21ST CENTURY DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: LESSONS FROM AMBROSE ALLI UNIVERSITY, EKPOMA, NIGERIA

PATRICK OSA. OVIASUYI

Abstract

This article looks at the benefits of digital transformation to the 21st Century organizations/universities with lessons from the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma. The paper discusses the state of digital transformation in the University before May, 2016. Challenges of transmitting from the Analog mode to digital transformation are identified. The evolutionary processes of digital transformation are highlighted. The paper discovered that: Prof. Ignatius A. Onimawo (popularly called digital Vice Chancellor) has successfully keyed Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma into the 21st world of digital transformation, and prays that subsequent Vice Chancellors will follow his pattern of making the University to rank among the best 10 State Universities in Nigeria. Ambrose Alli University is currently described as the “Most Innovative State University of the Year”. In view of this, the paper submits that: Digital transformation should be on the list of every university’s strategic plan and serious efforts must be made to faithfully implement the plan. Finally, the author recommends that all organizations/universities should embrace and integrate new technologies into their everyday operations.

Introduction

The Bendel State University, Ekpoma, was established in January 1981. The change in nomenclature from Bendel to Edo State University, Ekpoma was effected in 1992. In 1999, the institution was renamed Ambrose Alli University. The overall objective in the establishment of the University was the “concrete demonstration of efforts to liberalise and widen educational opportunities for all those with potentials.” In other words, the University has the intrinsic and bounden duty to respond to the crying needs of qualified persons to gain access to higher education opportunities. This duty remains unshakable despite the paucity of funding, limitation of academic and living spaces and increasingly, regrettable constriction of the good prospects and glowing promises underpinning the founding of the University. The challenges of the University thus, entail overcoming obstacles of resources and scaling the hurdles placed by the quota system that is often skewed and yet meets the educational aspirations of qualified persons of whatever origin, class or status.
The vision of the Ambrose Alli University is to be the centre of all round excellence not only in teaching and research but also in the total development of the individual person, in tune with the socio-cultural, environmental and technological realities of a dynamic world.

The mission of the University is to strive to put in place the necessary conditions for continuous learning for both staff and students, for the acquisition of new skills, and the promotion of scholarship, moral integrity, responsible leadership and entrepreneurship (Bendel State University, Ekpoma Law, 1981).

The University, established in 1981 operates in six locations in and around Ekpoma, namely:
- Ujemen - Main Campus
- Emaudo Campus – Faculty of Agriculture, Foundations and Part-time Programmes
- Ihumudumu – Faculty of Basic Medical Sciences
- Irrua – Faculty of Clinical Sciences
- Ujoelen – Staff Primary School

This diverse nature of the University locations, though with immense benefits, has implications for its running costs and coordination of operations. The University has 12 Faculties, 57 Departments and 71 National Universities Commission’s accredited academic programmes.

The physical environment of the University in each of these locations, without doubt, has challenges of the required infrastructure befitting a modern University of the age and status of Ambrose Alli University.

While many developmental and infrastructural projects have been completed under the current Administration, but more landmarks could have been recorded with adequate funding. The weak funding position of the University, therefore, impacts negatively on many aspects of the University’s functioning (AAU Annual Report, 2017).

Modern organizations in the 21st century operate on cutting edge information and communication technology. The provision of ICT facilities in the University requires massive investment in infrastructure, equipment and technological knowhow. The situation of less than encouraging ICT presence consequently resulted in staff and students suffering inhibitions in their quest for
knowledge on a wide variety of academic matters. In fact, this was the situation of ICT before May, 2016.

**State of Digital Transformation Before May, 2016**

It is germane to mention that before May, 2016, the state of information and communication technology (ICT) in Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, was in the elementary stage as: Internet service was only available in the Vice Chancellor’s office; Signals were very low and weak; No wifi in the University except in the office of the internet service providers; Very expensive, and therefore, there was inadequate commitment; Only very few Lecturers were computer literate and had personal laptops; The University as a whole had few laptops and for word processing only; Manual typewriters were prevalent even in the Examinations and Records office; Paper work in governance and administration was very massive and expensive with hiccups here and there; Everything was mostly analog with attendant logistical problems.

**Challenges of Transmitting from Analogue to Digital Transformation**

In the attempt to transmit from the analog mode of operations to the digital and modern technique of doing things, the following challenges were faced: Analog inertia and resistance to change by members of staff; There was serious paucity of funds to acquire modern technologies; The internet service provider was incompetent; There was resistance by all the staff unions; Endemic systemic corruption; and Stakeholders’ apathy (AAU Annual Report, 2017).

