Reinventing without a roadmap

How to transform without
a clear route in mind

Roadmaps aren't dead, but we do need to redefine what they are. That sentiment was shared by many of the participants at our most recent 'Executive Leaders Forum', and it formed the heart of several free-flowing debates.

This hybrid event was attended by 20 CEOs, CIOs, CFOs, CTOs, Transformation Directors and similar. Over the course of an evening, these leaders discussed three key themes:

1. What drives the roadmap today? If not business strategy, then what?

2. How do you bring financial accountability to a more fluid plan?

3. How do we get people at a senior level to understand what transformation is?

The group shared many interesting stories, experiences and practical tips throughout the event. With anonymity guaranteed to ensure unvarnished opinions.

We hope you enjoy the conversation.

Our guests represented the following types of organisations

Retail

TV, media and news

Insurance

Conservation

Utilities

Education

Government

Financial services

Transport

Healthcare and pharmaceuticals

Software

Life sciences

Professional services

Manufacturing

Waste management

The art of innovating through a crisis

What does it take to thrive during a pandemic, and emerge stronger as a result? IT leaders from a major supermarket chain opened the evening by sharing their story, and explained how teamwork, creativity, and a reliance on data proved invaluable.

When lockdown was first announced, traffic to their website exploded. In-demand products were flying off the shelves, and customer expectations were changing on a daily basis. In response, their Digital Delivery Team devised and deployed new ideas, often within hours. This included introducing a product-capping solution, and 'Waiting Room' functionality to keep the website up and running. The window for order amendments and future booking slots was also reduced to cope with demand and social distancing restrictions.

Keeping all of these plates spinning was a huge challenge. First, it required incredibly strong leadership throughout the organisation. The Digital Delivery Team also faced internal demand to provide particular solutions in particular ways. They pushed back, instead relying on principles more aligned with agile ways of working. That meant keeping things simple, using data to track customer behaviour, and making incremental changes based on what they were learning. Everything revolved around having a minimum viable product, and then testing, adapting, and iterating.

There's also another important factor in this story. This supermarket chain talked about how advanced they already were in their digital journey, both culturally and through their existing cloud platform. As a result, they had an environment that helped them cope with change in the most demanding of circumstances.

While the pandemic has obviously been a momentous challenge, it's also provided valuable lessons. For instance, they now realise the full value of using their data to listen and adapt to their customers' needs. In addition, their employees feel far more confident about handling change and testing new ideas – in the knowledge that every problem has more than one solution.

As for the future? It was perhaps best summarised by this closing comment: "We may know the details of what we're doing today, tomorrow and next week. But what we're doing in six months, who knows." It neatly captured their intention to remain agile, continually transform, push boundaries, and avoid the false certainty of the multi-year roadmaps of the past.

Three tips from our keynote:

1. Listen to customers via your data to continually iterate and adapt

2. Avoid complexity: aim to keep your solutions simple

3. Create an environment where your people can quickly test and deploy new ideas

The take-outs from the breakouts

The evening also involved three themed breakout sessions, where attendees split to debate and share ideas. Here are the main takeaways from their discussions.

Session one: What drives the roadmap today? If not business strategy, then what?

On the theme of rethinking the traditional roadmap, our groups called out the following learnings.

- Businesses are realising that they can't predict the future. Long-term roadmaps often show ambition rather than the mission, and can give a false sense of certainty about multiple unknowns.

- While the route might not be certain, it's important to have a north star that guides your overall direction.

- Don't overengineer a solution for a future scenario or problem that may never occur. Aim for better, not perfect, and keep iterating.

- Be bold. Take the opportunity to explore new business models, or even emerging new markets, that your business can move into.

- The pandemic has shown leaders that change management isn't as daunting as it might once have seemed. It's also possible to implement changes faster than they previously thought.

- People feel confident to try new things, and leaders feel more open about giving them the freedom and safety to do so.

- More than ever, it's become clear how vital technology will be to driving business strategy and reshaping the future of business.

