



The NBA ‘Restart’ and Beyond: Accelerating Digital Transformation

Agile organisations are testimony to paradigm shifts - nimble in their use of technology, quick in mobilising resources and adopting changes. The story of ‘NBA Restart’¹ in July 2020 in Orlando, Florida, is an exemplar of such dynamism and organisational capability. Ensuring safety of all the stakeholders involved, the most premier professional basketball league in the world, was able to innovate on viewership and fan engagement by creating a seamless, interactive, and immersive user experience, despite the pandemic. Spearheading the league on the technology front is Krishna Bhagavathula, Senior Vice President and Chief Technology Officer at NBA, and his team, who were instrumental in the game plan for many of these innovations.



Krishna Bhagavathula

SVP and CTO,
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2020 was a hugely disruptive year, affecting life and businesses worldwide, leaving us all grappling with navigating through uncharted waters. In mid-March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US and as the country went into lockdown, the ongoing National Basketball Association (NBA) season had to be suspended. For a sports powerhouse like the NBA, with close to 1.2 billion followers across the globe and 450 international players across 41 countries, anticipating that the season may reach such a juncture was not completely unforeseen². Monitoring the spread of the virus globally, from January 2020, we had been closely observing its impact across our offices in China and Hongkong, and learning from their experiences as we began preparing for a response in the event of a spread to the US.

Sports is the 11th largest industry in the United States, which meant that our business partners were just as eager as our fans to restart the NBA season and leaned in to support and augment our efforts to do so³. And as we planned for the resumption of games without fans, we quickly realised the importance of new ways to keep them engaged in a world that was increasingly conditioned to virtual meetings.

¹The NBA season 2019-2020 went on hiatus in March, because of the pandemic. The NBA governing board approved a competitive format for the comeback of the remaining season with a finalised comprehensive July restart.

²Contributor, S. *ServiceNow BrandVoice: How Digital Workflows Helped Save Basketball During The Pandemic*. Forbes. Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/servicenow/2020/12/08/how-digital-workflows-helped-save-basketball-during-the-pandemic/?sh=522d01934d7a>

³M.D, R. P. *Coronavirus Poses 5 Huge Threats To The Future Of Sports*. Forbes. Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertpearl/2020/08/25/coronavirus-future-of-sports/?sh=73fa55cd792a>



Several teams across the NBA worked diligently and relentlessly to come up with a plan to restart the season. And obviously, the plan emphasized the priority on health and safety of our players, staff, and vendors that we needed on campus to successfully pull this off.

The tight timeline that we had meant we needed quick action, and within IT we achieved that by decentralizing decision-making and ensuring that field-staff was empowered with appropriate authority and accountability. We had to work out lots of details – there was no playbook to follow and within weeks, we had to create new workflows, streamline processes, and build new capabilities. All of this culminated in the season resuming in July 2020 highlighted by a new marketing campaign called “A Whole New Game”. However, the journey to bring back the game-during and despite the pandemic – was not an easy one. Having successfully dealt with the roadblocks, we can now look back to some important lessons the pandemic has offered, not just for us at the NBA but for many other businesses and organisations that reeled under the impact of this disruptive year.

METAMORPHOSIS TO A VIRTUAL RESTART

Key Priorities

Around the start of 2020, with many of our staff beginning to work remotely, we were already into a phase of ‘wargames,’ trying to simulate how our business operations would be impacted in the changing scenario. One key aspect was figuring out if the tools and technology that we had in place were resilient enough to sustain people working remotely. Equally imperative was figuring out where we could face



roadblocks in our business processes. For instance, even the simplest things – if you need to cut a physical cheque for a vendor but the cheque printer is at the office and staff are working remotely, how would we do that?

Our immediate focus was on controlling the ‘controllables’ – we had to ensure that people had the tech and tools that they needed to get work done remotely. Communication was another key priority and we had to ensure timely and seamless flow of information across our staff and various stakeholders – including governors, teams, and players.

Also, of primary focus was getting the season started without compromising on the health and safety of players, staff, and vendors. Key to this was identifying a venue for the restart – a secure campus



where we felt comfortable with putting in place the health and safety protocols. Walt Disney World campus in Orlando, Florida, was the location that met the criteria determined by our Events and Health & Safety team. So once that decision was made, we got to work!



Strengthening Organisational Capabilities

We had to focus on designing processes and workflows to facilitate onboarding of staff, players and vendors that were approved to be on campus. Of course, the fact that there was no precedent or playbook to follow made it even more challenging especially given the tight timelines and the need for compliance with health and contact tracing protocols.