**Evolution of Digital Transformation in Ambrose Alli University**

The Ambrose Alli University that was established in 1981 did not really embrace modern Information and Communication Technologies from its inception until May, 2016 when the current Vice Chancellor, Prof. I. A. Onimawo took over the mantle of leadership of the University. On his appointment, he presented vision, mission and strategic plan for five years and the highlights of the plan was “to have a first-class University that will be rated as the best State University and among 10 (ten) best in Nigeria, in knowledge and skills for service delivery to the society”. (Onimawo, 2016). Key among the 12 (twelve) points mission strategy was Expansion, Deeping and Improvement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for repositioning of governance, administration, teaching, research and day-to-day operations in all
areas of the University. In order to achieve the goals, the following actions were taken: A radical shift from analog mode to digital mode in Administration, Finance, Academic, Examinations, Communications, Records, Research and other areas of the University operations; The vision and mission were written down, publicized and well communicated in all meetings of the University and to all stakeholders; An action plan was drawn and perfected to address the actualization of the vision in the areas of: Staff to be utilized; Committees set up and empowered; Funds sourced mostly from the prudent utilization of Internally Generated Revenue (IGR); Acquisition of new and modern internet infrastructures.

**Actions Taken to Migrate from the Analogue Era to the Modern Technological Age**

Collaboration with the GSM service providers to aggressively increase internet bandwidth by the introduction of fiber optics technology, rewiring and upgrading the entire University system; Strengthening, staffing and empowerment of the ICT Unit; Outreach to the National Communication Commission (NCC) for computer and staff training; Outreach to the Alumni, banks, contractors, politicians, etc. e for the donation of desktop and laptop computers; Engagement of resourceful staff for software development, testing and installation of internet connectivity; Blocking of all leakages in the finance system to make development fund available; Involvement of staff at all levels of: introduction, testing and application of new technologies, and determination to remain focus despite the numerous challenges.

**Digital transformation results achieved: Introduction of E-Senate**

This led to virtual and online meetings of the University Governing Council, University Senate, University Committees, Convocation and other statutory organs. Benefits derived from this include, but not limited to the following; Massive reduction of paperwork and huge costs savings; Massive reduction in arguments at meeting over irrelevancies; Great efficiency and effectiveness due to massive savings in time, energy and finances; Repositioning of the University in line with world-class best practice in ICT; Automatic and seamless acquisition of relevant gadgets by staff and students for personal upgrade in ICT world; Revolution in the minds and attitudes of staff towards keying into the computer world-best-practice; Became one of the very few Universities in Nigeria to achieve this level of ICT. In fact, the University won Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) computer awards severally.
(2) **Introduction of Computer-Based Examinations:**

All 100, 200 and some of the 300 levels, mid-semester and continuous assessment tests/examinations are now held through computer-based examinations. As the candidate is through with the tests/examinations and clicks submit, his/her scores/results reflect on the screen immediately. This is instant marking, scoring and display of results. Some benefits of this system are: Solves most problems relating to examination malpractices in the University; Solves problems of missing examination scripts, sexual harassment, mark-for-money, sorting at the end of examinations, etc. Helped to ensure that students pay their school fees and prevent most malpractices relating to school fees collections as only students who have paid fees can log in for examinations.

(3) **Introduction of Online Results Processing:**

Examinations results are now processed and published online within a very short period; All the long delays in marking, collations, analyses and release of results have been eliminated from the University; Parents and students now have absolute confidence in the University.

(4) **Introduction of Online Payment of School fees, Levies and Dues:**

Malpractices related to school fees payments, forgery of receipts, under payments, stealing, frauds and other negative practices have been reduced/eliminated; More funds are now available to the University for operational and developmental purposes; Registration of courses and programmes that used to be fraught with numerous logistics and malfeasance problems are now done seamlessly.

(5) **Introduction of Online Admission:**

Admission racketeering has been eliminated, as the process is now transparent, effective and efficient as it is done online without direct/indirect human interference.

(6) **Introduction of Electronic Voting:**

Students Union Election which used to experience huge election challenges, involving fraud, violence, bribery and all forms of malpractices are now done through electronic voting; Students
now do their voting using their phones and laptops from the comfort of their homes, hostels or anywhere in the world-wide; Only three Universities in Africa had tried this and fortunately only Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma has done it successfully for four consecutive years; The software was developed in Ambrose Alli University and is a model for all kinds of elections for any organization, institution or indeed in any country that needs it.

(7) **Introduction of E-Learning:**

Some aspects of students lectures and learnings are now done online; The University now offers e-learning certificate programmes and has graduated some students; Virtual Induction Ceremonies for graduated Nurses into their professional body have been done severally during the lockdown period.

(8) **Introduction of E-Library:**

A virtual library for comprehensive online tutorial has been established and is being effectively and efficiently utilized; The University’s e-library is now among the best amongst Nigerian Universities both in holding and subscriptions.

(9) **Introduction of Electronic Surveillance System (CCTV):**

The Closed-circuit television (CCTV) were installed in the Computer Based Examinations Halls, the main Library and in strategic points in the administrative building for surveillance.

(10) **Modification of the University Website:**

There has been dramatic expansion and population of the University website. In 2020 at the Nigeria Technology Award Ceremony, Ambrose Alli University won the award. It also won the award of being “State University Website of the Year”. (AAU Annual Report, 2019).

**Benefits of Digital Transformation to Ambrose Alli University**

There is no doubt that when technology is carefully aligned with organizational and environmental goals, the productivity gains and cost savings will be compelling. Energy management and industrial automation are at the heart of this transformation. Across all sectors and world geographies, digital technology is creating new organizational models and enhancing effectiveness and efficiency. ([www.benefits of digital transformation](#)). However, many organizations have not
yet fully understood how digital strategies can transform their organizational productivity, but good enough Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma had embraced and operationalized this concept successfully.

