



Quick Take

Learning from Early Digital Implementations

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What is digital technology?

Simply put, digital technology is a mechanism of joining people with each other and with information. These connections can include transactional services (e.g., online forms and ecommerce) across a variety of devices (e.g., mobile and tablet), and delivery mechanisms (e.g. websites, mobile applications, and social media).¹

Digital technology is transforming everyday work practices across a variety of industries, sectors, and markets.^{2,3} The recent Federal Leaders' Digital Insights (FLDI) Study conducted by the National Academy of Public Administration and ICF International provides insight into the unique promises and challenges digital technology brings to federal agencies. We provide a case below that highlights a few of these common challenges, along with our lessons learned in overcoming the barriers to successful digital transformation.

¹ National Academy of Public Administration and ICF, "Federal Leaders' Digital Insights (FLDI) Study Findings Report," 2015, available from <http://napawash.org/reports-publications/1703-federal-leaders-digital-insight-study.html>. This study consisted of a random sample of 10,653 federal leaders from the Leadership Directory database as well as a focus group discussion comprising federal leaders from the study and seven participants from CIO Council's IT Solutions Challenge.

² Kristen Purcell and Lee Rainie, "Technology's Impact on Workers," Pew Research Center, December 30, 2014. Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/12/30/technologys-impact-on-workers/>.

³ Michael Fitzgerald, Nina Kruschwitz, Didier Bonnet, and Michael. Welch, "Embracing Digital Technology: A New Strategic Imperative," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, October 7, 2013, p. 2, available at <http://sloanreview.mit.edu/projects/embracing-digital-technology/>.

So what are the challenges?

Consider the experience of a large organization operating in various regions across the country and with a mix of field and headquartered personnel. The organization wanted to deploy digital technology to better connect their staff to a variety of resources and learning opportunities. In doing so, leadership experienced three primary obstacles with their digital implementation that reflect common barriers faced across federal agencies.

The first issue was that the organization had invested thousands of dollars in new tablets - but then did not put them to use. The organization came to realize it had an imbalanced focus on the purchase of the technology. They had budgeted for the technology purchase, but had not set aside adequate resources for implementation. This organization is not alone in this predicament: nearly 60 percent of federal leaders in the FLDI study said that their agency is not dedicating an appropriate level of resources to leverage all facets of digital technology implementation.

To confound the budgetary issue, there was a lack of organizational direction regarding what to do with the tablets. Without a clear vision and plan, one department acted upon the technology availability and began to pilot its use without consideration of impacts on and needs of the larger organization. A potential conflict dangled in the background while leadership made decisions about the terms and priority areas that would be appropriate for tablet deployment. Leadership vision and alignment with overarching strategy are critical to digital success, yet they are all too often missing.⁴

One recent study found that when top leaders shared their vision for digital transformation, 93 percent of employees agreed it was the right thing, and the right time, for the organization to implement. Unfortunately, the vast majority of top leaders do not articulate a compelling vision for their digital initiatives.⁵

In this case, organizational leadership did eventually move forward with creating a comprehensive vision and strategy for utilizing mobile resources. This strategic plan served as the touchstone for digital projects and was key to moving the initiative from inception to adoption. As part of the strategic planning effort, leadership articulated the business case for the move to mobile technology and objectives and resources for the digital technology implementation.

⁴ Tracey E. Rizzuto and Jennifer Reeves, "A Multidisciplinary Meta-Analysis of Human Barriers to Technology Implementation," *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, September 2007, p. 226.

⁵ Michael Fitzgerald, Nina Kruschwitz, Didier Bonnet, and Michael Welch, "Embracing Digital Technology: A New Strategic Imperative," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, October 7, 2013.

Once the plan was drawn, however, a new dilemma emerged: a huge diversity among stakeholder perspectives. Some employees expressed impatience for what they considered an integral component to work efficiently (e.g., access to real-time job aids in the field). Others contended the new technology would take too long to incorporate and learn.



This experience underscores the importance of understanding perspectives and skills. The FDLI study reported that lack of current digital skills is one of the top five barriers to implementing digital technology. To combat this challenge, our case study organization began to build digital technology into its learning and development practices and took these steps to improve access to information:

- Communicated frequently about the availability of the technology.
- Performed an organization assessment to understand the needs and readiness of its audiences and stakeholders for the digital technology.
- Conducted pilots to ensure mobile technology was reaching the right audiences.

These efforts prepared users for manipulating and accessing the digital technology, helping the organization with widespread adoption.

What leads to success in digital transformation?

Digital transformation can be frustrating when investments in new technology fail to achieve great results. Executives and managers believe that unsuccessfully implementing digital technology harms an organization's competitive edge—therefore, failure is not an option.⁶ Organizations must take a measured view of implementation and map out the path from deployment to adoption. In our experience, three factors are integral to success:

- 1. Envision and Improve:** Do not simply use technology for technology sake. Use technology to solve an organizational problem such as a need to increase efficiencies and access to stakeholders. Outline a clear vision that serves as the foundation for all decisions.
- 2. Budget and Plan Broadly:** Carve out resources for implementation, from deployment to adoption. Many challenges exist to digital transformation, so there is not just a single impediment to overcome. However, short-term cost concerns tend to overpower thoughtful implementation by pooling resources in the purchase, rather than a more comprehensive plan. Plan, do not just purchase.
- 3. Prepare Your People:** Organizations are driven by their internal (e.g., employees) and external (e.g., customers) stakeholders: People access technology, people implement technology, and people drive digital transformation. Recognize the diversity of users in their readiness to adopt digital technology and deficiencies in skills to do so. Then, employ training and culture alignment to address gaps in tandem.

⁶ Ibid.

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The full advantages of any digital transformation only emerge once an organization has a strong sense of vision and has budgeted and planned properly to ensure adoption. Ultimately, the organization must entrench digital technology into its organization's policies, procedures, and culture for widespread success.

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