



Insights

Explore the Boyden View: The impact of high-speed digital change, the need for 'rebels', and how Shopify is getting it right

Jim Harmon, Amanda Gordon and Ian Collyer on tech's impact on industry ecosystems, education and career choices.

By Amanda Gordon, Ian Collyer, Jim Harmon

A companion piece to *Leadership Series*, The Boyden View brings the perspectives of in-house experts from Boyden offices around the world into the conversation. For a deeper dive into the subject matter, read the full [Leadership Series interview with Soumen Roy](#), Executive Director and Country Head Canada, Tata Consultancy Services.

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As traditional industries evolve into digitally-enabled industries, what is the experience of leaders in Canada?

Collyer: For more than a decade, we've seen most traditional industries, be it manufacturing, retail, food production or banking moving through various phases of digital transformation. They have moved at different speeds ranging from incremental to fast-paced transformation. With COVID-19, we've seen this digital evolution accelerate rapidly across whole sectors of these 'traditional' industries, in some cases driving ten years of transformation in just months. With this rapid change, a common theme and challenge these leaders face is digital talent: how to recruit the right digital talent and retain existing talent in the face of high demand.

Harmon: Canadian companies are like those elsewhere: many have been behind on digital enablement, with some retailers lacking the most basic ecommerce capabilities, let alone systems that span entire business models. To be fair, many businesses with tight margins have wisely avoided monolithic ERP implementations and are now squeezing the trigger on individual SaaS/Cloud solutions that are less expensive and offer flexibility via APIs from an integration standpoint.

How are candidates weighing up potential career moves into established start-ups versus multinationals?

Gordon: COVID-19 has created pockets of accelerated growth and some executives are chasing these, no matter the size of the organization. While there is a shift to shopping local and exploring local opportunities, the realities of working from anywhere have also opened up cross border opportunities with multinationals. In my experience, it is more about a technology space that is relevant versus joining a start-up or multinational. Executives are looking for the opportunity to work on something with high growth potential during this uncertain time, however they definitely have a lower risk appetite.

Collyer: Looking beyond what is hopefully a temporary COVID-19 situation, the Greater Toronto area (and Canadian) technology landscape has changed significantly over the past fifteen years, moving from a relatively small group of Canadian technology companies, with limited access to capital, to a world class ecosystem of Canadian born and bred tech companies and investors across the country. Within this ecosystem, I am seeing Canadian tech executives focusing on smaller, earlier stage technology companies attracted to high growth environments where they can drive strategy, have a greater impact and a much larger ownership stake in the company.

Harmon: Given the current fragility of the global economy, I am seeing executives in large companies less inclined to pursue roles in early stage or even scale-up or growth companies. Even with 'unicorn' transactions happening, there is a real sense of not knowing what will happen next, dampening the appetite for individual executive risk.

Roy talks about formal certification by technological organisations rather than educational institutions in future, given the greater understanding that organisations have of consumer needs. What are you seeing in the market?

Harmon: This has been especially true for technical leaders and staff, but less so for senior executives. Certainly for technical managers, hiring decision-makers have put as much emphasis on Cisco or Microsoft certifications for example, as conventional graduate achievement in recent years. The immediately practical, versus the adaptation of the general, takes precedent.

Gordon: I appreciate Roy's comment and I agree with Harmon's. Ultimately, the closer we are to understanding consumer needs, why they buy, and more importantly why they will buy our products and services, the closer we will be to building successful businesses. However, I believe it would be a wrong move to replace educational institutions with formal certifications, as I see a market that benefits from the power of candidates having both. The pace of innovation in today's technology space makes it difficult to stay ahead of the curve, so while specializing with a certificate is a quick win, when building future leaders we need breadth combined with the depth of a specialization.

Cloud has shifted from being virtually non-existent to being a key influence today upon security, networking, data centers and analytics. Cybersecurity is now top of mind in the face of increasingly sophisticated

cyberattacks. And then there's the Internet of Things, vitally important to the digital lives of our global population and our businesses, given its ability to connect to a staggering amount of data and devices. So which certification to take in an ever-evolving landscape?

On the other hand, with a talent shortage and competitive market, introducing certification tied to your brand is a smart move. Shopify is a great example of this. The launch of their Shopify Expert certifications, creating a community of brand ambassadors trained to enable their growing foothold in the ecommerce market, supports their customers getting up to speed quickly and more economically. That's smart business.

So, in this fast-paced tech space, we should look at both as the winning combination. In the meantime, I strongly feel the need to pay more attention to our educational institutions to ensure their modernization through the development of curriculum and co-op programs, which enable graduates with relevant and employable experiences on graduation day. Now that would be a win/win.

Roy talks about the democratising effect of technology worldwide, notably industry 5.0 and an ecosystem developing more AI and IoT capabilities. What are your clients looking for in terms of evolving skills sets and talent pools?

Collyer: Our industry 5.0, AI and IoT clients often look to us to attract, assess and recruit business or market-facing leaders across sales, marketing/product and finance. Here we are looking for high-level technical acumen, coupled with deep business experience to help these organizations commercialize and go-to-market with these new innovative technology solutions.

Harmon: Ironically, I see a looming risk of monopolization and dilution of democracy as a result of the unbelievable growth and pervasiveness of the world's largest tech players.

Our most successful clients are using this opportunity to seek out rebels; individuals who see things differently and aren't simply interested in furthering the dominance of a few players. These clients are also open to less impressive academic credentials, focusing more on experience, and offer much more flexible working arrangements.

In your work helping clients to identify, attract and hire the right leaders, what surprises you the most?

Harmon: I am surprised by the degree to which individuals want to remain in the 'Mother Ship' right now, with income assurance being critical. It is a difficult time to convince candidates to sow their 'entrepreneurial wild oats' if they are gainfully employed and enjoying continuity of lifestyle.

Gordon: Every day I passionately map and track top executive talent around the globe, our top CEOs, senior leadership candidates and of course the elusive VP Global Sales. While my focus remains unchanged, the impact and unpredictability of COVID-19 is a surprise for me. While there is a greater emphasis for all companies on business value, agility, connecting and measuring end-to-end activities, the impact of the pandemic is felt differently at each company. Business is either booming or hard hit; talent pools can now be borderless, versus local has never been more important. Each client experience is different and hard to predict, so we too need to be an agile business partner now more than ever.

Collyer: Through the past seven months, I've been surprised at how quickly companies (and candidates) have shifted their executive recruitment processes to be fully 'virtual'. Before, it would have been unthinkable for key leadership hires to occur without in-person meetings, dinners, social interactions, candidates visiting the office to get a feel for culture etc. yet these hiring processes and situations are now commonplace. A remarkable shift since March 2020.

About the Authors



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A search professional with nearly two decades of experience, Ian Collyer is a key member of our Technology and Industrial Practice Groups. Focusing on the highly competitive software, telecommunications, professional services, clean tech and manufacturing industries, Ian works with clients ranging from private equity and venture-backed start-ups to large multi-national organizations.



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A seasoned recruitment professional and trusted advisor to CEOs and business leaders, Amanda Gordon has recruited for hundreds of hard-to-hire roles. She has over 20 years' experience in all aspects of global HR management. Her expertise in the technology sector extends across multiple areas including software and applications, satellite and cellular networks, IT, Internet of Things and telecoms.



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Jim Harmon is one of Canada's most experienced technology sector search professionals. Over two decades, he has completed hundreds of searches for clients ranging from early-stage start-ups, to global public companies. His work has focused on board, C-suite, and VP recruitment, including dozens of CEOs. Jim also specializes in recruiting transformative IT, data and digital leadership talent.