

Future Reflections

Lessons from my 40 years in the industry

by: Bob Doucette, Smart Technologies of Florida

In any industry, looking back offers not just perspective, but clarity — a chance to ask the questions that lead us forward. The questions we ask shape the direction we go. For example, did we achieve our goals for the year? And if not, why? More importantly, what gains did we make and what impacts did we create? What can we see today that we couldn't see last year? These questions may seem simple, but they are the keys to unlocking the future.

As I reflect on my 40 years in the office technology industry, I am struck by how much has changed and how much remains timeless. In 2025, I will celebrate two milestones: my 40th year in this industry and the 25th anniversary of Smart Technologies, the company I founded to help businesses automate and streamline their processes.

Forty years ago, at the age of 19, I never could have imagined the profound impact of the digital revolution. Back then, the concept of a digital copier was a fledgling idea — one that did not fully reveal its transformative potential until years later. Today, that idea has evolved into the multifunction device (MFD), a centerpiece of the modern office.

The Digital Transformation & Beyond

The rise of digital technology has redefined how businesses operate. It has revolutionized the speed at which decisions are made, tasks are executed and companies scale. What started as an innovation in document handling has become a cornerstone of business process automation. These devices now serve as portals to entire ecosystems of software that integrate workflows, manage data and empower employees to be more productive than ever.

Looking back, it is clear that the decisions we made 10, 20 or even 30 years ago laid the foundation for today's opportunities. And now, as we stand on the precipice of yet another wave of innovation — artificial intelligence (AI), cloud-based workflows and internet of things (IoT)-enabled devices — the lessons of the past have become our greatest assets.

What the Past Teaches Us About the Future

So, what can the past teach us about preparing for the



future? One critical lesson is the power of perspective. At 19, I could only see the immediate — selling and servicing devices. Today, my view has expanded to see how technology integrates into broader business goals — not just for efficiency, but for scalability, resilience and growth.

The questions we ask ourselves and our teams shape that perspective. Here are a few questions I have learned to ask over the years:

- **What are we solving for?** Technology is not just about functionality — it is about driving meaningful change.
- **What trends are emerging today that we did not notice last year?** Staying ahead means continually reassessing the landscape.
- **What tools and practices are we adopting to make**

our clients' businesses better? It is not about selling devices; it is about empowering others to succeed.

Casting a Vision for the Future

As we prepare for the next decade, I believe our focus must shift from just adopting technology to fully embracing transformation. The tools are more advanced than ever, but they are only as effective as the vision driving them. Businesses must look beyond immediate needs and consider how today's technology will shape tomorrow's opportunities.

Digital connectivity has become a critical factor in this transformation, reaching even the most remote areas of the planet. This unprecedented access unlocks formerly untapped talent, creating opportunities for businesses to collaborate with a truly global workforce. The unlimited potential of a connected world challenges us to think bigger and act more inclusively, leveraging diverse perspectives and skills to innovate and grow.

This is where Smart Technologies excels. For more than 25 years, we have guided businesses through changes they could not foresee, helping them align their technology with their long-term goals. As we look to the future, our mission remains the same: to empower businesses to work smarter, move faster and scale bigger.

To help shape the next five years in the office technology industry, we can apply a strategic framework encompassing facts, deployment, development and discovery.

Facts (Understand the Truths and Gaps)

■ **Global Truths** — AI will dominate workflows, personalization and sustainability, and autonomous systems will become standard.

■ **Industry Truths** — Customers demand smarter, greener and more secure solutions. Hybrid work models will require seamless digital/physical integration.

■ **Business Truths** — Identify where your business stands today — its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT).

■ **Gap Analysis** — Compare your current capabilities against these truths to identify gaps in:

- (1) Technology: Missing AI, IoT or automation tools
- (2) Workforce: Skills needed for future systems
- (3) Customer Experience: Lack of personalized or sustainable solutions

Deployment (Bridge the Gaps With Action)

Develop a three-pronged deployment plan to address the identified gaps:

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■ **Technology Deployment** — Invest in AI tools, cloud-first infrastructure and predictive maintenance systems.

■ **Process Deployment** — Automate workflows and integrate AI-driven document management.

■ **Sustainability Deployment** — Implement energy-efficient and eco-friendly practices.

Development (Invest in People, Tools & Ecosystems)

■ **People Development** —

(1) Upskill employees in AI, cybersecurity and customer-centric innovation.

(2) Build a culture of adaptability and lifelong learning.

■ **Tool Development** —

(1) Adopt AI-powered printing solutions for personalization and automation.

(2) Focus on seamless integration of hybrid work tools.

■ **Ecosystem Development** —

(1) Forge partnerships with AI innovators and cloud services providers.

(2) Engage in sustainability and compliance initiatives.

Discovery (Stay Ahead Through Innovation)

Continuously discover emerging trends and technologies by:

■ Monitoring advancements in AI, IoT and 3D printing.

■ Experimenting with pilot programs (e.g., voice-activated printing or AI analytics).

■ Soliciting customer feedback to refine your product and services offerings.

■ Identifying disruptions and opportunities in hybrid work, sustainability and evolving security needs.

Moving Forward With Purpose

So, how do we set goals today that will yield the fruits of vision tomorrow? We need to embrace the lessons of the past while keeping our eyes firmly fixed on the horizon. The future will belong to those who can both clearly see what is ahead and act decisively to shape that future. With the right framework and a commitment to innovation, we can navigate the challenges of tomorrow and unlock opportunities that seemed unimaginable 40 years ago. ■

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