

Office

Moments of truth

Four companies and the insights
that transformed them

 Microsoft

When a business has an insight, it can become a moment of truth—a transformative event that changes and defines the business in unexpected ways. And that moment of truth can improve the business exponentially.

March
2017

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Sometimes those moments are small and unexpected—like the purchase of a cheap chicken fryer from Bed Bath & Beyond that leads to a fast-growing restaurant in the business of changing lives.

Sometimes they're obvious and deliberate—like a company that makes a conscious choice to live by its values, which then infuses the way they work, and the work they take.

Sometimes those moments are just a smart adaptation to the facts, and sometimes they are baked in right from the beginning.

Explore these stories of business transformation. You might even discover your next moment of truth.



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Changing lives through the power of **smart technology**, transformative employment, and Nashville fried chicken.

Hot Chicken Takeover

Joe Deloss
Founder - Head

Joe Deloss dreamed up Hot Chicken Takeover (HCT) on a “babymoon” to Nashville with his wife, right before their first daughter was born. “We started frying chicken in a cheap fryer from Bed Bath & Beyond in my living room,” says Joe. “Next thing you know, we started selling that chicken in a parking lot. It’s gone from five friends who volunteered to about 100 employees. By the end of this year, we’ll be at 200 employees.”

But as Joe is quick to point out, his startup is about way more than chicken: “I’ve spent the last decade trying to find ways to build supportive, transformative relationships with people through employment.” As a result, HCT’s primary mission is to provide a

fair chance for a decent job to people who have had some barrier to employment, such as homelessness or previous incarceration.

Tech that fuels the mission

This desire to transform more lives is driving HCT’s growth. “Every restaurant we build creates probably 60 to 75 opportunities for a team member to build a career with us,” says Joe. “That is the opportunity that keeps me up at night.”

Even HCT’s entry-level team members usually have access to their own smartphone, and Joe has relied on that to keep workers connected and efficient. “Technology really reduces a lot of that

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friction we had,” says Joe, “whether it’s from the moment somebody applies for a job, relying on newly integrated HR technology, all the way up to the way they navigate their work schedule, submit paperwork, and communicate with peers.”

The “aha!” of analytics

One of Joe’s first—and most important—insights was that good analytics needed to be the foundation of decision-making. “Someone told us data was really important, so we just started tracking everything we could track,” says Joe. “We’re currently on probably our fourth point-of-sales system, so we have really mature data—but the beauty of what we’ve

been able to accomplish is finding ways to integrate all the data streams into one format.”

“Through Microsoft Office, we’re leveraging Excel primarily to aggregate all of our data streams to build really rich scorecards,” says Joe. On a weekly basis, the leadership team and each restaurant’s operating team spend five minutes reviewing a high-level snapshot, followed by five to 10 minutes of more detailed troubleshooting.



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"That automation has turned what could be a three-hour meeting into 15 minutes of just highly productive scrutiny over our performance," says Joe. "We use those scorecards to call out red flags and then use those to structure our dialogue. A lot of that has been really thoughtful analysis of what data is important and what it tells us. I think we're only just scratching the surface—and as we find more automation, our decision-making will go through the roof."

Embracing "bold humility"

"We have a theme at HCT called 'bold humility,'" says Joe, "which is this idea that we are going to aggressively, without ego, push our boundaries to keep improving and constantly growing."

In terms of HCT's technology environment, that's often meant seeking mentorship from trusted partners familiar with the struggles faced by young businesses. "We would see things that we'd been racking our

brains on from a tech perspective," says Joe, "then we'd see that stuff happen seamlessly and start realizing the possibilities."

"Those moments were huge light bulbs. Knowing that things are possible. What would it be like if we didn't have to manually run back to the kitchen and call out an order change? Stuff like that."

Building relationships can be addicting
"I don't think I hide the fact that technology is not something I'm really passionate about," says Joe, "in the same way that I'm not particularly passionate about fried chicken—but those things are means to this huge end, which is building a lot of relationships with really special people who are improving our business and their lives at the same time."

"That is, to me, addicting. If I can use technology to do more of that, by all means I will spend energy and time and money, left and right, to pull that off."



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“We all **speak Internet**;
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Buffer

Courtney Seiter
Director of People

The diverse, far-flung team behind a fast-growing social media management platform is building—and living—the “future of work”

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Buffer helps companies around the world drive traffic, increase fan engagement, and save time on social media. The Buffer team—just like its customers—is “fully distributed,” located across multiple continents.

According to Courtney Seiter, Buffer’s Director of People, remote work is in Buffer’s DNA, thanks to its cofounders. “They worked in the UK, in Tel Aviv, in other locations before they were able to get to San Francisco,” says Courtney. “The result of that nomadic, wandering period was they realized it’s very possible to be really productive and work from a number of locations. And in doing that you get unique perspectives.”

