



Podcast Transcript

Technology from the Top: AI, Data and the Future of Business with Today's CIOs – Shannon Johnston

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Kattman: With the rapidly evolving technological landscape and an increase in data value, organizations, now more than ever, depend on their leaders to guide them through uncharted territory. Janine Anthony Bowen, co-leader of both the Privacy Governance and Technology Transactions team and the Digital Transformation and Data Economy team at BakerHostetler gets an inside look at how chief information officers across industries are tackling trends and planning for the future. Janine sits down one-on-one with current CIOs in the news series, Technology from the Top: AI, Data and the Future of Business with Today's CIOs. I'm Amy Kattman, and you're listening to BakerHosts.

On today's episode, Janine speaks with Shannon Johnston. Shannon is the Chief Information Officer and Senior Executive Vice President at Global Payments Inc., a leading worldwide provider of payment technology and software solutions. She is a proven IT leader with demonstrated success, leading global multinational teams specializing in technology transformation and delivery. Let's give it a listen.

Bowen: Shannon, in addition to your current role as Senior Executive Vice President and Chief Information Officer at Global Payments, you have developed a track record of leading global multinational teams across the technology ecosystem and across industries. Over the course of your career, you've been CIO at an advertising and marketing company, COO at a SaaS e-commerce company and chief technology officer at a national nonprofit. You currently serve as technology chair on the board of a German multinational corporation. And you've also been widely recognized for your contributions to the tech community, most recently as

one of the top 25 financial services chief technology officers by the Financial Technology Report and as a woman of influence by the Atlanta Business Chronicle. These experiences have given you a cross-industry, international perspective on these issues. In my technology-focused law practice, I am always looking at the ways technology leaders are viewing our most challenging topics of the day, and you are definitely a key voice in this conversation. I'm super excited to talk with you today. Shall we get started?

Johnston: Yes, please.

Bowen: Alright. First question. Is all the noise in the marketplace and pop culture around artificial intelligence, generative AI in particular, justified? What do you think?

Johnston: I do think it is justified. I think it is game changing, Janine. I really, I'm just amazed at both the personal capabilities and use for AI as well as the business capabilities and use for AI. I believe it could be a differentiator for both people, in terms of being an employee, being at work, employee satisfaction, ways to automate rote or parts of roles that are less interesting to allow employees and resources to really focus on things that are more fun than their role. Plus, I think from a differentiation factor, I think it is really interesting in terms of products and services and a way that companies can really get ahead and be a first mover of sorts.

Bowen: Okay, so you answered this question a little bit, but let's dive a little more deeply from the differentiation perspective. So, how will businesses be affected in the new era of AI? Let me add a little more to that. Given what you just talked about as a differentiator, do you see that differentiation because companies will determine unique ways to deploy AI that create competitive advantage? But it seems to me that all companies will be integrating AI to some degree. So, talk about the effect that it will have on business and that differentiation a bit more.

Johnston: Yeah, I think you're exactly right. I think most companies will introduce some form of AI. I think there are many off-the-shelf products and services that are including AI capabilities in a package that a company may already use. So, even very small companies can use it as part of their desktop setup, as it were. Not to name any names, but I will say I think that larger enterprise organizations will use it in a more bespoke manner to really differentiate their products and services. And so, I think that there are really unique ways to use it, and I'll pull from my past experience in SaaS-e-commerce. I think there is some amazing ways to evaluate a customer and to increase loyalty, increase the size of the shopping cart for example, recommend products and services to customers, all using AI. I think there is a lot of opportunity there that is already, we're already seeing it in the market today. But I think for each company, depending on their products and services, I think there're really interesting ways to use AI to help either increase their loyalty to their customer base or increase the subscription that a customer has to their products and services.

