

**BEST PRACTICES** 

# How a Transformation Platform Reimagines Success

A Look at the Traits, Data, and New Practices Behind High-Success Business and IT Change





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#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Data shows that most business and digital transformation efforts continue to fall short of the mark in terms of results, due to a complex interplay of issues that makes digital and business change too often fraught with risk and unmet expectations.

This report examines the breakthrough potential of new ways of orchestrating change via transformation platforms that hold the promise of producing significantly higher success rates and improved business outcomes via superior enablement and orchestration. The research in this report found that a transformation using a modern, purpose-built transformation platform *had nearly triple* the average success rate of traditional methods.





#### THE IMPERATIVE OF IMPROVED TRANSFORMATION

In a world of unprecedented disruption and market challenges, transformation today revolves around the overriding urgency to sustainably generate new value, unlock new opportunities, tap new avenues of growth, and deliver new efficiencies.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance and possibility of rapid transformation, yet for most organizations, results are still not easy to realize. Transformation remains an all-consuming, overarching activity whose core concepts and methods have not improved significantly for decades. Yet organizations continue to wade into the fray, despite an understanding of how difficult it is to achieve the desired outcomes. Without effective transformation, however, organizations cannot operate in the high-value markets and operating environments of the near future.

Transformation, be it business or digital, is thus an imperative for most organizations, and the need to undertake it is well understood by most executives.

The current data underscores how the state of business and digital transformation is still fraught with high risk and poor performance. In terms of success rates, projects or initiatives involving transformation have not significantly improved from the major programs and efforts of decades past. In fact, the average of available data sources sets the combined failure and underperformance rate of transformation of any kind at nearly eight out of 10 efforts. In 2016 Forbes assessed the overall risk of failure in transformation to be 84%. According to McKinsey, BCG, KPMG, and Bain & Company, the risk of failure in transformation falls somewhere between 70% and 95%.¹ These numbers are sobering and have remained essentially unchanged since the 1970s.

It must also be noted that most current transformation efforts tend to be run in a project mentality with a fixed term/outcome. These efforts do not acknowledge the reality that ongoing change is the only constant and that it requires a more systematic approach to agile evolution to successfully manage the dynamic shifts during transformation.



Fortunately, new approaches have recently arrived that bring together the people, processes, and data within a transformation effort in a way that promises to dramatically lower risk and improve results. The early data presented in this report is promising and indicates a clear path forward for significantly improving results and lowering risks. These results, along with lower risk, appear to be readily accessible to most enlightened organizations that look at the common reasons transformation is held back and then more comprehensively embody them, such as with a tool or a platform.

#### THE PERFORMANCE OF TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS

What does it actually take to transform successfully? In a recent survey by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 86% of the respondents reported that transformation requires a combination of the right culture, revised business processes, and new technologies.<sup>2</sup> However, only 20% of those respondents—about the same percentage as has long been the case—rated their transformation strategies as being effective.

Clearly, what most organizations are doing today to transform is not working well enough. Progress is difficult and hard-won and takes too long to return the desired results, even if the targeted changes manage not to fail outright. In this consistent and repeated environment of poor performance, it's worth examining the available data to discover what was key to achieving successful outcomes in the transformation efforts that managed to have good results.

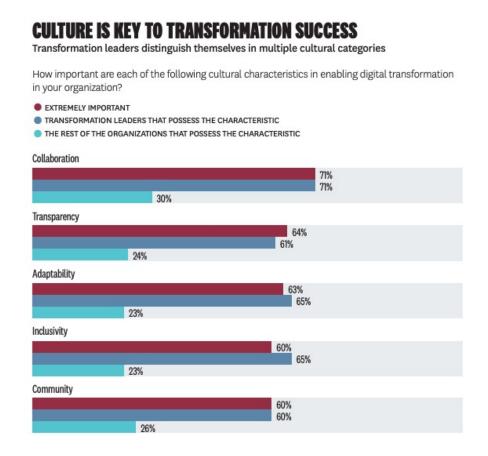
#### **Traditional Transformation Outcomes and Success Data**

Organizational culture often is considered to be the overriding barrier to successful transformation of any kind. A survey recently underscored the importance the respondents attributed to culture for driving transformation success and highlighted key characteristics of that culture (see Figure 1).