“What I do for Buffer,” says Courtney, “is figure out the best way for us to work together, communicate, and make sure teammates are coaching and growing in the directions they’d like to grow.”

Better teamwork through technology

One key moment of truth for Buffer came around teamwork, when they realized the role that technology could play in fostering spontaneous connections. "We try and create humanity, the 'serendipity moment' where you'd be passing each other at the water cooler, having a chat that sparks an idea that turns into something big," says Courtney. "Those are really, really hard to create in a remote environment."

The Buffer team encourages serendipitous moments with technology—including video conferencing, which they often use to get

everyone in the same "room." "We've got a 'Buffer Good Vibes' playlist to have a little dance party," says Courtney. "We've had a formalwear one where you dress up—because we never get to see each other dressed up. We had one where a teammate led us in gentle yoga. We just try as many things as we can to create that environment where it's not just working in solitude all day."

The company also realized early on that the mix of languages and cultures could be a communications challenge, but that diversity has also encouraged other authentic connections and created unexpected common ground. "It's fun to learn one another's idioms and interesting expressions," says Courtney. "What's interesting is we all

speak Internet; we all can communicate with emojis and GIFs and memes. It seems to be the universal language that puts everyone on even footing."

Given the structure and DNA of the company, whether the challenge is teamwork or communication, Buffer tends to come back to the same answer. "Technology is at the core of absolutely everything we do," says Courtney. "We're so, so dependent on all the different tools we use, and we're always experimenting with new tools. It's really, really crucial. I don't know that we could've done this successfully even 10 years ago."

The right tools for the job

The Buffer team takes a unified approach to document sharing and cloud storage, but teams often have moments where they realize they need to just use the tools that make sense for them—for everything from project management to bug tracking to facilitating wider conversations.

Chat-based workspaces can present challenges, though. "What we have discovered is that it can sort of run away with your day. Decisions can get made really quickly there. One thing we've tried to do is give ourselves more balance between making things happen fast and making sure people aren't left out."



The life un-deferred

The company's nomadic upbringing left another cultural mark: valuing travel and diverse experiences, to help workers feel greater freedom and to encourage new perspectives and more moments of insight. "A thing that's really important to our culture is avoiding this idea of the deferred life," says Courtney, "where you say, 'Oh, I'd really love to travel the world, maybe when I retire I can do that.' I think that idea of travel as an eye-opener, as a way to prevent a deferred life, became really crucial."

"We're such big believers in remote work," says Courtney. "So it makes sense that we'd want to double down on that and help people have that environment. I make sure we are looking ahead and always building 'the future of work.'"



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A scrappy, content-focused startup with a light tech footprint is setting the standard for podcasts.

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Gimlet Media

Katie Christiansen
Director of People Operations

Gimlet Media is an award-winning maker of narrative podcasts with over seven million downloads per month. Gimlet distinguishes itself with its high production values—in both storytelling and audio engineering. As Katie Christiansen, Gimlet's Director of People Operations, puts it, "We're trying to make something that's essentially the next iteration of public radio."

"I joined Gimlet when we were about 26 people," says Katie. "I was a one-woman team for a while, and I did a lot of recruiting, bringing people on board, growing the company, rolling out our first HR processes, implementing new platforms."

Not surprising for a lean startup, Gimlet's key moment of truth came when they realized that they had to balance the

practical challenges of producing high-quality content with big-picture thinking around a fast-growing new media segment. "We're very lean and we try to stay lean," Katie said. "So we say at Gimlet that everyone's very vertically integrated—meaning within your function, you're doing really high-level strategic stuff and really day-to-day grunt work stuff."

"Some days I'm wearing the hat of being super down-in-the-weeds, getting into nitty-gritty process stuff within our applicant tracking system. Other days I put my leadership hat on and think really strategically about how People Ops can better support whatever initiatives we're processing down the pipeline."

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When "tech" isn't in your DNA

That need to wear many hats was a key insight, and it's had an impact on where Gimlet makes internal investments. For example, Gimlet has only one technical director, and the team had begun recruiting for someone to take on more IT—but Katie realized that leveraging outside help could be more cost-effective.

"For us, outsourcing our tech has made a lot of sense," says Katie. "It's not quite part of our DNA in the way it might be for more tech-focused startups, because we're more content-focused. It's a calculation you have to make: Do you want to spend salary and headcount on a higher impact role? If we're going to invest in technical know-how, it makes more sense to invest in audio engineers versus a systems administrator or an IT Infrastructure expert."

"The outside company provides really great support, they're accessible, and they can continue to work with us as we grow," says Katie. "The way we leverage them now is different than it was a year ago, a year and a half ago, which has been really nice."

