

White Paper

Business Leaders Must Engage with Technology, Even if They Don't Understand It



Introduction

Contemporary business thinking argues that IT is now so fundamental to commercial success that it should reshape how companies are run, how they prioritise investment, even how they describe themselves.

The idea can be summed up in one phrase: “we are now all tech companies”, and in the last few years, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Techcrunch and Fortune are just a few of many respected voices that have shown support for the momentum building behind Digital Transformation.

Take Uber, for instance, which for many isn't a disruptive transportation or delivery business, it's a tech company. Similarly, Amazon isn't primarily a retailer, it's a technology company - the list goes on. Everything from banks and food companies to manufacturers and utilities now position themselves as completely tech-led. It drives their innovation, product and service development, customer experience, sales and even organisational culture.



**"It is not
necessary
to change.
Survival is not
mandatory."**

**W Edwards
Deming**

Digital Transformation: Perception vs Reality



A 2019 study by The Global Center for Digital Business Transformation found that over 88% of respondents believed digital disruption will have a major or transformative impact on their industries. While the majority claimed to have a digital strategy transformation, many acknowledged that it was fragmented. In fact, only 22% of respondents claimed to have a coordinated approach.

Just over one-third of respondents feel that their organization's leadership is actively responding to digital disruption. A clear perception gap exists between senior leadership and lower-level managers regarding their digital transformation efforts.

For many SMEs and plenty of enterprise organisations, however, this remains a step too far. While they recognise the importance of technology in a modern, competitive business environment, they have neither the time, resources or experience to go 'all in' on the changes required to match the ambitions of the Digital Transformation leaders.

But what should be of most concern to these businesses, and particularly their leaders - is that far from embracing transformation, they still view IT as a siloed business function and a cost centre, as opposed to a value centre. Leaders employ experts to define what technology solutions their business needs, to implement it and then keep it working - but they don't engage any further.

This is a mistake that costs thousands of businesses time, money and reduces their ability to respond to changing markets or exploit competitive advantage. The solution lies in a leadership mindset where senior engagement in technology projects - or the absence of it - has a fundamental impact on the ability of tech teams to deliver, and of the wider business to benefit from their efforts. This mindset generally takes one of two forms:

Mindset 1: Leaders view IT as a specialist problem and don't engage beyond signing off investment

Businesses hire specialists and expertise for very obvious reasons - we all want bright people as colleagues and employees. This is apparent across the IT function, whose role has become so important that in many enterprises, technology leadership is now an executive position.

But this also creates a mindset where leaders automatically divest responsibility to IT teams for addressing business issues. Typically, business leaders will identify a risk or opportunity where technology holds the solution. They give their IT teams the responsibility, budget and timescales, and at that point, most then disengage from the process and wait for results.

They assume that because they have hired bright minds that understand IT, their involvement is not necessary. But, by imposing a complete disconnect between the business expertise that leaders possess and the effective integration of technology, specialist IT teams must then try to solve business problems outside of their experience and understanding.

IT teams then take their work back to the leaders who identify weaknesses in the approach and ask for improvements. Thus begins an inefficient and frustrating process that often gets bogged down in technology priorities, when it should be solving business problems or embracing opportunities.

This scenario is extremely common among executives running every non-IT function - they don't understand IT in detail, so disengage from how it is applied to their business. It is also why so many IT initiatives fail to deliver on their core objectives.

Mindset 2: Leaders view IT as an enabler and invest time to ensure solutions solve business problems

In complete contrast, active engagement from senior stakeholders in any IT project can be transformational. IT teams and suppliers who are offered the time and direct involvement of leaders are far more effective in focusing on addressing business needs.

In this approach, engaged leaders help drive problem solving, priorities and processes. They cut through the noise to identify precise, focused requirements - technology is then applied to these challenges.

Technology issues still remain under the control of their IT experts, but the business problems or opportunities remain as the focal point of every IT project. Technology choices are made in support of strategic objectives, and should adapt to fit the needs of existing, proven processes - unless there is a compelling need, technology should not lead, it should enable.

In these situations, leaders with an engaged mindset are enabling the success of their wider team. Projects are much more likely to deliver solutions that help businesses move forward, return on investment is easier to assess and the agility that sits at the heart of so many modern organisations is evident in projects delivered on time and within budget.

