital play by the likes of Google, Apple, Microsoft, even Hyperloop and the serried ranks of telcos that will take that first mover risk/advantage, with the capital stack following in their wake once the business model is firmed up.

It will, without question, require greater flexibility in contract writing that is customary with the likes of PPP contracts as these projects will transform on a month-by-month basis, expanding to meet evolving technology deployment and adoption – from inter-connectivity of mobile devices right through to automated vehicles.

For now, the middle layer is missing.

And this will be filled by infra funds, lenders and the entire advisory shooting match as one pilot project is rolled out after another and a roadmap is laid out for municipalities to copy or tailor to their requirements.

So – brace for a bumpy ride and devour every piece of intelligence you can find on digital infrastructure because it's going to right at the “core” of your business.

Thank you for printing this article from IJGlobal.

As the leading online publication serving the infrastructure investment market, IJGlobal is read daily by decision-makers within investment banks, international law firms, advisory firms, institutional investors and governments.

If you have been given this article by a subscriber, you can contact us through www.ijglobal.com/sign-in, or call our London office on +44 (0)20 7779 8870 to discuss our subscription options.