This data shows four traits of nearly the same high importance—transparency, adaptability, inclusivity, and community—capped by one trait of very high importance: collaboration. If these measures are



Figure 1: The Top Characteristics of Culture in Effective Transformation



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, November 2019

vitally important, and most experts believe they are,<sup>3</sup> they are a clue to how transformation might be significantly improved via some new capability that better supports these traits.

But culture is not the whole story of transformation. Several other key factors have recently emerged to be in play as well, most significantly the ability to use data to make more informed decisions during the transformation journey.

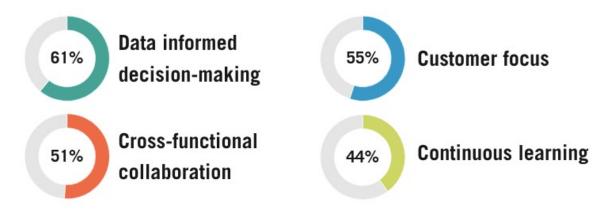
To underscore these particular factors, practitioners of transformation can use an important new study<sup>4</sup> by Harvard Business School professor Linda A. Hill. She identifies the most critical factors for success in the digital era in which continuous transformation is arguably the overarching activity.



Figure 2: The Leading Qualities Organizations Need to Succeed in the Digital Era

### What companies need to compete

Survey respondents ranked the following qualities as most critical to succeeding in the digital era.



Source: "Leadership in the Digital Era" survey

In this study, of the four top factors cited, two are directly involved in guiding transformation successfully: data-informed decision-making and cross-functional collaboration (see Figure 2).

Combined, these factors provide key indicators of what sort of new methods might provide a new step function—or significant ladder up—toward lower-risk and higher-success transformation. Transformation, of all major human activities, is famously a team sport yet often fails to fully engage that team. Research of this type and others continues to push the industry toward the realization that large-scale change simply must be more open, inclusive, collaborative, and data-driven in order to achieve the stated goals.

Therefore, it seems increasingly likely that new approaches to transformation that embody those values in a consistent and rigorous way are more likely to lead to the desired outcomes. For the purposes of this report, we will call these desired attributes the *supporting values of next generaliton transformation*, which, if particularly effective, must therefore be highly prized and explicitly cultivated in order to achieve better rates of progress in the practice.



#### Supporting Values of Next-Generation Transformation

The hypothesis, then, is that if a better approach to transformation will embody these support values in the core of the approach and if these values are indeed the gateway to a new, higher plateau of results, the data will show it. To summarize, these supporting values are:

- Transparency: Ensuring that everyone is able to understand the overall plans, objectives, and progress of transformation and identify their role in supporting them
- Adaptability: Effectively and quickly responding to new data and lessons learned and then suitably changing course
- Inclusivity: Ensuring that all those who are able are involved in supporting the transformation, wherever they may be
- Community: Connecting with others in the transformation process in a way that creates shared visibility and purpose
- Cross-functional collaboration: Working together with others across the transformation community to achieve shared goals
- Data-informed decision-making: Using available data to guide the process of transformation in an effective way

It's worth noting that digitally enabling each of these supporting values across an organization is a way of shifting that organization's culture to be better prepared for transformation. Culture is famously resistant to change from a structural standpoint, but if the structures of communication and collaboration are shifted, the culture typically follows. In other words, the primary way such activities are carried out can be deliberately structured to be directly supportive of the values most likely to improve the transformation process.