- Think of the office as a collaboration tool – a place that people choose to use when they want, rather than being required to visit on set days of the week.
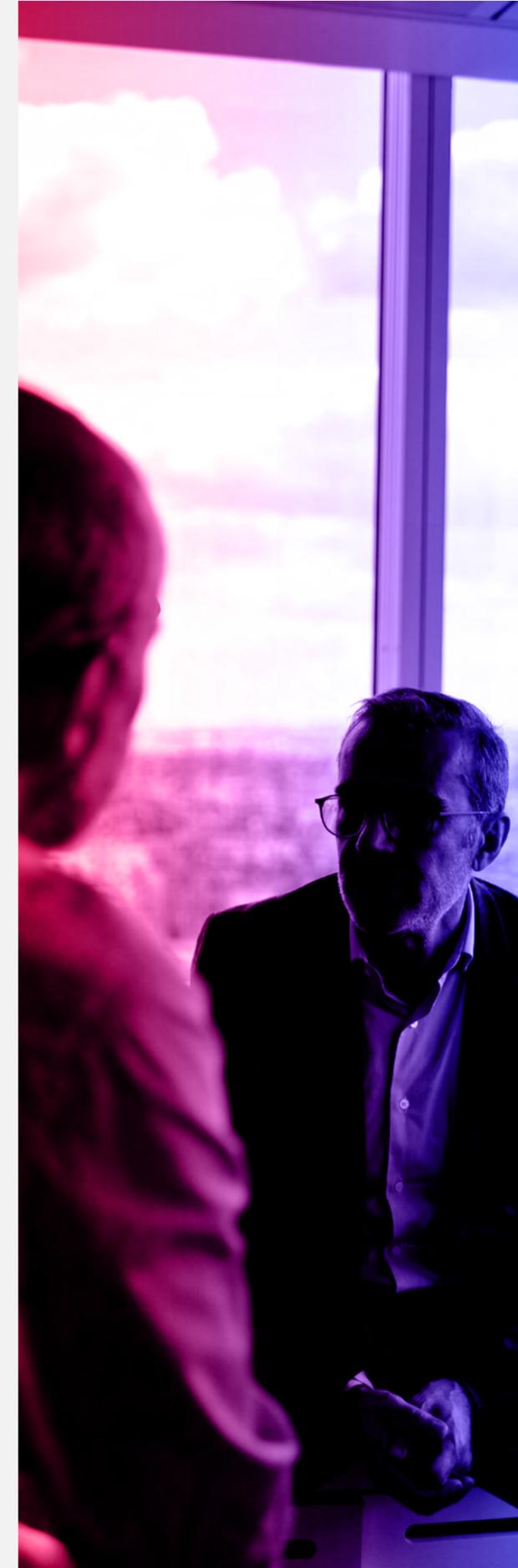
The take-outs from the breakouts

Session two: How will you bring financial accountability to a more fluid plan?

When it comes to financing transformation projects, our groups shared the following thoughts.

- Separate value from money. Instead of focusing on a fixed benefit for a fixed budget, be guided by the reason that you're doing something.

- Bring the CFO and the Board on the journey with you. Building strong relationships with key decision-makers will help you get buy-in on what you're trying to achieve.

- Create a culture where it's okay to speak up when something isn't working. Sometimes, it might be better to stop a project and try a different approach.

- Have a conversation about your risk appetite. Are there areas of your business where you're more willing to take chances than others?

- Roadmaps and allocation of funding need to be nimble to account for future uncertainties.

- Have the courage to do things differently. Some organisations are keeping their foot on the accelerator with R&D to get ahead of the competition.

- Some companies are investing in shorter-term projects that are delivered in months instead of years. Doing so can help you gauge outcomes and manage budgets more effectively.

- Switching from a project-focused to a product-focused model can help give CFOs real cost certainty.
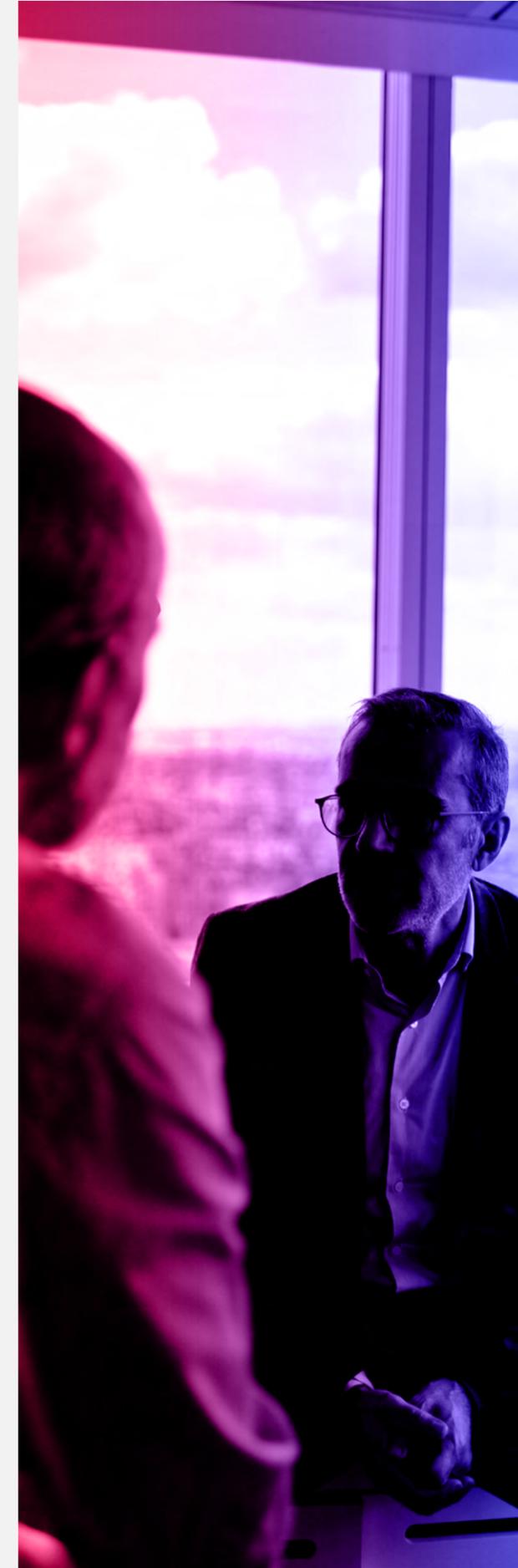
The take-outs from the breakouts

