From Globalization to Dual Digital Transformation: CEO Thierry Breton Leading Atos Into “Digital Shockwaves” (A)

Our customers are more and more global, so we need to be more global. And our customers have more technology, so we need to have more too. We need specialists everywhere, at each level of the chain, understanding deeply each segment of the technology. In order to do this, we need to control and to own some of the technology, and be able to partner with others on an equal basis.

— Thierry Breton, Chairman and CEO, Atos

By 2016, Thierry Breton, Chairman and CEO of Atos, had spent eight years scaling the information technology company into a global enterprise with over 100,000 employees. Atos specialized in online transactional services, system integration, unified communications, cloud, big data, IDM activities, and cybersecurity. Now, with the vantage of this global scale, Breton announced an ambitious three-year plan for Atos to become the leader in digital transformation defined as redesigning the underlying processes and competencies of an organization to become more adaptive using digital technology, from artificial intelligence and machine learning to the Internet of Things and cybersecurity.¹

But countless competitors were popping up from all sides, including start-ups born digital from Silicon Valley, India and China that had digital expertise from their inception. What’s more, digitally exposed consumers were becoming increasingly demanding. In his three-year plan, Breton was clear about these challenges:

As Digital Shockwaves accelerate, sending out wave after wave of transformative disruption, digital will become the cornerstone of enterprise and public services competitiveness and growth, bringing both opportunities and risks. The business and social impacts of these shockwaves will intensify competition in all industries, and will require the development of new employee skills, new forms of security, and new business models.
To distinguish Atos from the widening sea of global competitors, Breton had to rapidly achieve dual digital transformation, or redesigning Atos’ own internal processes and competencies through digital technology while simultaneously guiding customers through the same changes.

By March 2018, Breton secured a partnership with Google Cloud to deliver cloud and machine learning to enterprises. The partnership was a major step in Breton’s goals, raising Atos’ annual digital maturity ranking from 39th to 7th out of 40 companies, the highest jump on the list. But Breton did not have time to celebrate. Now that the partnership had been announced, Atos had to deliver.

The firm’s top leadership was split on the best way to prepare his large workforce for the monumental task of dual digital transformation. In one view, Atos needed its employees to complete digital certification training programs. But what percentage of the workforce would need certifications? Did every role require one, or only the jobs that dealt directly with digital technology? In another view, the only way for employees to learn relevant digital skills was through on-the-job experience working with customers. Could Atos apply the same strategies from its recently completed global transformation? Breton needed to equip his organization as fast as possible to claim the position of the top global digital transformation company.

**Thierry Breton, the Technology Visionary**

Born in France, Breton moved to the United States in his early twenties to found Forma Systems, a software engineering company. He left Forma Systems in 1986. By the age of 33, he had published three novels, each eerily prescient about the impact of cyberspace. *Softwar* (1984) sold over two million copies and was the first novel to explore the notion of a computer virus in cyberwarfare between nation states. Breton described his intent:

> I tried to imagine how globalization would look through internet networks. When you have networks, how you could use fake news, satellites, and so forth. It wasn’t science fiction either. It was 1984 and I was just explaining how the information age and information society would totally change relationships between communities.

His second book, *The Pentecost Project* (1985), featured a software program that could radio broadcast simultaneously in multiple languages. Building on a framework of three natural spatial dimensions—the earth, the seas, and air—the novel introduced a fourth dimension: an information space enabled by computers and satellites. Breton expounded, “Through globalization, people draw upon the first three dimensions. Digitization is the exploration of the fourth information space. Each space creates value, jobs and has to be regulated and organized.”

Breton expanded on these ideas when he published his third novel, *Netwar*, in 1987. The following year, his foresights and creativity were acknowledged when the Young Economic Chamber elected Breton “Person of the Year” in Lyon, France. He later went on to publish eight non-fiction books over the course of his career.

Breton’s ability to anticipate the effects of technology informed his decisions as a leader. For instance, while preparing for the digital wave at Atos, he was convinced that quantum physics would be the next frontier for computing power and speed. Each morning during his exercise routine, he studied theories about particles, wave functions, and probability. He eventually presented the potential of quantum physics to his executive committee who witnessed yet another instance where Breton led with deep technical understanding about emerging technology.