#### **Next-Generation Approaches to Transformation**

Approximately a decade ago, using digital applications to track the details of complex projects was an emerging practice. This was not project management, which was concerned primarily with identifying and tracking tasks after the fact. Instead, this was much more wholesale knowledge work, detailed planning, and ongoing collaboration involving complex teamwork to achieve large, often decentralized outcomes. The traditional tools up to that point were not very connected or were very conversational (email, collaboration apps) or weren't very concerned with the actual details or subject matter of the actual work or its results (project management tools).

To overcome the limits of these early tools, the industry required something that brought everything together, helped structure and channel the overall work via ongoing collaboration, and managed the actual knowledge work and shared teamwork toward a targeted result.

One outcome of this broader industry desire was work coordination platforms (a product category that Constellation Research tracks), which ultimately became a collaborative work management toolset that managed the tactical work of groups of people but typically lacked key strategic components that were required for transformation-level activities.

The other result was the emergence of tools designed specifically for aiding and orchestrating large-scale transformation. Although many organizations attempt to adapt their collaboration, knowledge management, project management, and other tools to serve the transformation process, none of those tools was specifically developed or optimized for the purpose. Thus they omitted or inadequately addressed key functionality or integrations that would directly support transformation by using leading best practices.

These transformation platforms are therefore digital tools and solutions developed to span the lifecycle of a transformation, with situated capabilities that address several very specific issues and challenges in transformation that a business will face—issues and challenges that older,



more traditional and siloed solutions simply do not address. These include connecting strategic transformation plans and goals to individual work tasks; providing management and governance views of the overall transformation process; and managing program/project portfolios of interlocking and mutually supporting transformation initiatives, using metrics/KPIs to guide program success and benefits.

The data cited above suggests that these transformation platforms can indeed notably improve the success rate and quality of change-based outcomes, but only if they plug needed gaps in the strategic direction of transformations while also significantly increasing transparency, adaptability, inclusivity, community, collaboration, and data-informed decision-making.

The question does arise whether technology is really the key to unlocking improved transformation. Will the much-desired step function in transformation be one that is aided primarily by technology and not by changing the underlying processes or the way people are organized? The key insight is that after three decades of attempting to change the people and process (the other two legs of management theory) and having little to show for it in terms of improved success rates, technology consistently has been the area where productivity and effectiveness have improved.

In fact, long-term research by the Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) has found a tight coupling between extensive digitization and growth in productivity. It does this in a way that specifically underscores the importance of both platforming the majority of the transformation process itself and tying that process to the supporting values of transformation.

The OECD notes that digital technologies "are characterized by strong complementarities between technologies themselves and with firms' capabilities and assets, such as technical and managerial skills, organizational capital, innovation and financing capacity." In other words, digitization, when applied directly and deeply to operating capabilities, does indeed show sustained and significant improvements in benefits when "high digital intensity" is adopted.<sup>5</sup> This strongly implies that transformation platforms that imbue such intensity to the functional aspects of transformation in a way that is complementary to the supporting values noted above will produce superior results.



So, what does the actual data from transformation projects tell us?

More and more transformation efforts in recent years have attempted to "platform" their large-scale change processes, mostly using ad hoc conglomerations of tools that embodied some of the support values but that often had limited integration and also had the challenge of not really being "born" for the purpose at hand: business or digital transformation at scale (either decentralized or centralized) in a way that proactively addresses the historic shortfalls of previous approaches and solutions.

In short, the question is whether more extensive digitization of transformation—especially addressing the most enabling values—actually produces higher-quality outcomes. Moreover, organizations generally can't achieve such deep changes by using the same tools and ways of working that created the need for the transformation in the first place.

#### Essential Aspects of a Transformation Platform

For the purposes of answering this question, Constellation Research studied 12 separate transformation projects that used some form of a next-generation approach that employed a transformation platform as the core foundation and operational center, strategic and/or tactical, and also significantly embodied most or all of the next-generation supporting values (see Figure 3).

