



Launch is not adoption: Why technology transformation still fails to deliver value

Tech Leaders Connect Dinner co-hosted by Jungle IT

Most technology programmes do not fail because the technology does not work. They fail because the organisation does not adapt in a way that changes behaviour, improves outcomes and delivers value.

There is an old adage that change is all about people. That is true, but it's incomplete because successful adoption depends on leadership, incentives, operating model, process design, timing, communications, training, governance, commercial discipline and, increasingly, the organisation's emotional readiness for continuous change.

For CIOs and CTOs, this matters because technology is often blamed when adoption fails. A system may be technically sound, well implemented and available to users, yet still fail to create value because people continue to work around it, senior stakeholders avoid it, processes remain unchanged, or the benefits appear in one part of the business while the burden lands elsewhere.

The dinner discussion behind this paper explored three questions:

1. What is the most avoidable reason technology adoptions fail?
2. If only one investment lever could be moved to improve adoption, what should it be?
3. Has AI fundamentally changed how organisations need to approach change and adoption?

The discussion produced a clear message: CIOs and CTOs need to stop treating adoption as a post-launch activity. Adoption shouldn't be considered the final phase of a technology programme, rather it's the measure of whether the programme has achieved anything meaningful.

Change and adoption are not the same thing

A recurring theme was the distinction between change and adoption.

Change is the introduction of a new system, process, tool, structure or way of working whilst adoption is the extent to which the organisation actually uses the change in a way that produces the intended result.

This distinction sounds obvious, but many programmes still behave as if launch equals success. They measure whether the system went live, whether users were trained, whether the project closed, and whether the budget was broadly met. Those may be useful indicators of delivery, but they are not indicators of adoption.

A post-launch workshop is not an adoption strategy, neither is a one-off training session enough. Nor a set of comms announcing that the system is live. If there's no ongoing engagement, advice, practical help and reinforcement, it shouldn't be surprising when users drift back to old behaviours within a matter of days.

This is one of the most avoidable causes of failure. Organisations underinvest in the messy human and operational work that happens after launch, then conclude that the technology did not work.

For CIOs and CTOs, the implication is important: adoption must be designed into the programme from the beginning. So, if the question is "How do we get people trained before go-live?" this is flirting with failure. Instead it should be, "What has to change in behaviour, process, incentive and management practice for this investment to produce value?"

The most avoidable failure: poor business engagement

The dinner discussion strongly suggested that the biggest avoidable reason adoption fails is not poor technology, but poor business engagement.

In today's world, the technology itself is unlikely to be the hard part. Modern platforms, cloud services, SaaS products and integration tools are generally capable. That does not imply that technology selection and delivery are easy, but they are rarely the sole reason adoption fails.

The harder problem is getting the business to engage honestly with what needs to change.

This includes several common failure patterns:

The CEO wants change, but the users do not: A CEO's desire for change can be powerful, but it's not sufficient. If the programme is driven wholly from the top without meaningful buy-in from the people who will use the system, it can fail expensively.

This is not a mandate for delivering all change bottom-up. Many transformations need executive sponsorship, senior authority and clear direction. But adoption is more likely when users and operational leaders have been properly involved in shaping, testing and understanding the change.

Starting with those closest to the work often reveals practical realities that senior leaders miss. It also creates the possibility of advocacy from within the business rather than instruction from outside it.

Consultants replace business ownership: Another common failure mode is relying too heavily on consultants to define, implement and explain the change, without properly engaging the business.

Consultants can bring pace, experience and structure, but they cannot adopt the change on behalf of the organisation. If business teams feel that the change has been designed by outsiders and imposed upon them, resistance becomes more likely.

Using consultants can be a good thing, but the problem comes when consultants become a substitute for business ownership.

The “why” is not clear enough: Successful adoption requires a clear answer to “why”, but there is rarely only one “why”.