- Bowen: So, Shannon, given everything you said, should we be afraid, and should I be afraid as an employee? Should we be afraid from a cultural perspective? How concerned should we be about the potential for artificial intelligence?
- Johnston: Yeah, I think afraid is probably too harsh of a word. I've looked at AI with cautious optimism. And I think caution is the word, in terms of sharing of data, cost, just the impact of the compute that is required to do many of the AI queries that are happening today and, obviously, as the products mature and scale, would probably increase. And so, I'm most excited about AI as it relates to information security. I think it would be a very powerful way for us to take a lot of information and distill it down and detect bad actors faster. However, there is a lot of concern about sharing of data and what the sharing of data means. We don't want that to be a boomerang that ends up hurting us in the end. And so, I think it is something you have to really be cautious about and be thoughtful about how you implement it, what data you share, and how much it costs to implement to make sure that the value outweighs the negatives.
- Bowen: Alright, so you talked about the impact of compute, and I really want to delve into your sense around the environmental impacts of the mass consumption of data and the energy required to give the ultimate results we hope to receive from AI. But I want to park that for a second, and maybe you can bake that into this next question or next response a little bit. So, as data has become increasingly more valuable and you just described that a bit, okay, especially over the last I've said three to five years, but maybe longer, right, how has your role as a technology leader in the business evolved? How have your goals in your role evolved and your responsibilities?
- Johnston: Yeah, I think we were a first mover in moving data to the cloud, some, maybe seven years ago, which for Fintech companies was cutting edge. I wouldn't say bleeding edge but cutting edge for sure. And we were very thoughtful about it because, obviously, back then there were a lot of concerns just about security in the cloud, etc. And so, we mitigated those by being very thoughtful about the program that we that we undertook to implement moving our data to the cloud. I really feel like the CIO's role as it relates to data is to be a partner to the CEO and to actually work with the CEO to develop a culture of data and analytics in the organization because I think if an organization is not data-driven and doesn't embrace the use of analytics, it is very difficult to just put your data in the cloud and suddenly think it is going to have benefit for you. And so, I think really, for me, it is about what value does the data bring. It is not a technical problem. We have so many amazing tools to be able to enable people to use data and to do analytics in a way that we've never done before. Natural language search, drag-and-drop queries so that you can build a report and change it on the fly and then schedule it to be sent to people on a, some frequent basis. The capability is there. Then it is really just the question of what is the value that that data brings, how do you use data to make better decisions. Superior decision making from data I think is a force multiplier and also just, then how do you have a culture of data use and data analytics in the organization?

Bowen: And so, to that end, since AI has a bit of a crowdsourced feel to it in terms of sucking in massive data sets in order to deliver high quality results, are you concerned about third parties, vendors, other organizations getting access to your data sets to feed or to train their LLMs for their own business purposes?

Johnston: Sure. Yeah, I think if you were to share your data with an LLM, it is absolutely something to be concerned about, Janine. We will not share our data with LLMs. There are ways for you to harness the power of an LLM in a way that is custom to you without sharing that data with the LLM provider. And so that is the approach we're going to take because we don't want our data to be used to train an LLM. Now there is trade-offs to that, of course. Obviously, your model is only good as the data that you, on the data that you got the LLM and then the data that you're using to feed it and so, we're evaluating ways where we could keep the LLM updated with the global data set to be sure that it is continuing to learn while not sharing our proprietary information. That is crucial to us. I think companies in other situations, maybe it is fine for them to share proprietary data or data that is not proprietary with LLMs because they get the benefit of that, but I do think it is important to really determine and distinguish where are places where the data is not proprietary, it doesn't matter if we share and that we're getting the benefit of an LLM that is being constantly trained or tuned, and where are the places where the data is really proprietary, if we were to share it, it diminishes the value of the data for us and shares intellectual property that we don't want to share. And so, those are the places that we're looking at and good classification of data is the best place to start. And so, again, a lot of a lot of AI almost entirely relies on how well you're managing your data as an asset.

Bowen: So, that data classification has become a bit of a hot topic for me as I'm talking to clients because I'm asking, okay, you have this internal data classification system. Can't, are you tagging your data in such a way that is consistent with that system, such that if you wanted to parse off universes of data, you could protect those pieces that are trade secret, high value, proprietary from those other ones? And so, there is a mixed bag of answers there. Are you paying more attention to data classification inside of your business for that very reason?

Johnston: I would say we've always paid really close attention to it, Janine, and so I think we're fortunate in that respect. And so, yes, I think if you haven't done it before, it takes a lot of work to do the cleanup, as it were, even though it is not really cleanup. It is more of just good hygiene. And so, yeah, we have always had a very solid data classification mechanism and so we're in good shape there. However, I think it is, like anything, it is a living, breathing thing. It is always something that we're looking at and evaluating to be sure that it still is in line with the times in terms of how we feel about different types of data and what the classification should show.