Session three: How do we get people at a senior level to understand what transformation is?

In the final session, the group discussed how to get different members of an organisation on the same transformation journey. Here's a snapshot of the key talking points.

- Transformation projects often fail because senior leaders aren't seen to be involved.

- Getting support from the top of the organisation is crucial to achieving a successful outcome.

- Words matter. Communicate with different stakeholders in a language that will resonate with them based on their own objectives and expertise.

- You can't do everything. Look at what might have the biggest impact, provide the most valuable lesson, or be replicable across your organisation.

- Transformation and 'business as usual' are no longer separate areas of focus. If the environment around you is constantly changing, it's essential to evolve with it.

- Adapting for the future might once have been about investing in shiny new tools. But now it's more about constantly and incrementally changing the entire culture and mindset of an organisation.

- Give non-technical executives an environment where they feel comfortable to ask questions, and admit when they don't understand something. A one-to-one chat outside the boardroom is a great place to start.
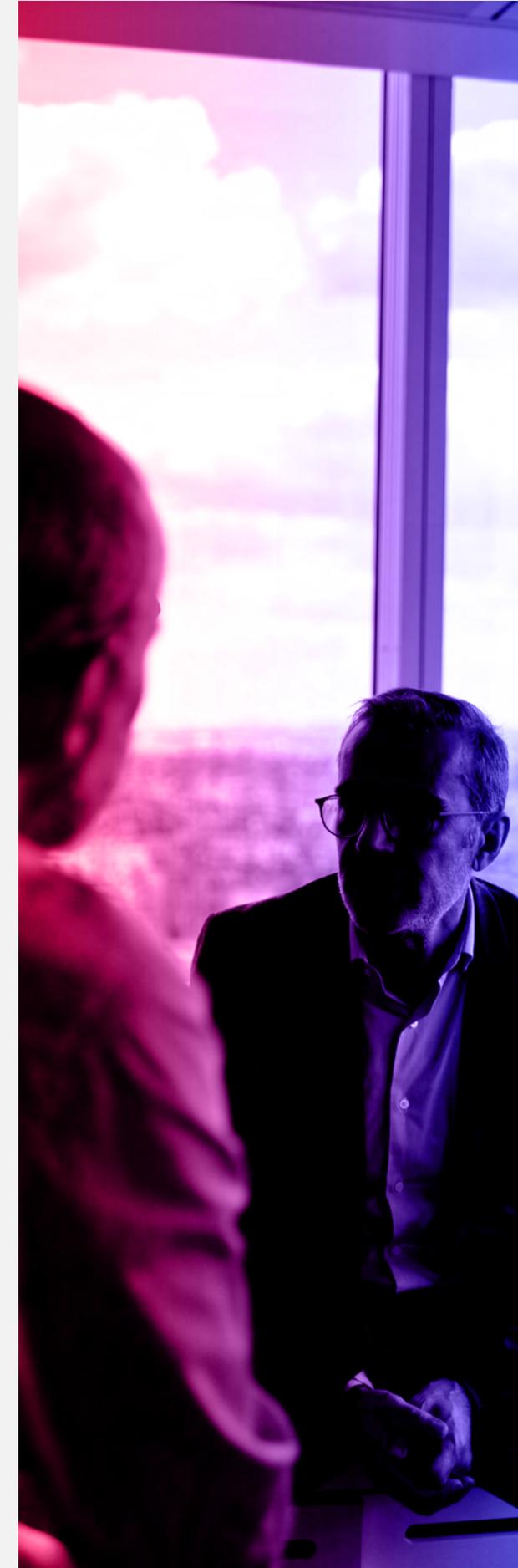
Get involved

Our next Executive Leaders Forum is themed around sustainability.
We hope you can join one of the following events:

Dublin, Ireland – 20 October 2021

London, UK – 3 November 2021

If you would like to attend, please email us to register your interest here:
exec-leaders-uki@amazon.com