How to become an engaged leader to help IT deliver

Technology strategy and success isn't about the solutions and services business buy, it should be measured by business outcome. Engaged leaders - even those who have limited IT experience - recognise this and offer their knowledge and experience to the process of implementing technology. Fostering this approach should include a number of key considerations:

- Embrace the possibilities offered by an engaged mindset. Recognising the importance of technology as one of the most powerful business enablers, not just as a cost centre is key to effective, all-round business leadership. This does not require a deep understanding of IT.
- Don't try to become an IT expert. Businesses that use technology most successfully apply focused expertise at the most appropriate parts of the process. Non-IT leaders should not feel under pressure to significantly improve their technology knowledge. Instead, they should offer their own skillset to support those bringing solutions together.
- Recognise your value and that of senior, non-IT leaders to the delivery of IT strategy. Equally, do not expect IT specialists to apply their focused knowledge to solving problems that aren't related to their role. Whether the challenge or opportunity is focused on sales, customer service, marketing, finance, reporting, manufacturing or the many other functions where IT has a role, make sure focused leadership expertise is made available to help IT professionals design effective technology solutions.
- Allocate the time of all senior stakeholders and subject matter experts to guide the development of IT solutions. If, for instance, the IT team is designing a solution to improve financial efficiency or reporting, make sure senior finance leaders engage with the process as a priority. This is a commitment that many non-IT leaders find extremely

challenging, but is central to ensuring technology projects remain focused.

- Remember, a leader with little or no IT knowledge who engages with and supports the development of key IT projects will always deliver more value than one who doesn't.

Case Study

Suffolk County Council is responsible for major services countywide including: Education, Environment, Leisure and Culture, Public Safety, Social Care, Trading Standards, Transport and Registrars. Their vast IT network has to cope with ever more information and changing requirements in order to provide the best services possible to residents and businesses across the county.

The Council engaged IJYI to conduct a two-day 'Inception Workshop' in April 2020 to initiate a project to replace their existing Analysis of Additional Needs Tool (AANT). The tool is designed to provide a standardised method of early intervention for educational psychologists and has been developed since 2012 with further development by the Suffolk Psychology & Therapeutic Services department of Suffolk County Council who have conducted over 200 assessments and provided measurable benefits to many children as a result.

The software being used was based on old technology that was no longer fit for purpose and so required a complete update with a modern Software as a Service platform. Due to restraints on face to face meetings the workshop was conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams and utilised PowerPoint and Trello as the key tools for presenting and gathering information. The workshop aimed to use interactive exercises to accelerate the gathering of the key information required to define and progress the software element of the AANT project. This included:

- Setting the scene and understanding the project background
- Identifying key business drivers



Suffolk
County Council

"Being part of the IJYI Inception Workshop was a really positive experience. The team were open and accommodating throughout. The 2 day workshop was extremely well orchestrated and left us with a clear roadmap for our project.

I would recommend an IJYI Inception Workshop to anyone wanting to kick-off a new project."

Gareth Morris
Senior Technical Lead
Suffolk County Council

Case Study (cont)

“IJYI’s Inception Workshop enabled us to bring stakeholders from across the council together and really articulate our requirements for this project. The workshop was incredibly collaborative and the IJYI team made it easy for us to creatively work together.

An intensive and engaging experience; the workshop allowed us to formulate a clear scope for the project”

Claire Darwin
Psychology and Therapeutic Service Lead
Suffolk County Council

- Defining a summary elevator pitch for the project
- Analysing the unique selling point for the customer
- Defining the project scope
- Analysis of the stakeholder community
- Definition of the high-level technical solution
- Indication of high-level timeline and estimated cost

IJYI are currently engaged in delivering the AANT project. Using Agile methodologies IJYI are working collaboratively with Suffolk County Council and have adopted a continuous integration process. Daily update calls and ongoing dialogue is enabling effective progress tracking.

Collaboration is key to the success of any project and IJYI clients are always invited to work closely with the team on customer projects. Clients are encouraged to be hands-on, making changes and asking questions as the project progresses. They are given access to and are able to create work items, and indicate sign-off in project tracking tools – really making clients a part of the development team rather than sitting on the outside. Working this way engages customers in the journey and ensures a successful outcome.

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Want to learn more?

Make informed, confident business decisions by putting data-driven insights into everyone's hands. For further information about IJYI's Business Intelligence and Data Services, visit: <https://www.ijyi.com/data-services/>

Or if you would like us to run an Inception Workshop with you, visit <https://www.ijyi.com/services/inception-workshop/>