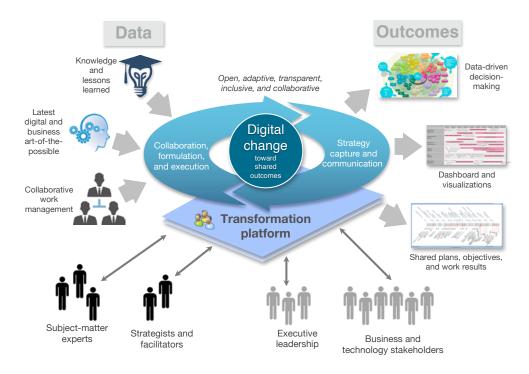
*Note*: In the research conducted here, generic collaboration or project management solutions such as SharePoint or enterprise project management office (PMO) tools were not found to be sufficiently adapted to the task to be considered transformation platforms as described here.

It's worth noting the complementary nature of the traits of a transformation platform. The research into the transformation projects above showed that a force multiplier effect was notable among them. The less the transformation platform was designed for the purpose of large-scale change and the less the supporting values were broadly enabled, the more limited the results.

**Key insight:** The data shows that transformation platforms must enable enough of the essential aspects of large-scale change to achieve notable success rates and outcomes.



Figure 3: The Key Elements of a Transformation Platform That Supports Next-Gen Values



Source: Constellation Research

The early data from Constellation Research's analysis of next-generation transformation projects (dating from 2013–2022, with an overall transformation success rate of 57%) found that they used the essential aspects of transformation platforms in varying degrees, shown in Figure 4.

#### Early Data on Next-Generation Transformation Methods

Although the evolution of next-generation transformation is still in its early stages, Constellation Research was able to isolate and analyze a dozen enterprise-class projects that have used or are still using a transformation platform in some form to guide the majority of at least one significant transformation effort. Some of the more mature enterprises analyzed were using their chosen platform to manage several or, in one case, scores of transformation projects.

In each of these cases, an effort was made to extract the project's or program's overall success rate and correlate it with the degree with which it applies next-generation capabilities in the enterprise's transformation platform.



Figure 4: Capabilities of Platforms Used to Enable Next-Generation Transformation

Openness and
inclusivity by
default

These capabilities enable information to be broadly shared within the transformation platform and viewed and searched by anyone, including partners and participants outside the organization as needed.

# Features for strategic transformation activities

These features include project/initiative/program/portfolio management, governance and compliance features, visualization and dashboarding for leaders, and best-practice capture and sharing.

#### Collaboration

This aspect involves features for collaborative work management, from the most strategic to the most tactical, with customizable templates and blueprints for the leading types of transformation.

#### Data-based decision-making and KPI management

These capabilities make it possible to set and track measures for the ongoing transformation process, capture key metrics, and predict/prescribe the best courses of action, with top measures/KPIs built in and ready to use.

## Knowledge management

This aspect is the ability to capture knowledge and distill insights from the successful-activities outcomes within the community.

#### Being community-based

This characteristic brings the ability to bring together and better connect far-flung teams across and within projects and initiatives to ideate, innovate, design, deliver, manage, and oversee transformation in a shared, inclusive, and highly visible way.

## A critical mass of integrations

Transformation requires data and insights from many other IT systems to provide a single source of truth to managers and teams. Much of the ideation, design, knowledge capture, and collaboration may even be done in different tools, yet all must be brought together to drive a single view and a community focused on transformation. This means that the majority of dependent IT systems must be supported by the transformation platform in an integrated fashion.

Source: Constellation Research



Figure 6: Comparing Traditional and Platform-Based Transformation

Traditional Transformation	Platform-Based Transformation
More isolation and centralization	More inclusivity even though distributed
Less data available for making decisions	More data available to enable confident decision-making
No single source of truth	Single source of truth
Silos of stakeholders	Few silos of stakeholders
Limited collaboration	Rich cross-border collaboration
Difficulty of capturing and reusing knowledge	Knowledge captured and reused automatically
Processes, artifacts, and data fragmented across IT systems	Well-integrated processes, artifacts, and data
Low levels of stakeholder engagement	High levels of stakeholder participation

Source: Constellation Research

The companies represented are in the financial services, media, or consumer packaged goods industries; multinational conglomerates; or other lines of business. All were based in North America or Europe, but several had a global presence.

