

How to Prepare for Technological Change Management

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The change management theory provides useful lessons for managing technological change. The main insights include the need for clear engagement and communication with staff to ensure their acceptance, and the importance of careful consideration of how the technology aligns with employee needs.

Change management emerged as a discipline in the early post-war decades, with psychologist Kurt Lewin being one of the early pioneers with his theory of a predictable and planned approach to change, involving 3 distinct stages: unfreezing the status quo, moving the workforce and refreezing to stabilise an organisation with the new practices. In more recent years, scholars have instead emphasised the more fluid and experimental nature of change – that not everything can be predicted in advance and that a large part of change management consists of preparing contingency plans and managing challenges as they emerge (Hughes, 2006).

Among the most influential models of managing change is the 8-step change process introduced by Harvard Professor John Kotter in his 1995 book 'Leading Change'. These steps included establishing a sense of urgency within the organisation that change is needed, by identifying threats and opportunities and starting conversations, creating the guiding coalition of key people from different areas and levels within the organisation who will lead the change and developing a vision and strategy about why the change is happening, what values underpin it and how it is going to be executed.

Many of these lessons are equally applicable when it comes to technological change for organisations, particularly those around having a clear plan, communicating it clearly and then empowering and valuing employees through the process. Veronica Hope-Hailey described research that had shown the importance of maintaining a positive message throughout the transition from one technology to another. She explained how those who were successful, who managed change well, have these conversations that celebrate what you have achieved.

Anthony Bruce of PwC lists many of the common problems managers can face when it comes to implementing new technology with their staff: "They don't want to do it in a new way, they don't understand why they have to change and it doesn't link back to their job. Maybe the organisation doesn't invest sufficiently in training and education. They don't invest sufficiently in hearts and minds so people don't want to go on the journey and people inherently fear change.

However, he goes on to point out some ways in which new technology is changing this rulebook. One new difficulty technology poses is around trust relating to the collection, storage and use of data, which can introduce additional workforce anxieties, as seen in the Whittington Health district nursing case study, that complicate the question of winning over 'hearts and minds'.

Keeping up with technological changes

Experts agree that the pace of technological advancement itself is accelerating, something that poses serious challenges for organisations' abilities to keep up. How quickly can and should organisations move when it comes to implementing new technology?

Anthony Bruce pointed out that employees, being generally of a younger generation, might have grown up with an expectation that things move quicker than their older managers' generation, who might have the view that things should move more cautiously and slowly. Therefore, he explained, it might be the case that the population you are trying to change are probably more ready for it than you think they are. This will be truer for organisations with a younger employee profile while managing change among a population of older workers might require a slightly more measured approach.

Veronica Hope-Hailey agreed with the view that that the change itself can and often should be executed at pace, not least because it maintains the enthusiasm of the workforce rather than allowing them to become impatient or disillusioned. There is, however, an important need for careful planning and preparation before technology is brought in – as Harry Armstrong put it, "try and do as much as possible to understand what the impact is going to be and mitigate issues before they happen and stay responsive when issues arise and you know what you can do about it".

The general lesson for organisations on the pace of technological change seems to be 'prepare thoroughly, implement quickly', something that all of the case studies also seem to bear out. The difficulty is that organisational ability to meet this timetable will likely come under more strain if work-related technologies continue to advance at a more rapidly over the coming decades. As Leslie Willcocks cautioned, the theoretical capabilities of technology might soon be advancing far ahead of the practical ability of organisations to adopt and implement it successfully.

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