



Human-Centered Digital Transformation

Why Adoption Fails and How to Fix It

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Executive Summary

Digital transformation initiatives are accelerating across public and private sector organizations at a fast pace. “Think cloud applications and AI agents in modernizing operations, and the decades-old slog to move away from paper and into fully online processes.”

I’ll frame it by saying that many initiatives are driven by modernization mandates, workforce pressures, rapid advances in the sprint into agentic AI. Yet despite significant investment, many efforts fail to deliver on promised outcomes.

McKinsey research cites as high as 70 percent of transformations fail¹. Plans get approved, systems get deployed, and tools get opened to more people, but adoption stalls and value (a.k.a. ROI) is anything but.

So, I’ll ask: Is it the right pace with the right focus?

But rarely is technology itself to blame. In my role as a consultant with state government and public sector experience, what I see is that transformation fails because a decision is made to lead with technology and expect people, processes, and behaviors to follow or get (pushed!) on board afterward. That leaves no room for keying in on value.

When value is treated as a downstream activity, rather than an upstream starting point, organizational alignment around transformation becomes a technical exercise instead of a forward-looking, value-oriented way to help human adoption.

Taking a cue from that scenario, there is opportunity to reverse that. A way to give transformation an overarching human-centered focus, and in doing so reframe success around value, adoption, and alignment. It’s a practical lens for understanding how to not let transformations falter and encourage true design change that is sustainable, usable, and aligned to real business outcomes.

Overview

Across industries, digital transformation over the past decade shows big business is scrapping legacy systems, while smaller organizations are trying to forecast what type of transformation they can (a) afford and (b) manage outward. That transformation mindset is gaining a foothold with solopreneurs, too, some who are looking for ways to outpace bigger competitors in how they are committing to AI

¹ Jon Garcia, *Common Pitfalls in Transformations: A Conversation with Jon Garcia* (McKinsey & Company, March 29, 2022).

tools, and not overly expensive ones. Each of those scenarios needs collaboration across platforms, data, and analytics capabilities, along with exploration of AI's promises to improve efficiency and service delivery.

At the same time, there are real constraints, too: shifting/changing expectations around service levels, limited workforce capacity and fatigue, and increasing pressure to deliver ROI. The constraints leave decision-makers questioning why well-funded, well-intentioned efforts don't always translate into real improvement.

In my experience, when organizations choose a solution without deep consideration for real-world outcomes, value is assumed and not designed. It's a danger point for transformation failure, and it's becoming increasingly important to ask a few probing, high-impact questions head on when considering transformation projects.

Key Questions to Ask

What key outcome will be different/better for real people when a digital transformation succeeds, and how will we know?

Success will show fuller and faster completion of work, but with less friction and better workflow. This ensures less confusion and a clearer path to finish. We'll see adoption rates happening with more enthusiasm and fewer holdouts, and we can measure it by improvements in error rates, decreased help desk tickets, and increased user satisfaction.

Which decisions/biases need to change for digital transformation success to happen, and who is the driver of that?

The shift needs to be a mindset across the organization, a pivot from bringing in technology and forcing compliance to *engaging users up-front and learning their needs so change is designed around them*.

Big organizations need big support from an executive sponsor; smaller organizations need the same support, and both must own the outcomes.

What assumptions about digital transformation change need to be thrown out to ensure people are on board with adoption to ensure success?

Adoption can't be forced. It needs to be deliberately co-designed as part of the project, long before launch, and nurtured day-to-day to earn the team's commitment to the change.

What each of those questions asks, importantly, is about human focus: real people, and not technology. Simply, what needs considered in getting people on board with change. That's human centered design concisely. Rather than treating technology as the primary driver of change, it becomes an opportunity for keeping people at the heart of change.

A human centered approach designs around how people work/benefit, how they make decisions, and how they adopt new ways of thinking and behaving. This shift reflects a growing recognition among consultancy organizations for guiding sustainable transformation. It depends first on behavior, alignment, and trust before systems and tools.

The Challenge

Technology and platform scenarios are important. But it needs to be pointed out that a sole dependence on tech to drive transformation can lead to what I'll call a quiet failure path or human-centered failure mode.

Here's what that means. Strategy gets approved. Tech gets deployed. Roles and processes aren't understood. Adoption wanes or stagnates because humans were an afterthought.