Within my department, we quickly realised the need for increased communication across all channels and to that end, set up frequent department check-ins to keep staff updated on plans around restarting the season. Even as we were dealing with time pressures, that often meant long hours for the team, the pandemic added an additional degree of uncertainty and stress. Empathy has probably never been more crucial in the workplace-as the separation between work and personal time was eroding. It was important for leaders to lean-in and understand concerns people were facing and address them candidly and in real-time.

People tend to get comfortable working a certain way, often choosing not to adopt new tools or technologies and sticking to ones they are familiar with. The pandemic created an opportunity to break that inertia and has acted as a catalyst for digital adoption.

In the past, we had quarterly all hands meetings, but now we started meeting more frequently and I host a department check-in-every two weeks. And we quickly realised that brief fortnightly updates could be much more productive than quarterly townhalls. Additionally, the



use of real-time dashboards and demos of innovative tools was great for sharing information on the fly!

Combining Synergies with New Partnerships

Another major need for restarting the season was the implementation of self-directed and automated digital workflows to aid in the approval of people permitted to be on campus. To achieve that, the NBA partnered with 'ServiceNow'⁴, a market leader in workflow and automation technologies. Our teams worked together to rapidly design and deploy an omnichannel, platform-based onboarding process. It included an intuitive user experience that would help collect important health information, and other documentation using their cloud-based platform and route them to the right personnel for review and approval.

We were able to create a portal within two weeks, and this processed over 13,000 documents and details of 2600 people including staff, vendors, and guests.

Once people entered the Disney campus, we had protocols in place to conduct frequent tests and developed a rapid response contact tracing system. To do this, we relied on data collected from multiple digital health devices. They included an internet connected thermometer, a digital pulse



⁴ServiceNow is an American software firm developing cloud computing platforms to help companies manage digital workflows for enterprise operations.



oximeter and a proximity detection device that was programmed to give audible alerts in case people came within six feet of each other. All of this data was aggregated and used for monitoring and reporting to aid in early detection and response in case anyone tested positive for COVID-19.

The next challenge was to figure out a way to bring fans and their reactions into the arena – and with the backdrop of a pandemic, this obviously had to be done virtually. We were fortunate to have a partnership



with Microsoft and we were able to leverage ‘Together’ Mode within Microsoft Teams to create an experience called Michelob ULTRA Courtside experience.

There were 10 courtside video boards that captured live video reactions of fans even as they were viewing the game from the safety and comfort of their homes. Overall, we had great engagement with our content, including about 1.7 billion actions across our various digital platforms, which topped the previous season’s engagement by about 30%!⁵

⁵News: CMO of the Week: National Basketball Association’s Kate Jhaveri. (n.d.). www.brand-innovators.com. Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.brand-innovators.com/news/cmo-of-the-week-national-basketball-associations-kate-jhaveri>



INGREDIENTS OF THE STRATEGY

Transcending Roadblocks

In my view, our experiences from 2020 have showcased resilience and put a spotlight once again on the innovation that the NBA is famous for. Within my organisation, we have focussed on operational efficiencies – learning from our experiences, eliminating redundancies improving, our IT processes. We have embraced the use of Agile frameworks like Kanban⁶ and Scrum⁷ that provide the feedback mechanisms necessary to improve and optimize our processes.



And within my leadership team, we have empowered staff and created opportunities to decentralise decision-making by clearly defining responsibilities and enabling staff to think and act on the fly.

Building a Sustainable Business Model

Our digital transformation journey helped us to adapt to newer workflows which were created and implemented on the cloud. What worked for us was effective communication, context setting, and strategic alignment with the league’s objectives.

⁶Kanban is a process designed to help teams work together more effectively. It follows a set of principles and practices for managing and improving the flow of work.

⁷Scrum is an agile framework for developing, delivering, and sustaining complex products, with an initial emphasis on software development.



A rubric that I thought was especially relevant for my department during the pandemic is something that was developed by Professor Vijay Govindarajan from the Tuck School of Business – called The Three Box Solution⁸.

The first box says, “manage the present”; the second box is “selectively forget the past”, and the third box is “create the future”. In some ways, the pandemic forced us into box two, and we had no choice but to invent and focus on painting the future.

The best interest of our players, teams, fans, and the league were central to the planning and the execution efforts around the season restart; both from a health and business standpoint. And our response to the pandemic has cemented existing business relationships and created opportunities for new partnerships for the future. In a world where health and safety will play a vital role as the world returns to normalcy, technology will be a key enabler and accelerator to define workplaces and arenas of the future.

THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SPORTS BROADCASTING

Platforms of the Future

Undoubtedly, the experience of attending live sports in an arena is electrifying. The biggest sporting performances have come in front of screaming fans in stadiums, cheering for their favorite players. The energy from live fans motivates and inspires athletes to push boundaries. And the virtual fans experience was an experiment to

⁸Vijay Govindarajan - *THREE-BOX SOLUTION*. (n.d.). www.tuck.dartmouth.edu/people/vg/speaking/topics/changing-the-rules-of-the-global-game



explore the alternatives to that with innovative technology.

We are in an incredibly exciting time in terms of the future of sports broadcasting and streaming content. A lot of new players are entering the space – there is Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV Plus and Disney+ that launched in late 2019. NBC and Warner Media launched Peacock and HBO Max respectively *during* the pandemic. And other new platforms are being announced and launched regularly. The interest and competition for eyeballs in this space has never been greater.

And that's where sport is unique – it's original content, it's live, it's action-packed, and there are often inspirational storylines around athletes and their paths to success. And this combination creates a plethora of opportunities to leverage on digital platforms in addition to traditional broadcasting.

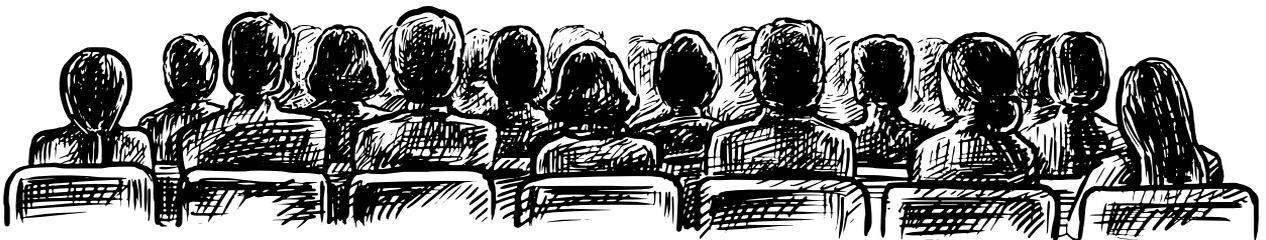


Reinventing the Fan Journey

The NBA has experimented with several models to engage a new set of audiences with its content. Our subscription-based models allow viewers to purchase a segment of the game – or a quarter – that fans can choose to view before committing to a monthly or annual package.

Catering to Varied Audiences

The road ahead for the business of streaming live sports content has multifold dimensions. There are a plethora of traditional TV and streaming platforms for consumers to choose from and the consumption form factors range from large-sized televisions to tablets and smartphones. Besides, sporting events take place in different time zones and thus fans watch the event at varying timings. It is not a stretch to assume that we can have a fan watching a game at 7 PM on their big screen at home, while another fan in a different part of the world could be following the game on their mobile phone while having lunch, and yet another one might be catching the action on their smartphones with their headsets on during their morning commute. And if you are in a country where the timing of the games does not work with your schedule, then maybe what you are interested in is a highlights package that recaps the games you missed.





Opportunities to Innovate

A big opportunity to innovate in sports is through data – using it to increase engagement by factoring in user-behavior and interests to provide content recommendations and personalising user experiences. Leveraging statistics to provide greater information and insights about the game and the players through graphic overlays during a game or deeper dive into a player’s historical performance may appeal to data-obsessed superfans.

Like most modern business, sports too have evolved beyond a one-size-fits-all model. It is a multi-dimensional experience blended to cater to different cohorts of audiences and their expectations. And the ideal outcome is increased fan engagement, enhanced viewership and meaningfully nurturing the sport at the grassroots level.

“ There lies a correlation between nurturing sport at the grassroots level and packaging it into a format that appeals to a new generation of audiences.

BEING AGILE AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

This evolving landscape implies several opportunities for organisations that are willing to rethink their value proposition, reflect on their core offering, and transform from within to meet the demands of this new reality.

While the world of sports eagerly waits for normalcy to be restored, and for live games to be played in arenas packed with fans, innovation and digital technology have helped to keep the interest in sports alive.



In the words of Satya Nadella, “The pandemic has driven more digital transformation in two months than we could in the last two years.”

Technology excellence is a powerful capability that agile organisations can use to deal with sudden turbulences caused by “black swan” events – helping them to take swift steps to develop ambitious and yet sustainable action plans to help navigate uncertainty. For us at the NBA, this journey has been truly rewarding and we are optimistic and excited about the potential that technology can unlock for the future.