**Digital Transformation** may have a different meaning to persons or organizations. Generally, digital transformation is the integration of digital technologies into all areas of organization’s operations. In short, it is the integration of information, computer and mobile technologies into a company’s overall business strategy. The integration of these technologies provides openness and flexible working environment for employees. Additionally, digital transformation helps to deliver a better experience for customers and encourages long-term relationships. Modern organizations whose ultimate goal is **staying at the top of any competition** never erodes the idea of digital transformation.

Majority of organizations are shifting towards the process of **digitalization** nowadays due to its benefits. Essentially, the proliferation of computer and mobile technologies has made it necessary for businesses to go digital. While some organizations are able to convert goods and services into digital form, some are still drowned in the implementation process challenges.

Overall, the benefits that come with digital transformation outweigh the challenges. Therefore, overcoming the challenges is paramount. It is on this that the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, has benefited from digital transformation in the following seven ways:

**Delivers a better Staff-Students experiences:** Advancement in technology has increased the way organizations interact with their customers. As a result, it helps organizations to provide better and consistent experience in fulfilling the needs of their clients. These days, part of creating satisfactory customer experience is speed. Therefore, a University that embraces the digital transformation stands a chance of engaging and serving its staff and students quickly, hence Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma is at the forefront of the 21st Century digital transformation in Nigeria;

**Improves the skill set of Staff and Students:** With the adoption of new technologies in Ambrose Alli University, staff and students have updated their skills in order to meet the changing technological environment. In this regard, the computer knowledge and the skills of the staff and students have been elevated. This has resulted in the creation of agility and better communication among all the departments in the University;
**Encourages digital culture:** Having a digitalized University environment increases productivity and allows staff and students to easily adapt to any technological changes. Digital culture develops staff and students’ creativities and thereby leads to innovation. In relation to the skill set improvement, a digital environment encourages continuous learning amongst the staff and students. Additionally, it will keep the staff and students motivated and agile at all time;

**Improves data collection and analysis:** With the online availability of data analytics tools, it has become easier to monitor, collect and analyze staff and students’ data for making informed decisions. Data collection and analysis process has opened up new opportunities for digital businesses. Basically, it helps to further enhance strategies by studying the online habits of staff and students;

**Enables digitization of Staff and Students Records:** Through digital transformation, the University is now able to convert tangible records into digital records in order to meet the needs of all the stakeholders;

**Makes the University more Service Oriented:** Digital transformation, in many cases, has affected the University positively. Moreover, digital transformation opens the door for new ideas, creativity, innovation and growth. For example, the introduction of e-learning platform and eventual graduation of students online;

**Keeps the pace of competition:** Being able to compete is what ensures the survivability of organizations. With the prevalent world of digitization and continuous transformation of the organizational environment, competition among tertiary institutions will continue to grow. So, by transforming Ambrose Alli University into the 21st Century digital world, we are keeping the pace with the competition, as this will have favourable change on everything that revolves around the University. ([www.proven benefits of digital transformation](https://www.provenbenefitsofdigitaltransformation.com))

**Conclusion**

The benefits of digital transformation are more than the ones listed above. For some organizations, the gains they derive after the implementation supersede what had been anticipated. While digital transformation may be a challenge for some universities in the short-term, the long-term benefits are significant. Digital transformation should be on the list of every university’s strategic plan and serious efforts must be made to faithfully implement the plan. Doing this will propel the university
for an easy adaptation to the future technological inventions. The experiences of staff and students is at the heart of digital transformation. As a result, the primary focus of digital transformation is to use cutting-edge technology to improve the staff and students’ experiences.

Interestingly, Prof. Ignatius A. Onimawo (our digital Vice Chancellor) has successfully keyed the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma into the 21st world of digital transformation, and it is our fervent prayers that subsequent Vice Chancellors will follow his pattern of making the University to rank among the best 10 State Universities in Nigeria. Ambrose Alli University is currently described as the “Most Innovative State University of the Year”

Finally, it is therefore, my humble recommendation that all organizations/universities should embrace and integrate new technologies into their everyday operations.

References

(Bendel State University, Ekpoma Law, 1981). Ambrose Alli University Strategic Plan, 2016."
Ambrose Ili University Annual Report, 2016/2017 Academic Session
Ambrose AAU University Annual Report, 2017/2018 Academic Session
Ambrose Alli University Annual Report, 2018/2019 Academic Session
Ambrose Alli University Annual Report, 2019/2020 Academic Session
www.benefits of digital transformation (Retrieved on 21/03/2021)
www.5 proven benefits of digital transformation (cnbc.com) (Retrieved on 21/03/2021)
www.7 Business Benefits of Digital Transformation | by Calistus Mbachu | Medium (Retrieved on 21/03/2021)
Onimawo, I. A., (2016),’’ Strategic Plan for Ambrose Alli University, 2016-2021’’. 