The board’s “why” may be margin improvement, risk reduction, scalability, faster reporting or better customer experience. The user’s “why” may be less obvious. They may be asked to enter more data, follow a stricter process, use a less familiar interface, or give up shortcuts that have worked for years.

In some cases, the benefits of a new system do not accrue to the people doing the additional work. A team may have to capture more structured data so another department can make better decisions. A finance team may need cleaner workflows so the board gets faster visibility. A sales team may be asked to use CRM more consistently so forecasting improves.

If the local burden and wider benefit are not both explained clearly, adoption will suffer.

CIOs and CTOs therefore need to help the organisation articulate different versions of the “why” for different stakeholder groups. A single corporate message is rarely enough.

Power, culture and incentives can block adoption

Adoption often fails because influential individuals choose not to adopt. This may be a senior salesperson who has always made money using their own methods. It may be a partner in a law firm whose personal power allows them to ignore process. It may be a department head who publicly supports the change but privately tolerates workarounds. It may be a senior leader who says, “We’ve always done it this way,” and has enough status to make that resistance contagious.

These individuals matter because adoption is social. People watch what powerful people do. If senior figures ignore the new process, others conclude that the change is optional.

This is particularly acute in partnership environments, professional services firms, sales-led businesses and organisations with powerful rainmakers. Formal authority may sit in one place, but practical influence sits somewhere else.

CIOs and CTOs need to map influence as well as hierarchy. The formal sponsor may not be the person who determines whether adoption succeeds. Sometimes the critical stakeholder is a respected operator, partner, regional manager, sales leader or finance controller whose behaviour signals whether the change is real.

The dinner discussion also highlighted that resistance is not always irrational. If people believe the change threatens their job, status, autonomy or ability to perform, they will naturally hesitate. This is especially relevant with AI, where many people suspect that efficiency gains may eventually translate into role reduction.

The distinction made in the discussion was that some “intelligence-based” work may be automated or reduced, while judgement-based work may become more valuable. Whether or not that proves universally true, it captures an important adoption point: people need an honest conversation about how work will change. Vague reassurance is unlikely to be enough.

Adoption can happen quickly when the context is right

The fact that many organisations adopted remote working rapidly during COVID demonstrates that businesses can change quickly when the conditions are right.

This matters because it challenges the lazy assumption that “people don’t like change”. People will adopt change when the need is clear, the old way is no longer viable, the tools are available, and the organisation removes ambiguity.

The question for CIOs and CTOs is how to create some of those conditions without requiring a crisis.

Several practical adoption accelerators emerged from the discussion:

Use respected early adopters: Find successful people in the business who can be persuaded to adopt early. If credible people demonstrate the value of the change, others are more likely to follow.

This works because adoption spreads more effectively through trusted peers than through central instruction. When users see “one of their own” benefiting from a new system, it creates social proof. In some cases, adoption spreads through a form of positive fear of missing out.

The key is to choose champions carefully. They should be more than simply enthusiastic volunteers; they should be credible, respected and close enough to the work to influence others.

Demonstrate consequences and benefits: People need to see what changes as a result of adoption. This includes positive outcomes, such as faster decisions, fewer errors, better customer experience, improved compliance or reduced rework. It may also include the consequences of not adopting, such as duplicated effort, poor data, missed opportunities or operational risk.

Benefits don't always need to be personal, but they do need to be visible. If a team is being asked to do more work so another part of the business can benefit, that wider benefit must be illustrated clearly.

Parallel running can reveal value: Where practical, parallel running old and new ways of working can help expose benefits quickly. Users can see the difference between the old process and the new one, rather than being asked to trust abstract claims.

This can be particularly useful when moving from familiar legacy systems to newer interfaces. A green-screen, keyboard-driven process may be extremely fast for experienced users. A modern mouse-and-keyboard interface may look better but feel slower to the people doing high-volume work. Unless those realities are understood and addressed, adoption will be harder.

Parallel running is not always possible or desirable, but where it is used well, it can turn adoption from a theoretical argument into a practical comparison.

Where should investment go?