Bowen: Alright. I appreciate that. So, let's pivot to another question. You've alluded to this a bit. So, back in the dawn of cloud computing, I'd say 2008, 2009, 2010, maybe a little bit later for financial services, but not much later, okay, companies went through a lot of go/no-go analyses with respect to moving both systems and data to the cloud. You talked about that a little bit in your prior response. But now,

what are the analyses and decision rubrics that you are currently using around maximizing the value of data in the enterprise?

Johnston: Yeah, I think it is somewhat the same, Janine. I think, obviously security is number one. But then after that, a very fast follower is how do you extract data and data in the cloud and the capabilities that the cloud gives you in terms of real time scale, and some of the other positives, how does that, how do those positives compare to the negatives, which is the cost associated with moving data to the cloud and housing data in the cloud and the compute costs, etc. Very similar to what you would do if you were building a new program on-premise. I don't think it is different from that perspective, but for us, it is very much about do the benefits outweigh the negatives and some of that is cost and some of that is security and some of it is just what are, what will it get us from a differentiation perspective.

Bowen: Okay. Got you. Got you. Alright, so AI has sucked all the oxygen out of the room conversationally, but clearly there are other things going on. So, what else are you thinking about technologically in order to generate revenue and move your business forward?

Johnston: Yeah, it is a really good point. I think foundationally for us, we always are trying to be frictionless with our customers. It is a big word for us and a way that we are trying to figure out how do we create technical capabilities that are easy for our customers to use, either small business or large enterprise, in terms of integration with that capability or use of that capability. And, for us, it really is taking huge monolithic capabilities that maybe live on-premise today and moving them to the cloud in a microservices approach and having them be accessible through API etc. Having the ability to stream your own data as a customer especially as an enterprise customer is hugely important because they have technology teams that are world class. And so, they can do a lot in a bespoke manner for themselves if you enable them to do that. And so, for us it is about customer enablement, frictionless customer interaction. How do we get our customers as much data as we have, and in real time so that they can make these superior decisions with the good data that we've got and that they can use?

Bowen: Interesting. So, we haven't talked a whole lot about APIs, but I'm seeing more and more of that in the deals that I'm working on where vendors are introducing solutions that allow those interfaces to access data in more seamless ways. Is that a differentiator from your perspective or is that becoming ordinary course and just one of the things you do from a standard commercial perspective at this point?

Johnston: Well, I think it is table stakes, Janine. I do think that is, it can be a differentiator because instead of a customer sending us a request to say this is what I want the system to do or this is what I, these are the analytics that I want you to do for me, they can plug into an API, pull the data back and do whatever they want as quickly as they want. And so, I think depending on the size of the organization

and their technical capabilities, some of that is table stakes but I do think that there are ways to make that differentiator.

Bowen: Okay.

Johnston: We recently built a product to do event streaming, which I think is going to be game changing for a lot of our customers because they're going to see in real time the things we see in real time. And so, I'm really excited about what can be done using these technologies.

Bowen: Interesting. So, more transparency for your customers with respect to the data that is, that they're housing in your systems.

Johnston: Absolutely.

Bowen: Interesting. Alright. So, let's close with this. This has been a great conversation, but I just can't help but ask. I have a son that is a computer science major and I am really curious about what words of wisdom would you have for him and the next generation of leaders, both in technical and non-technical discipline.

Johnston: Yeah, I think, I recently got asked a question which is, what do you look for when you hire? And I answered intellectual curiosity. It is the absolute number one thing that to me is a differentiator for team. And so, I think my advice to anyone is, be intellectually curious. I think it really means that you're a good listener. It means that you're inquisitive and you want to learn. You're, if you're a constant learner, I think there is nothing you can't do. And so, that is my advice, is to be very curious.

Bowen: Got it. I will pass that on. I appreciate that notion of really just wanting to know more. There is so much in the world to know, want to know it, right.

Johnston: Right, that is exactly right.

Bowen: Perfect. Well, Shannon, I have enjoyed our time together and I certainly appreciate you taking the time to talk with us. Thanks so much.

Johnston: It is my pleasure, Janine. Thank you so much for inviting me.

Kattman: If you have any questions for Janine, her contact information is in the show notes. As always, thanks for listening to BakerHosts.

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