Time to retire digital transformation?

How changing the narrative in tech can transform your business

101 ways

1. Is digital transformation holding you back?

Right now, every IT project has become a digital transformation initiative. Whether we're talking a cloud migration or optimisation project, big data analytics or the development of a front-end digital product, if technology is involved then chances are, at some point, it will acquire this label.

Transformation fatigue aside, does it really matter what initiatives are called? Experience suggests it does. Viewing everything through a 'digital transformation' lens may not only be injurious to efficient programme planning, it can create artificial barriers to achieving the actual transformational outcomes your projects are designed to deliver.

Written to support senior tech and product leaders, this eBook looks at how thinking in terms of 'digital transformation' could be holding your organisation back, and why a different mindset could make a big difference to team performance and success.

2. Transform or change? They're not the same.

It's hard to put a date on when 'digital transformation' became an actual phrase. It certainly gained prominence in the early to mid 2010s but the concept can be traced right back to the development of the microchip in the early 1950s. One thing is clear: having taken hold, digital transformation is nigh on impossible to avoid.

Today, the phrase is as ubiquitous as it is inaccurate. There's no real definition, and the term is as likely to be used discussing a new SAAS implementation or replatforming programme as it is a hook for a vendor marketing campaign.

In the purest sense, digital transformation is the move from a manual process to a software-based (digital) one. And in the main, every large, successful organisation has already done it. They've been through their digital transformations. Data's now in public and private clouds – not in hard copy ledgers. Finance has switched from paper-based to electronic invoicing. Software-based ERP and CRM tools proliferate and mobile apps are now the norm. The list goes on…

More recently, as organisations adopt or extend their use of automation, artificial intelligence, machine learning and so on, 'digital transformation' has had a buzz-word upgrade. Many now talk in terms of 'agile' and 'product-led' transformation.

Definitions are important

Definitions do matter; not in themselves but for how tech programmes are seen within the organisation. Early digitalisation programmes had a beginning and an end. Tasks that used to be done using pen and paper started to be completed using software: digital transformation in its truest sense.

That's all changed. Today, everything's digital and we're in a cycle of continual iteration and improvement. The impact may well be transformational, but the process isn't.

This is important because it changes the way tech initiatives are planned and paid for. In traditional IT 'project' models, there was an objective, a cost and an endpoint. Not anymore. Software needs continual updates. And everything has to happen faster.

Today, everything's digital and we're in a cycle of continual iteration and improvement

Today, changing consumer tastes and evolving technologies are liable to make an 18 month web project obsolete before its completed. It's now highly inefficient, for example, to develop new products on old software stacks – especially if the stack's locked-in to a single vendor. At the same time, while organisations are bringing in Agile coaches to co-develop new operating models, many find that, just a year into the programme, the world has changed and the model's no longer fit for purpose.

So how do you plan, budget and operate in an environment of continual change? Certainly not by focusing on a start and end date.

Changing the narrative

Let's stop thinking about tech initiatives in terms of one-time digital transformations and start building planning and cost models around constant iteration and improvement. It's a major change of approach, and it's challenging. But get it right and tech leaders and their teams will be in a much stronger place to deliver the kind of outcomes that really do drive the business forward.

101 ways

3. 5 steps to transforming outcomes

How do organisations – tech leaders, teams and wider business stakeholders – move from a focus on digital transformation to the kind of iteration and continual improvement needed in today's software-defined world. Here are five steps to help accelerate change.

Step 1. Start with a cultural shift

Change isn't always easy – for larger organisations or smaller, scaling businesses. In the former, huge volumes of technical debt, established processes and high levels of resistance are typically the big blockers. For scalers, it's often a perception that they're still at the bleeding edge that's holding them back. They were when they started. But having built a lead it's common to stagnate and fall behind.

Either way, moving from a project-based to a more fluid approach to planning and delivering tech initiatives rarely begins with process or technology change. At least, not at this stage. It starts with developing a culture and mindset of continuous improvement. If you don't, as legendary management consultant and author Peter Drucker says, "culture eats strategy for breakfast" so any changes you make are liable to revert if businesses struggle to embed the right cultures.