When asked which single investment lever would most improve adoption, the discussion returned to a fundamental point: it depends on the business outcome.

Before deciding where to invest, the organisation needs to be clear about what it's trying to achieve. Is the programme intended to reduce cost, improve margin, increase capacity, reduce risk, improve customer experience, support growth, enable compliance or create new capability?

Without that clarity, investment decisions become distorted. Too much emphasis is placed on setting and achieving the technology budget, while too little is spent on the work that determines whether the technology will be used properly.

Several investment priorities emerged.

Invest earlier in understanding the real requirement: Many adoption problems are created before implementation begins. If the organisation hasn't properly understood the business process, non-functional requirements, operating constraints and user realities, the programme may be compromised from the start.

One example discussed was a supplier claiming that a system could handle direct debits. Technically, it could. But it turned out not at the volume required: The system

supported around 300 per month, whilst the business required more than 30,000 per month. That kind of gap can completely derail both change and adoption.

CIOs and CTOs have a critical role in forcing clarity around non-functional requirements: volume, performance, resilience, security, reporting, integration, data quality, auditability and operational scale. These are often the requirements that determine whether a system is usable in the real world.

Invest in adoption, not unnecessary customisation: A strong view from the discussion was that businesses too often spend money customising and configuring systems to fit existing processes, when it would be cheaper and more effective to adapt processes to fit the system.

This is not always true; some processes are genuinely differentiating, and some regulatory or sector-specific needs require adaptation, but many functions are less unique than they believe. Finance departments, for example, generally share broadly similar core processes, and mainstream finance systems are designed to support those processes.

The danger is that organisations spend large sums preserving old ways of working inside new technology. That increases complexity, cost and upgrade risk, while doing little to improve adoption.

A better approach is often to use relatively standard, low-configuration products and invest more heavily in process change, training, champions and adoption support.

Invest in MVPs and iteration: Another theme was the risk of overbuilding: Businesses often want the “fantastic” system when “good enough” would create value sooner. Large amounts of money can be spent defining and implementing a full product, only to discover that users adopt a small percentage of the functionality.

Minimum viable products and iterative delivery can reduce this risk allowing users to test, assess and shape the solution earlier. They also help the organisation learn which features are genuinely valuable and which are not.

This requires discipline and an MVP approach should not mean poor quality or half-finished rather it should mean a focused version of the product that allows the organisation to test whether the intended value is real.

Invest in product understanding and utilisation: Adoption improves when users understand not just how to operate a system, but how to use it well.

This is particularly important with modern SaaS platforms, where many organisations use only a fraction of the capability they’re already paying for. Additional investment in product expertise, super users, process redesign and usage analysis can produce significant value without major new technology spend.

The same applies to licensing. Huge sums can be wasted on unnecessary or poorly understood licensing, particularly across large cloud and productivity platforms from providers such as Microsoft, AWS and Google. Licensing and product specialists can help ensure the organisation is paying for what it needs and actually using what it buys.

Invest in contractual discipline: The discussion also highlighted the importance of contracts, documentation and supplier accountability.

Good documentation across internal teams and third parties can be a life-saver. Attaching the content of an RFP response to the supplier contract was cited as a practical example. This helps ensure that promises made during selection remain visible and enforceable during delivery.

This matters for adoption because supplier gaps often become user pain. If a capability is assumed but not delivered or delivered in a way that does not meet real operational needs, adoption suffers.

CIOs and CTOs need to bring decisions to a head

A recurring leadership point was that CIOs and CTOs can add significant value by helping departments focus on what matters, rather than allowing programmes to drift into endless requirements debate or technology detail.

Too much time can be spent gathering requirements. Equally, too little time can be spent understanding the requirements that actually matter. The role of the CIO/CTO is to bring judgement.

That may mean challenging claims of uniqueness. It may mean pushing for standard processes, forcing clarity on business outcomes and potentially identifying when a department is optimising for local convenience rather than enterprise value. At a fundamental level, it may also mean stopping a programme.