So, it's useful to know that path's weaknesses to guard against any level of potential failure from the start.

For example, during an open session in a state agency's modernization effort, a small question surfaced quickly into a high-stakes adoption risk: who is allowed to correct routine data entry errors on submission (e.g., an incorrect date, issue code, or phone number).

From their experience, staff raised that when corrections were unclear or escalated to managers, it created friction and concerns around migrated records that could not be updated the same way as in the prior legacy system. What looked like "just permissions" was a human-centered failure mode in disguise: miscommunication about roles, uneven rules between migrated and non-migrated records, and uncertainty about the process for submitting and prioritizing change requests.

When value or organizational acceptance around change is assumed, or underprioritized, organizations and their people pay a price. Without clear, viable, and quantifiable ways to meet user needs, no one knows what they'll get or the impact that will be delivered.

I'll break it down into two risks when there's an absence of human focus.

- Value is assumed, without proof (inherent danger).
- Organizational acceptance is assumed and not designed.

With a technology-first scenario, users don't know why the change matters for their work or for the people they serve through their work. Tech may be introduced without human-focused processes in place or training that's grounded in user experience. Those factors can lead to the user experience becoming fair game for unforeseen, out-of-process workarounds.

Should that happen, users are hesitant at best and hands-off at worst to accept the modernization efforts. The end point can be a team that's quietly passive-aggressive in adoption (little to no adoption) or outwardly vocal, retreating behind arguments of "Things were just fine before. Why do we have to change?" or "What a mess this is, so why bother."

The result is that the organization now owns the technology, but it hasn't factored in its people. Tech investment doesn't become a solution for getting work done, and there is no ROI. Instead, there's technical debt.

Momentum Perspective

At Momentum, we've seen that leading with tech and hoping people follow leads to failure.

In our digital transformation consulting, we lead with a four-part lens with the desired outcome clearly up-front—one that doesn't leave the human part as an afterthought.

- Lens One: State the Value (what changes for whom and why it's a win)
- Lens Two: Get Things Aligned (decisions + champions + priorities)
- Lens Three: Elevate Adoption (roles + needs + capacity + learning)
- Lens Four: Expert Enablement (listen + implement + feedback)

We believe our perspective is a differentiator in driving successful transformation. In helping our clients get clear on the up-front people expectations as part of project governance we can ensure that capacity for change is baked into your organization's readiness for adoption.

We don't just work with public-sector clients, we deliver long-running, complex solutions to organizations across Pennsylvania, Maryland, and the mid-Atlantic

region. With 450+ successful projects with our public and commercial clients, we deliver operational fluency from procurement to implementation.

Implications

There's no substitute for clarity around the human-side of digital transformation. If you've ever used a manual film camera with adjustable lens and aperture settings, you know the value of having a clear lens. But shift the focus from people to a lead-with-technology mindset, and all sorts of things will go fuzzy, fast. This includes thin understanding of user needs, veiled processes, off-the-mark features—worse yet, features for the sake of features—employee distrust and disengagement and stalled or unrealized ROI.

If left unchecked, the quiet drift away from people-first clarity doesn't just leave the project in free-fall, it erodes trust. That trust may take a few months to wane, or it could be a much shorter time. But the bottom line is that the projected goal doesn't materialize.

Key Takeaways

Digital transformation most often fails at adoption, not solely with the technology itself or its deployment. You can avoid this with three non-negotiable points.

1. First consider people and how work will change for the better to move them toward adoption.
2. Understand biases around human behavior and intentionally manage it forward, not as an afterthought.
3. Human-centered transformation is healthy transformation that fosters adoption with sustainable outcomes = ROI.

About the Author

Christine “Chris” Conard is a communication and change management consultant with experience supporting digital transformation initiatives across private and public sector organizations. Her work focuses on aligning strategies, teams, technology, and measurable outcomes.

About Momentum

Momentum Inc. is a management and technology consulting firm focused on helping organizations move forward with clarity and confidence. We combine technology expertise with a people-first approach to deliver transformation that is practical, sustainable, and aligned to real business outcomes.

Our core service areas include:

- Management Consulting
- Process Improvement
- Product and Project Management
- Implementation Support

We partner with clients across public and private sector organizations to bring structure, clarity, and execution discipline to initiatives ranging from strategy through implementation.

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