

Stay on target

Remaining focused on the end game

CEOs and executive boards in every sector are putting IT leaders under increasing demands to transform their organisations. Different customer experiences, simplified back-office operations and new products are expected yesterday.

So, how do you manage those expectations? How do you deliver at speed but within budgets and timeframes?



To find out we recently held our first Executive Leaders Forum. It gathered 34 CIOs, CDOs, IT Directors, Head of IT & Risk and similar to ask them three simple questions.

1. How do we keep our organisations focused on strategic goals?
2. Why do some organisations transform faster than others?
3. How do we optimise for speed whilst transforming at scale?

It was a free-flowing exchange of experiences and views. With anonymity guaranteed to ensure unvarnished opinions.

We hope you enjoy the conversation.

**Our guests
represented the
following types of
organisations**

A global and market-leading toy manufacturer

World-renowned fashion brands

TV, Media and news

Leisure and food

Utilities

Education

Government

Financial services

Materials sciences

Professional services

Manufacturing

Waste management

Construction



You can't plan for what you don't know

The session opened with this brand's senior IT leaders talking us through how they and their team approach transforming products, services and processes around digital outcomes. It's a globally recognised brand, found in practically every home that has children.

The significant point can be found in a word in the opening sentence above: **outcomes**.

Rather than focussing on outputs, this brand concentrates on having its executive board focus on what the digital outcome will be. So, instead of proposing a new payment process, for example, the project is pitched as one that will improve the consumer payment experience. By putting the onus on how the user experience will change, the project becomes less driven by timescales and more on improvements.

They were honest in explaining why they take this approach. Roadmaps with dates are all very well, but large transformational projects do not run smoothly. New challenges appear out of nowhere and have no respect for timelines. Their advice is to remind senior stakeholders that any plan or date is only good for day one. Day two is always different.

It's why – controversially for some – they feel that strategic planning cycles are somewhat pointless. As they noted, none of the strategic planning meetings they sat in two years ago mentioned COVID-19 as a potential disrupter. And why would they? It's not only technology that shifts at speed, but also events that are outside anyone's control. That's why they and their team concentrate on the first step.

Once that's taken, they move onto the next one and accept that future steps may change. As they colourfully put it, "Step on the first crocodile. If it doesn't bite, you're free to step onto the next one."

It's a mindset that they work hard to instil not just in their delivery team, but their executive board. That, they believe, helps them understand the inherent volatility in transformation programmes. It helps them understand that an organisation is merely travelling to the next digital destination, not the destination. They admit that the top-down nature of many organisations can make that difficult, as it requires stressing that agility is all about how you think, rather than a process. It's why they see themselves as an ambassador to their board when it comes to digital transformation. Helping them understand the realities of large technological change and acting as an advisor that can help them chart a way through.

To help them, they like to use the metaphor of climbing a mountain whose peak is out of sight. You think you know the route, but suddenly – under the cloud cover – you find a sheer rock face that has to be climbed. Or a crevasse that has to be crossed. Things that you never knew existed before you came across them. But you've got the kit and press on to reach the summit. You celebrate, and then realise that you have to descend, but the route you used has been covered by a snowstorm and your backpack is empty of supplies.

That is digital transformation. It's the landscape that all IT leaders need to help their senior stakeholders understand.

Three tips from our keynote

1. Stay focused on the end goal but recognise that it moves.
2. Set and communicate goals which accept that change will never finish.
3. Plan with velocity in mind: what's happening now, next and later.

The take-outs from the breakouts

The evening also featured two 20-minute breakout sessions, where the group split to answer some knotty questions. Here's the highlights of those discussions.

Session one: Why do some organisations transform faster than others?

To transform quickly, our groups felt that the following talking points were important.

- Focus on where you've been, not where you're going.
- Look for the best solutions – including outside of your industry – and find market leaders that can help your company.
- Allow ownership across your teams and allow them to make decisions.
- Take your project plan, halve it and then allow people to take risks.
- Every day is day one when it comes to transformation. It is continuous.
- Being paranoid about the competition is good.
- Culture beats strategy, set clear boundaries and empower teams.
- Tech is just an enabler. On its own it doesn't make organisations change, it's people that do that.
- Understand the risk appetite of the organisation you are transforming.



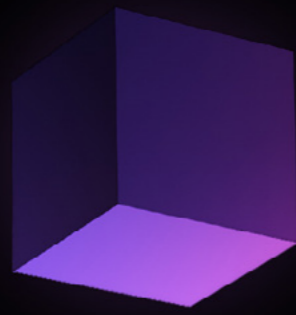
The take-outs from the breakouts

Session two: How do we optimise for speed, while transforming at scale?

When it comes to working quickly, our groups agreed the following talking points.

- Organise product teams into working groups with representatives of all stakeholders so that the message isn't lost between stages.
- Get all the viewpoints baked in, so there are fewer objections down the line.
- Work to ensure that regulations do not block transformation and pick your fights.
- Empower your people so everyone can do everything.
- Create the sweet spot between scale and agility, where you can step in and experiment. Find what works and execute.
- Autonomy of decision making is important. Then put the best people in the best place.
- Flatter organisations make things easier as hierarchies can slow things down.
- You know you're done when no one talks about it anymore.
- Don't shy away from hiring specialists.
- Factor in that you're going to get derailed.





Get involved

We hope you found something here to take away. Our next Executive Leaders Forum is being held on 21 July 2021; entitled Reinventing without a Roadmap, we'll be discussing how to transform without a clear route in mind.

We hope to see you there.



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1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7003578/>