One note of caution from the discussion was that there are times when more money will not change the outcome and the programme may need to be abandoned. Politics often get in the way of this, particularly when senior sponsors have invested reputation and budget. But CIOs and CTOs must be able to recognise when good money is being thrown after bad and communicate that clearly.

This is a difficult leadership responsibility. It requires commercial confidence, stakeholder trust and the courage to separate sunk cost from future value.

AI changes the speed, but not the fundamentals

The discussion then turned to AI and whether it fundamentally changes how organisations should approach change and adoption.

The answer was nuanced: AI changes the pace, risk profile and adoption dynamics of technology change, but it does not remove the need for clear business problems, measurable outcomes, governance, user engagement and disciplined investment.

However, it is clear that AI is shortening the cycle of change. Organisations are having to develop new “muscle memories” faster than before. The focus is shifting towards building systems, teams and operating models that can cope with continuous change.

Technology teams may be used to this pace, but many business functions are not. Finance was mentioned as a particular example of a function where constant change can be harder to absorb. This creates a new adoption challenge: organisations need to help the workforce understand not just a single change, but the reality of ongoing change.

At the same time, AI should not be forced into problems where it is not required. The starting point remains the business problem. If AI is part of the best solution, then it should be considered. If not, it should not be adopted simply because it is fashionable.

Forced AI adoption will not work just because leadership wants it to happen quickly.

AI is turning adoption inside out

Traditional enterprise technology adoption is often push-led. The organisation selects a system, implements it, trains users and encourages adoption.

AI is different. In many organisations, adoption is already happening from the bottom up. Employees are experimenting with public AI tools, copilots, automation features and department-specific use cases. Shadow AI is emerging in the same way shadow IT emerged before it.

This creates a different challenge for CIOs and CTOs. The task is not only to drive adoption. It is also to govern adoption that is already happening.

The business needs methods to guide, secure and shape AI use without stifling useful experimentation. Too much control will push activity underground. Too little control creates risk around data leakage, intellectual property, compliance, accuracy, bias, security and accountability.

The right approach will vary by organisation. There is no one-size-fits-all model. Some organisations will require strict controls because of their sector, data sensitivity or regulatory environment. Others can allow more open experimentation. The key is to define acceptable risk clearly.

Many organisations already have IT security and acceptable-use policies, so AI governance shouldn't require a wholly new management philosophy, but those policies may need updating, and leaders will need to decide how far controls should go.

AI value must still be measured

Another strong theme was that “better” is not a meaningful success measure.

AI initiatives should not be justified on the basis that they will “make things better”.

Such a statement needs to be challenged: Better in what way? Faster? Cheaper? More accurate? More compliant? More scalable? More personalised? More profitable? Less risky?

AI should be assessed in the same commercial terms as other technology investments. Does it improve margin, reduce cost, increase revenue, reduce risk, improve customer retention or create measurable operational advantage?

Pilots can be useful, but only if they are designed to gather meaningful evidence. A pilot should have clear objectives, agreed measures and a decision point. If it does not deliver the required outcome, the organisation must have the courage to stop it.

This is particularly important because AI can create a seductive illusion of progress. Demonstrations can be impressive. Early experiments can feel exciting. But enthusiasm is not the same as value.

CIOs and CTOs should help the business distinguish between capability, novelty and commercial impact.

Some AI investment will be wasted — and that needs to be accepted

The discussion recognised an uncomfortable truth: some AI investment will be wasted.

Not every AI initiative will work. In many cases, organisations will not know at the outset which use cases will create value. Some experiments will fail because the technology is not mature enough. Some because the data is not good enough. Some because the process is wrong. Some because users do not trust the outputs and some because the benefit is too small to justify the effort.

This does not a mandate for organisations to avoid AI investment rather it means they should treat some AI investment more like exploratory business development or marketing experimentation than traditional IT delivery.