**Key insight:** Those employing a platform-based approach and applying a significant degree of the supporting values had a substantially higher success rate. Constellation Research found that a modern platform-based transformation effort had nearly triple the average success rate of a traditional transformation effort, using the industry baseline success/failure data cited at the beginning of this report.

#### Comparing Traditional and Next-Generation Approaches

Although the data sample remains small and there is still work to do in studying the emerging practice of platform-based transformation, there is substantial evidence to conclude that a platform-



based approach offers significantly improved delivery of innovation and change activities. Statistical research by Constellation Research has found similar success patterns in other platform-based work platforms,<sup>6</sup> again correlated with the same capabilities and support values.

If traditional approaches to transformation are compared with next-generation transformation that uses a platform to connect and enable stakeholders, broad contrasts emerge, as shown in Figure 6.

#### **EXAMPLES OF NEXT-GENERATION TRANSFORMATION**

Based on their transformation efforts, the following companies sampled in this research effort have contributed insights to this report:

#### Large Multinational Conglomerate

A large American multinational conglomerate based in Massachusetts found that its transformation platform has "been instrumental in guaranteeing governance around the data accuracy of our transformation initiatives and to democratize the access of transformation data across the organization," says a senior manager at the organization. "The [Conductor platform] is definitely an accelerator for us." Of the data measures it has, end-of-initiative reconciliation efforts have fallen from an average of two days to fewer than an hour each, says the manager. But he cites democratization as the largest benefit, ensuring transparency by giving everyone insight into which initiatives need assistance and what the real status of change in the organization is.

#### Food Additives and Agribusiness

A major food and agribusiness company based in Europe employed its transformation platform to manage and orchestrate a portfolio of approximately 400 change initiatives around the world. A senior executive noted to Constellation Research that their transformation platform has become "a key pillar in our transformation journey because because it helps us centrally manage and control the complex business that we have operating in many countries in different systems. Having one single place where transformation is very easily manageable and trackable has been invaluable." Early



experience indicates that their transformation journey is significantly improved, because previous ad hoc methods were put aside for a more systematic and platform-based approach..

#### Sensei Labs

Several of these transformation efforts were conducted with the Conductor platform by Ontario, Canada-based software company Sensei Labs, which combines collaborative work management, data tracking and reporting, and knowledge management together with dashboards and KPI measurement. Conductor qualifies for the definition of a next-generation transformation platform and is an example of the actual solutions being used to carry out platform-based large-scale change today.

# BOTTOM LINE: EXPECTED SHIFTS IN KEY TRANSFORMATION KPIS

If platform-based transformation is more powerful because it inherently and more systematically leverages what makes transformation naturally more successful, we would expect to see the typical KPIs for transformation significantly improved via this approach. This will be an ongoing area of study, but based on the initial sampling of firms here, the following KPIs are important in a nontrivial way:

- Overall return on digital investments
- Customer experience satisfaction
- Workforce productivity rate
- Revenue from new products and services
- Cost/benefit returns
- Operational improvements
- Reliability and availability



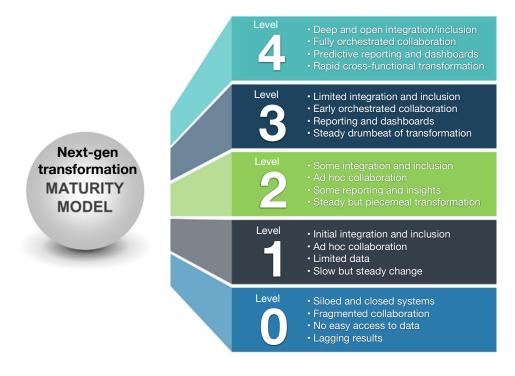
- Time to value
- Transformation project/initiative failure rate

# THE OUTLINES OF A NEW EMERGING TRANSFORMATION MATURITY MODEL

The hypothesis and initial data here promise important new avenues for improving proactive and emergent transformation within organizations, but more insights are needed. One such insight is the sense of an overall maturity model to which this is leading, such as that shown in Figure 7.

