EXECUTIVES HAVE BEEN BOMBARDED BY ONE digital initiative after another during the last decade—social media, mobile technology, and big data. In response to this rapid change, creating separate initiatives seems to make sense. It’s a logical reaction to hire and allow subject-matter experts to build the infrastructure, programs, and approaches that will work to address these new demands. This is, after all, how organizations have dealt with similar initiatives in the past. Six Sigma, Lean, Kaizen, Just-In-Time inventory, open sourcing, outsourcing, reverse innovation, and risk management all have been handled by creating new initiatives. Some added lasting value while others didn’t. But when these trends faded, companies went back to business as usual.

Many companies have handled these new digital initiatives as they have handled others in the past—they’ve launched initiatives but haven’t seen a need to address their larger implications, believing that given enough time, these too will fade. But these are not hype-driven management trends. They are consumer trends, reflecting fundamental changes in consumer behavior. And consumers will not suddenly give up the power social media has given them; they will not become less mobile. Therefore, nearly all of the significant obstacles organizations face while becoming Big Social Mobile stem from this conflict between how companies have traditionally dealt with the changes initiatives have placed upon them and how these traditional approaches conflict with the demands of today’s social consumer.
THE EIGHT-YEAR RULE

Never before have companies been at such odds with consumers. The traditional approach of creating segmented initiatives to deal with new market-driven demands fails to address new consumer concerns and needs effectively, although to organizations they seem to be doing the job—creating large communities of followers that are actively engaged with their organization. But big data, social media, and mobile technology actually require a different response than the norm. If we continue to treat these changes as we did those in the past, we will unknowingly create obstacles to integration.

Consider the first major digital development that prompted a significant change in consumer behavior was handled: the Internet. By now, most business readers are familiar with its simple beginnings as a way for Department of Defense scientists to share information and its stagnant growth until the 1990s, where it reached a peak size of approximately 4,000 institutions. In 1995 it was decommissioned from government control and quickly grew to over 16 million users; by the year 2000, there were over 300 million users; a billion by 2005.1 By 2015 Internet usage will exceed 3 billion individual users—an 18,650 percent growth rate in personal use in 20 years.

This is consumer-driven change; it reflects the most rapid adoption rate of any technology in history. Even smart phones, tablets, laptops, and computers have not come close. Companies had no other option but to respond, and most of them initially responded with a segregated approach.

Symbolics.com, a Massachusetts-based computer manufacturer, was the first to respond in 1985, registering the first domain and kicking off the .com and .net structure we know today.2 But despite its early adoption of this new consumer-based technology, Symbolics was actually slow to adapt to the changes it represented. Former Symbolics employee Dan Weinreb explains: “The world changed out from under us very quickly…We at Symbolics were slow to acknowledge this. We believed our own ‘dogma’ even as it became less true. It was embedded in our corporate culture. If you disputed it, your co-workers felt that you ‘just didn’t get it’ and weren’t a member of the clan, so to speak. This stifled objective analysis. (This is a very easy problem to fall into—don’t let it happen to you!).”3

Within ten years Symbolics was bankrupt.

From that first .com the Internet has grown to over 275 million active domains—entities or individuals operating as entities—conducting commerce