

Jesse Berst on Smart Cities Week 2017

Jesse Berst is the Founder and Chairman of the Smart Cities Council. He was one of the speakers at this year's Smart Cities Week in Washington, D.C. This third annual Smart Cities Week in D.C. attracted an impressive 1,300 people to discuss ways that smart infrastructure can enable smart cities.

For Jesse, it's stimulating events like this that allow him—along with some of the best technology companies in the world—to work towards a more livable, workable, and sustainable future. Here we get his insights from the week-long event, as well as Jesse's thoughts on the role of digital signage in smart cities.

What were the key takeaways from the Smart Cities Week?

The key takeaway was that a smart city is now on every city's list of things to pay attention to. More and more of our cities of all sizes have smart city projects in the works and are starting to deploy them at scale.

We're transforming from the era of pilots to rolling out changes throughout whole cities. In the 'early adopter' phase there were piecemeal projects in different departments that had no knowledge of one another. Now, we're moving to a more cross-cutting, city-wide plan. This doesn't mean that every department is going to be building smart cities in one fell swoop. But it does mean that departments are going to start coordinating with each other and, most importantly, figuring out how they can share the infrastructure, costs, and data.



You moderated a panel on clearing the roadblocks to smart infrastructure. For you, what was one of the most interesting things that came out of that panel?

On a panel of five technologists, which included CIOs and CTOs, what was most striking was they all remarked how diligently they worked to consider non-technical issues when making technology decisions. Questions like “Are we moving everybody ahead?” and “Are we creating opportunities for everybody in every neighborhood?” are being asked, to ensure inclusiveness. Certainly, in North America we've had a history of under-served neighborhoods that were isolated because of a lack of infrastructure so technologists are working really hard to make sure this doesn't happen again.

Another example of a non-technical issue influencing technology was from the CIO in Charlotte, North Carolina who mentioned that he looks for ways to give his city a competitive advantage, always asking “Will this get us ahead?”

With both examples it's clear that a smart city is not just a trend, it's a race. And, it was interesting to hear that these big city CIOs understood that.

What are the top three ways that digital signage will contribute to smart city developments?

For me, it's advertising kiosks, wayfinding, and warning signs. And, of course, the beauty of digital signage is that it can be completely responsive to the person and the context.

Firstly, you could have a kiosk that lets the public find a location or the closest parking spot, see a list of city events, book a ticket or pay a traffic fine, all in between seeing advertisements.

Secondly, with wayfinding it would be helpful in parking scenarios to see which direction to go and where the open parking spot is, particularly in a rush. Similarly, something we're seeing in cutting-edge office buildings is digital signage that directs you to your workstation for the day. Some companies are now using something called hoteling, where you come in and that day you're assigned a space depending on what you're planning to do.

Finally, with warning signs it would be useful to have warnings about congestion, parades, protests or flooding, to name just a few use cases.

How do you see digital signage and companies like Samsung Display supporting your vision?

I think the important thing that technology companies need to do, and most of the better ones are doing now, is to come in as an ecosystem. So, pull total solutions together, pre-integrate them and then offer cities a menu of things they can do with that same platform, as opposed to just saying “We have this networking” or “We have this database” or “We have the sensor,” and simply passing it over the fence and wishing the city good luck. Cross-cutting initiatives are the way to go and synergy and collaboration between departments is something most cities now strive to achieve.

Currently, how are smart cities being implemented? Particularly, when the aim is to be as holistic as possible.

At the moment, I'm seeing three places for smart city occupations. Firstly, many cities are appointing a smart city specialist. Sometimes they have a lot of authority, sometimes they're more in a staff role but their role is still to pull all the departments together and get them collaborating and sharing infrastructure and resources. Cities like Dubai, Seattle, Charlotte, and Philadelphia have done this. In other cases, a smart cities role is just becoming part of the CIO or CTO role.

Then there's a third premise; it's a realization by many cities that they have a huge infrastructure budget for things like roads and bridges and they can use this money to 'smarten up' the infrastructure. So, those who would have been working in infrastructure are now starting to become 'smart infrastructure people'. Every year, the percentage of infrastructure that includes smart components increases. So, if you're trying to chart the market, there's a lot of smart city investment that's hidden under an airport renewal or a roadway improvement, in fact, there's a whole bunch of smart components going on under the radar.

Tell me about the Smart Cities Council - what's its background and goals?

We're an industry coalition. Our altruistic goal is to help cities around the world achieve better livability, workability, and sustainability. It's a triple bottom line: people, planet, profits. For the first time, we believe smart city technologies really give us a chance to achieve all three.

Most previous attempts at one of these three areas have required sacrifices in another area. We may be environmentally sustainable but we can't be financially sustainable. Or we can be more environmentally sustainable, but we've got to turn the thermostat down three degrees, wear a sweater, and switch to a bike! There have always been compromises but now we have a chance to do all three well.

There's a lot of talks that this is the first generation that's worse off than its parents. But that shouldn't be our aspiration. Our goal should be affluence and abundance and we should hope to have cities that are environmentally sustainable, economically sustainable, and equitable. Smart city technologies are not the only answer, but they're the best toolbox we've ever had.

So, with the development of projects in mind, are there any projects you're seeing at the moment that you're really excited for?

There are many but one example that comes to mind is SingPass, which is a system in Singapore where you log in once and have access to roughly 350 government services.

One of the things I like about it, and one of the things I think gets overlooked by many people when they're talking about smart cities, is the importance of digital city services. Cities need to start delivering their services digitally and it needs to be a single application that is organized by the users' needs, not by different city departments. You want one form for the end user and then your system takes care of sending that information to the different departments.

Advanced digital city services are what I call 'happier for less'. It's the idea that when you go digital, it costs you a lot less to serve your citizens but your citizens are a lot happier. There's a [British study](#) that suggests that a digital transaction with a citizen is 50 times cheaper than a face-to-face transaction and yet the citizens are happier.

Moving on to exciting developments that are driving smart cities here in North America, Amazon just ran a contest for its new second headquarters. They're promising as many as 50,000 new jobs for the city. Because of what Amazon will require from a city, they'll be looking for a smart city. Smaller companies and the 'next Amazons' are going to realize this and be looking for the same thing too. It really is a race and it's becoming urgent to get the infrastructure in place so cities can compete.

What are your favorite resources to learn about smart cities?

Smart Cities Council has the Internet's largest collection of free smart city resources. You can get our [smart cities readiness](#), [financing](#), and [street lighting guides](#). We also provide [case studies](#) so you can learn best practices from those who have done it before. Then there are a number of events. We host our [Smart Cities Week](#) twice a year in the states and we hope to expand overseas next year.

We also come to cities with our [readiness workshop](#), where we'll help you activate your local ecosystem and align all your stakeholders. We think that's a great way to really drill down into what your city needs and your city's priorities.

This interview has been edited.

To get more insights from Jesse on Smart Cities, follow him on [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

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