101 ways

Leadership is key. It's important that technology and product leaders align their approach and demonstrate and 'live' the behaviours and mindsets they want in their people. Otherwise teams will push in different directions. If the messaging's consistent and collaboration's happening at the top, there's more chance of it trickling down throughout the organisation.
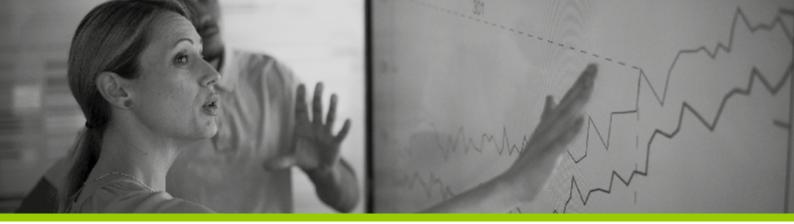
It's worth remembering that culture is a reflection of the conversations and interactions of people within the organisation. While you may have an idea what you want it to look like and the kinds of behaviours you want to encourage, it's not always possible to know exactly how your culture will develop. Don't let that put you off. If you stride forward with purpose and intent, chances are you'll end up in a good place – even if it's not exactly what you thought it was going to be.

Put it another way, apply the principles of Agile: collaborate, iterate and improve.

Learning from experience

- Be clear about the kind of culture you're looking to develop and the benefits.
- Be consistent and continually reinforce the messages.
- Lead by example, demonstrating the right mindsets and behaviours.

Step 2. Find out what good looks like

If it's not been done before, it's difficult to know exactly what good looks like when it comes to embedding continuous product improvement in the team. Businesses can adopt an agile approach, but that's not going to solve all their problems – particularly if it's not done right.

Find out what works, what doesn't, and the common pitfalls

One of the best ways of changing your approach is to get help from people who do know. This can mean bringing in trusted third parties or adding new blood to the team. Both can be very effective. It doesn't have to be just about 'new' though. CTOs typically have fairly extensive networks – use them. Seek out experts from outside your circle and get their take.

It's important to challenge current ways of working. While the majority of businesses say they've adopted an agile approach, over a quarter don't believe it's working . There could be all kinds of reasons for this.

The most common being a tendency to view agile only as set of processes and tightly controlled workflows and frameworks. In reality, it's really about achieving a state of continuous improvement, adaptability and flexibility. And as we've seen, that means a cultural change.

So talk to peers and find out how others develop their target operating models. Find out what works, what doesn't, and the common pitfalls. Then bring those learnings back to the team and discuss how to apply an approach that works in the context of your organisation.

Learning from experience

- Lean into your networks for best practice advice.
- Challenge your existing approaches – could they be improved?
- Define a target operating model that works in the context of your business.

Step 3. Focus on the value not the plan

It's important to have a plan. It's more important to know when to pivot when things change. Sticking resolutely to a project plan may tick a box for the CFO – after all, the budget was released for this initiative. But it may not actually deliver any business value if the world has changed or competitors have moved the game on. Knowing when to change direction then is key.

Tech and product teams need budget but it's not always possible (or advisable) to guarantee how it's going to be spent

Start with defining what success looks like – by agreeing measurement criteria and key metrics upfront. Then embrace that 'inspect and adapt' culture to regularly stop and check to see if you're achieving your metrics and adding value. It could be that you've extracted 80 percent of the value in the first 20 percent of the journey. Or you may be a long way in and yet to achieve meaning successes. Knowing this makes the decision to continue with the plan or change direction much simpler.

It also makes sense to involve finance and the c-suite in the conversation – so everyone understands how and why decisions are being taken. Tech and product teams need budget but it's not always possible (or advisable) to guarantee how it's going to be spent. If delivering value means moving away from the original plan to achieve the outcome, it's so much easier to do if everyone is bought in.

Leaders need to be prepared to make these decisions. It's one thing to talk about adapting the plan if it's not working out, it's quite another to do it – especially if considerable sums of money have been spent getting you so far. You may have to make bold calls. Ultimately though, they're the right ones if they get you to your business outcome faster.

Learning from experience
- Know what 'value' means and how to measure it.
- Stop frequently to check whether value is being achieved.
- Involve finance and the c-suite in your decision-making.

101 ways

Step 4. Make sure the product fits

Creating great digital products is one thing. Creating great products that align to market need is quite another. A key part of the transition to a continual improvement approach is making sure products always address customer need, when they need it.

It can also be quite common for business leaders to have a particular vision for features that are not always grounded in the realities of what customers want

It may sound obvious. Why develop a digital product without cause? But many organisations do. They may not set out to, but customer preferences move on and being late to market often means missing the boat.