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Content is king

This focus on content over tech was another moment of truth for Gimlet—and when you wander their offices, tech isn't very visible. “People are surprised by how little machinery and blinking lights there are in our recording studio,” says Katie. “People are just on their laptops all the time, either on a couch or at their desk.”

“It's partially intentional to keep our tech light,” says Katie, “We're a content company. Because we're lean, because we're focused on content, there's nobody internally who is like, 'We need to have all these systems, we need to have platforms, we need this specific thing to be effective.'”

But that doesn't mean technology has no place here: “We really are pretty light when

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it comes to tech—but we leverage a lot of software service products. I can name three platforms that we use on the backend for People Operations on the cloud. Being lean means you also need non-human help—and sometimes that comes in the form of different software platforms.”

The future of podcasting

What will be Gimlet's next moment of truth? Katie has her eyes on the future, and new insights come every day for a company that's on the cutting edge of a quick-changing media-consumption landscape. “I really hope that podcasting becomes what video and on-demand video is today,” says Katie, “which is a really robust ecosystem of players like HBO, Netflix, Hulu—which are platforms that can host content and make original content. Ecosystems of platforms

are really robust and encourage more competition, and for people to get creative and experimental with the content they're creating.”

That next moment might just revolve around why audio is so special: “The medium is so intimate and people feel such a connection to the shows they listen to,” says Katie. “People respond so strongly because it's this quiet, unassuming way to get totally sucked into another world that is portable, relatable, free—it's unlike anything else in that way. I have high hopes for the future of long-form content.”



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“The great thing about tech is that it has the potential to push boundaries.”

Substantial

Eleni Adams
VP of Operations & HR



How a passionate, tech-savvy digital products studio honors its values through its work

Substantial is a 50-person digital studio that designs, develops, and creates strategy for products on mobile devices and the Internet of Things.

What's most striking about Substantial, though, is its portfolio of work: "Currently about 80% of our projects focus on social good," says Eleni Adams, Substantial's VP of Operations & HR.

Living your values

When Substantial was defining its organizational values, the team had an important moment of insight. "We really wanted to think about why people work here and what about the work makes us different," says Eleni. "We came up with 'Care & Connect,' because we really feel like the relationship with each other as human

beings is at the core of what we do—whether that's relationships with our clients or each other."

"We are thinking about, 'How do you accommodate folks who wouldn't necessarily be able to work in our industry otherwise?'" says Eleni. "Whether that's adapting how moms are able to work and still be caretakers, or how folks with disabilities are able to participate in the industry."

"In addition to our project work, we have a community grant program and we use that to help people who don't have enough money to have a full client engagement," says Eleni. "But they're really passionate about what they're doing and they have a problem they need help solving."

HR without the “principal’s office”

The Substantial team came to the realization that to motivate a values-driven organization, you need to take a different approach to HR. “I hate the term ‘HR,’ truthfully,” says Eleni. “It’s kind of outdated and when people hear it, it’s like, ‘Oh, god, I’m being sent to the principal’s office.’ That’s the lady that deals with all the forms, that kind of stuff.”

“I really think of it as people strategy,” says Eleni. “So it’s my job to make sure that we are competitive with our benefits, and we’re small enough that I’m fortunate to have a rapport with every single person at the company. I’m really passionate about employee development, really growing our employees, and making Substantial a company where people want to work.”

Keeping up with changing tools

“I view Operations as everything that keeps the engine humming and allows people to really focus on client work,” says Eleni, “to make sure that the operational software, on a high level, is really doing that for employees.”

But there are still moments when teams realize that a particular tool is no longer working for them, or that there’s a better alternative. “We want to make sure we’re selecting the best tools—but we also trust our employees to be the experts, so I’m going to listen,” says Eleni. “Most of the time we are the ears, not the gatekeepers.”

Technology that empowers

Early on, Substantial discovered that technology accessibility could be a powerful way to value diversity. “Personally, I’m really passionate about this,” says Eleni, “because as a company that is still digital, our products are used by a wide subset of people. And humanity is more than just young white guys.”

“The great thing about tech is that it has the potential to push boundaries,” says Eleni. “People are able to communicate remotely and in different time zones. Tech allows people to work more flexibly and have all kinds of different tools and ways of working, to grow and stay connected, and as a creative outlet. For example, we allow people to create side projects in their downtime. Employees have built games, one of which ended up being really successful.”

“The big thing is allowing people to be their authentic selves and recognize that technology is a vehicle for making that happen,” says Eleni. “Tech shouldn’t be the thing driving, the people should always be the things driving.”

“It’s exciting to bring on new tools and have people say, ‘Hey, this is really working and actually makes my life much easier,’” says Eleni. “I never get bored and am most excited about watching our people grow.”

What have the moments of truth been for your business?



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And can you imagine what moments might be yet to come? Much of the excitement and satisfaction of working in a growing business is that these moments can be around any corner, and it's up to you to make the most of them.

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