The maturity model shown in Figure 7 is based on the next-generation capabilities and supporting values identified in this report. Organizations can use it as an approximate gauge to measure how their transformation improvement efforts are faring. More significantly, this maturity model shows a

Figure 7: A Maturity Model for Next-Generation Digital Transformation



Source: Constellation Research



path toward reducing the overall failure rate of transformation and thus the associated high cost of underperforming projects/programs.

#### TAKEAWAYS FOR TRANSFORMATION LEADERS

What is clear from this early data is that if business and IT leaders focus on what the small but growing cohort of leading organizations is doing by using situated technology solutions aimed at the shortfalls in traditional transformation, they can significantly lower the risk and increase the overall success of their transformation efforts.

To this end, those seeking to traverse the step function toward such next-generation improvements should keep the following in mind:

- Technology can be used to continuously embody, enable, and enforce best practices in ways no other delivery method can deliver.
- Platforms designed from the outset to embody the best functional capabilities in modern transformation and their support values will be the easiest to adopt and most successful in their outcomes.
- The tendency toward siloing and overcontrol by highly centralized transformation efforts often has a negative impact on overall success.
- Instead, leveraging the innovation, creativity, and energy of invested stakeholders and broadly
  empowering them with peers, data-based insights, best practices, and decision support are strongly
  correlated with superior results.
- A data-rich platform that is inclusive and transparent enables organizations to more quickly sidestep poorly producing activities and get the help or remediation they need.
- A key metric for success is speed. An examination of the project data from the efforts sampled in this report shows that transformation initiatives that will ultimately be successful quickly find the



right path after a pivot or two. Data-based platforms provide the transparency and insight to make this possible.

- Inclusion and openness in participation are key to success, with successful change frequently coming from stakeholders where it was least expected.
- Leaders can most effectively use their time to ensure that their plans and objectives are met by basing their transformation work on a properly enabling platform to set direction, build community, gain buy-in, and enlist stakeholders at scale to change and then let much of the effort drive itself, saving their time for managing areas that most need their help and support.



#### **ENDNOTES**

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#### **ANALYST BIO**

## Dion Hinchcliffe

#### Vice President and Principal Analyst

Dion Hinchcliffe is an internationally recognized digital thought leader, industry analyst, business strategist, enterprise architect, transformation consultant, and keynote speaker. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in enterprise IT.

Currently a VP and principal analyst of Constellation Research, Hinchcliffe is a well-known industry expert on the topics of digital transformation, CIO issues, digital workplace, ecosystem strategy, digital business, and next-generation enterprises. His thought leadership can be found on ZDNet, ebizQ, On Digital Strategy, and Enterprise Irregulars. He is co-author of the bestselling Social Business by Design (John Wiley & Sons).

Hinchcliffe is an executive fellow at the Tuck Center for Digital Strategies and was recently identified as one of the top three people most mentioned by IT leaders. Industry analytics firm Onalytica ranks Hinchcliffe as the No. 2 influencer globally on the subject of digital transformation. He has keynoted or spoken at hundreds of leading industry conferences, including CeBIT, KMWorld, IT Roadmap, Dreamforce, CIO Perspectives, AIIM Conference, IBM Connect, and other industry events.

@DHinchcliffe

constellationr.com/users/dion-hinchcliffe

linkedin.com/in/dhinchcliffe



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#### Organizational Highlights

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- · Experienced research team with an average of 25 years of practitioner, management, and industry experience.
- · Organizers of the Constellation Connected Enterprise—an innovation summit and best practices knowledge-sharing retreat for business leaders.
- Founders of Constellation Executive Network, a membership organization for digital leaders seeking to learn from market leaders and fast followers.

 www.ConstellationR.com
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 info@ConstellationR.com
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