It can also be quite common for business leaders to have a particular vision for features that are not always grounded in the realities of what customers want. So beware becoming distracted by the highest paid opinion in the room.

Tech and product leaders therefore need to actively engage in user research – interviews, surveys, and usability testing and so on – to gather feedback and insights from potential users. This helps in understanding their preferences, challenges, and expectations, which guides the development process.

With minimum viable products (MVPs) or prototypes created, it's also possible to gather early user feedback and iterate on the product. This also uncovers potential pivot points and informs decision-making on whether to fine tune or refocus to ensure products perfectly align with customer need.

Getting product market fit right is hugely important in and it's incredibly hard to do with a conventional digital transformation mindset. And remember, it's not about changing the product itself but rather how it's being developed.

Learning from experience

- Put market need front and centre in product development.
- Create feedback loops and engage in constant dialogue with users.
- Don't be distracted by the highest paid opinion in the room.

101 ways

Step 5. Put the right frameworks in place

This isn't about software or products, it's about operations and putting in place the right frameworks to empower teams to deliver better products faster, get feedback quicker, and solve problems at pace. It's less about transforming the product and more about transforming the development process itself.

Put the right frameworks in place and product development becomes a constantly repeating cycle of learning, iteration and improvement. And the more it repeats, the better it gets and the more this mindset change away from one-time only digital transformation becomes embedded in the culture of the organisation.

And your framework doesn't have to be out of the box. Create your own, aligned to the unique context of your teams and individuals. Large enterprises don't own the rights to frameworks. And don't be afraid to experiment. Inspect, adapt and learn and develop the best ways of working to suit your business.

Learning from experience

- Develop your way of working to your unique context.
- Take an agile approach and evolve and improve.
- Don't assume an off-the-shelf framework will always work for you.

101 ways

4. Referencing success – Zoopla

Business outcomes start by improving the developer experience

We've still got tons of plans. You haven't seen anything close to what the Zoopla business is capable of yet. 101 Ways has been a big part of that success.

Paul Hammond CTO, Zoopla

When you're operating in the world of fast moving online property portals, you need to adapt fast to changing markets and customer behaviours. For Zoopla, that meant getting to grips with a disparate tech environment and giving its developers the right platform to get the job done.

Supported by 101 Ways, the team re-platformed onto a simple modern stack. Code named 'Project Bedrock' the move optimised Zoopla's developer resources, reduced the cognitive burden on engineers and made it easier to configure, run and learn.

Within a year, Project Bedrock had delivered a new rendering stack, a new content management system and a new multi-variate testing tool – decoupling front and back-end development. Team productivity soared – leading to the rapid development of a new and improved property search page that radically improved the user experience.

101 Ways also helped Zoopla improve its capabilities around listing properties, engaging with estate agents, enhancing search results, and increasing conversion rates of property enquiries to estate agent follow ups.

This wasn't a one-time digital transformation, just a great example of continual improvement. And the work goes on.

5. Key takeaway

Right now, every IT project has become a digital transformation initiative. Whether we're talking a cloud migration or optimisation project, big data analytics or the development of a front-end digital product, if technology is involved then chances are it will, at some point, acquire this label.

So what's the solution? In a word: agility. Businesses that are unafraid to change course, that can do so quickly and re-align products to market need are likely to be more successful as markets, customers and business priorities evolve. And because all digital products go out of date, it's imperative to adopt a truly responsive mindset.

Put it another way, by retiring the 'digital' and focusing on the 'transformation' tech leaders can achieve better, faster outcomes for the business.

101 ways

6. 101 Ways to help

When it comes to retiring today's 'digital transformation' mindset, it's good to know there's an experienced partner who's got your back.101 Ways is here to do just that.

We're helping leaders balance budgets, deliver on their roadmaps and embed the agility to pivot and adapt when things change – while taking pressure off their teams

Our most successful projects balance leadership and delivery; strategic consultancy to help senior leaders set goals, product and leadership consultants to drive client programmes, and delivery teams to provide additional, expert resource when and where it's needed.

And underpinning every engagement is our commitment to building skills and leaving teams stronger.

Clients we work with

ZOOPLA   The Guardian   M&S EST. 1884

JUST EAT   TESCO   The Economist

Argos   gousto   TOPSHOP

HARGREAVES LANSDOWN   graze   PayPoint

Find out how we can help you change the
narrative and culture in your organisation:

Get in touch