Businesses are often comfortable with marketing investment where the outcome is uncertain. A similar mindset may be needed for some areas of AI. The difference is that AI experimentation still needs governance, boundaries and learning discipline.

The organisation should know how much risk it is willing to accept, how much budget can be used for experimentation, what kinds of data can be used, who is accountable, and when an initiative should be stopped.

This requires a different conversation between technology, finance and the board. Not all technology investment can be judged only through the lens of certainty and predictable ROI. But neither should AI be given a free pass.

A practical adoption cycle for AI and beyond

One useful model emerging from the discussion was an improvement cycle:

Educate. Enable. Feedback. Invest.

This applies to AI, but also to technology adoption more broadly.

- **Educate:** People need to understand what is changing, why it matters, what the risks are and how their work may be affected. Education should be far more than just technical training, it should include business context, judgement, governance and practical examples.
- **Enable:** Users need access to the right tools, processes, support and permission. If the organisation wants adoption, it must remove friction. That may include templates, approved tools, clear policies, super users, office hours, prompt libraries, process guides or local champions.
- **Feedback:** Adoption cannot be managed from a programme dashboard alone. The organisation needs feedback from real users: what's working, what's not, what's confusing, what's slowing people down, what risks are emerging, and where's value being created.
- **Invest:** Investment should follow evidence. Where adoption is working and value is visible, invest further. Where adoption is weak but the problem is solvable, invest in support, redesign or communication. Where value is not materialising, stop or redirect the effort.

This cycle helps CIOs and CTOs move away from one-off launch thinking and towards continuous adoption management.

Implications for CIOs and CTOs

In today's business, the role of the CIO/CTO in transformation is far more involved than simply to deliver systems. It is to help the organisation absorb technology in a way that changes performance and that requires a broader leadership stance; the T-Shaped IT Leader if you will.

CIOs and CTOs must feel confident and capable to challenge weak business cases, vague benefits, unnecessary customisation, poor requirements, unrealistic timelines and overconfident supplier claims. They must also be able to engage human concerns: status, fear, habit, incentives, workload and trust. The dinner discussion suggests several practical principles:

- *First, define adoption before launch:* Do not wait until go-live to ask whether people will use the system. Define the behaviours, measures and outcomes that will indicate adoption has happened.
- *Second, treat business engagement as critical path:* If business ownership is weak, the programme is already at risk. Engagement is not a soft activity; it is a delivery dependency.
- *Third, identify the real influencers:* Map the people whose behaviour will determine whether others follow. They may not be the formal sponsors.
- *Fourth, invest in champions and super users:* Peer-led adoption is often more powerful than central communication. Local credibility matters.
- *Fifth, avoid preserving bad process through customisation:* Do not spend heavily adapting systems to old ways of working unless those processes are genuinely differentiating or necessary.
- *Sixth, measure value, not activity:* Training completion, login rates and project closure are not enough. Adoption should connect to business outcomes.
- *Seventh, know when to stop:* CIOs and CTOs must help the organisation avoid throwing good money after bad.
- *Eighth, govern AI without suffocating it:* Shadow AI is already happening in many organisations. The aim should be controlled enablement, not blanket prohibition or reckless freedom.

Conclusion: adoption is the real transformation

Technology transformation doesn't occur when the system goes live, it is only achieved when the organisation changes how it works and produces a better result. That is why adoption deserves to be treated as a strategic discipline and not a project afterthought.

For CIOs and CTOs, this creates both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that they are often held accountable for outcomes that depend on wider business behaviour. The opportunity is that they are uniquely placed to connect technology, process, commercial value, governance and organisational change.

AI may accelerate the pace and raise the stakes, but it does not remove the fundamentals. Organisations that simply implement more technology faster will not be the winners or naturally successful. The successful businesses will be those that build the leadership, governance and operating muscle to adopt change continuously.

As a CIO or CTO, we need a more challenging question than "Did we deliver the system?". Perhaps that challenging question is now: "Did the organisation change in a way that delivered value?"