Harvard Business School Online

Winning with Digital Platforms

Syllabus

Winning with Digital Platforms is an online course for those who want to launch, scale, maintain, or work with a successful platform business. Participants explore platforms' unique properties, opportunities, and risks and learn how to develop effective strategies that deliver a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Leaders Interviewed

- **Mo Abudu,** Chief Executive Officer and Founder, EbonyLife Group
- **Lulu Chen,** Investing and Real Estate Team Leader, Bloomberg LP
- **Vlad Christoff,** Co-Founder and Former Chief Operating Officer, Fasten
- **Rofolfo Chung,** Former Chief Executive Officer, Zé Delivery
- **Fernanda Faria,** Product and Design Director, Zé Delivery
- **Chiara Farronato,** Associate Professor, Harvard Business School
- **Helena Geng,** Chief Executive Officer and Founder, Picabuu
- **Stephen Herbert, Sr.,** Founder and Owner, X Fire Paintball & Airsoft
- **Stephen Herbert, Jr.,** Head of Online Business, X Fire Paintball & Airsoft
- **Jon Li,** Chief Product Officer, Picabuu
- **Temidayo Makanjuola,** Producer, EbonyLife Media
- **Zhu Mingye,** Chief Executive Officer, Zhubajie (ZBJ)
- **Krishna Palepu,** Professor, Harvard Business School
- **Heidi Uys,** Head of Programming, EbonyLife Media
- **Andy Wu,** Associate Professor, Harvard Business School
- **Frances Zhan,** Co-Founder and Chief Communications Officer, Picabuu

Modules		Takeaways	Key Exercises
Module 1	**Platform Fundamentals**	• Explore characteristics of platforms and distinguish platforms from other parties in a value chain. • Explain how platforms create value for users. • Summarize how platform firms can capture value from users. • Describe the primary mechanisms that allow platform firms to scale.	• Articulate benefits and drawbacks of dynamic pricing. • Define the characteristics of economies of scale that are most important in promoting growth in platform businesses. • Determine how platforms can build trust into their systems. • Advise a startup (Picabuu) on how they can capture value and anticipate challenges.
Module 2	**Scaling and Sustaining a Platform I**	• Differentiate between various types of network effects and explain how the strength of each type impacts a platform's ability to grow. • Apply strategies a platform can use to strengthen network effects. • Recognize examples of network properties (multi-homing, network clustering) and explore associated advantages, disadvantages, and challenges. • Assess prospective new markets based on network shape and discuss possible outcomes of altering the shape of a network.	• Determine ways in which companies can strengthen direct network effects. • Articulate ways in which network structure can influence a new platform's ability to scale, and an existing platform's ability to defend itself against new competitors. • Consider how a platform might increase profitability by changing its network clustering structures. • Advise a startup (Picabuu) on how they might generate strong network effects to scale up.

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Modules		Takeaways	Key Exercises
Module 3	**Scaling and Sustaining a Platform II**	• Recognize the chicken-or-egg problem (COE), determine when it will be most challenging and understand how to use network properties to overcome it. • Describe factors that contribute to beneficial and detrimental network properties (disintermediation, network bridging) and understand how to mitigate them.	• Determine how a firm can overcome its "chicken or egg" problem. • Consider how to adapt business models as new challenges arise in the marketplace. • Establish which considerations are essential for platform companies to keep in mind when they are considering entering adjacent markets. • Propose an action plan for a startup (Picabuu) to address a network property of your choice.
Module 4	**Transforming into a Platform Firm**	• Explain why it can be beneficial for some traditional (i.e. product-/service-based) firms to transition to a platform model. • Differentiate between product- and platform-based business models and summarize the advantages of adopting a hybrid model. • Distinguish between business scenarios that are strong candidates for effective transition to a platform model and those that are not. • Describe common operational challenges that traditional firms encounter when transitioning to a platform model. • Explore cultural differences that may emerge as your company makes the transition.	• Articulate the benefits of transitioning a traditional business model to a platform, and apply this to your own experience. • Investigate shifts in product and service capability, customer acquisition, and tech and AI capabilities that facilitate a transition to a platform business model. • Advise a startup (Picabuu) on how they might acquire new customers to scale beyond their initial community. • Detect, and anticipate how to manage, conflicts that may arise while transitioning business models. • Sketch out an idea for a platform a company you're familiar with might launch, and anticipate feasibility and obstacles to the transition.
Module 5	**Working with Platforms**	• Explain why traditional firms must learn how to work effectively with platform firms if they want to thrive in today's economy. • Evaluate the potential benefits traditional firms may obtain from working with a platform firm and describe the risks that they are likely to encounter when working with them. • Identify factors that make it more likely for a platform firm to encroach upon a traditional firm's business. • Explore defense strategies that traditional firms can use to respond to threats from platform firms and summarize how antitrust laws can ameliorate those risks. • Discuss why all businesses, both traditional and platform firms, must be aware of trends in politics and public sentiment surrounding competition and fair business practices.	• Articulate both the benefits and risks of partnering with platform companies. • Evaluate the optimal means of gathering data (internal vs. third-party). • Investigate defensive strategies that companies can use to ward off platform encroachment. • Consider the benefits and risks of open vs. closed platform models. • Synthesize all you've learned to advise a startup (Picabuu) on how to prioritize as they launch their platform.

Learning requirements: In order to earn a Certificate of Completion, participants must thoughtfully complete Modules 1-5 and exercises therein by stated deadlines.

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