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RESEARCH REPORT

WHAT'S REALLY PREVENTING DIGITAL INITIATIVES FROM MEETING EXPECTATIONS?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the wake of accelerated digital efforts since the pandemic, organizations continue to grapple with the tension between technological innovation and frontline adoption. While investments in digital tools, platforms, and automation remain high, the promised value of these initiatives is rarely fully realized.

To explore this critical challenge, Service Council™ recently hosted a virtual IdeaShare workshop with a select group of 30+ senior service, support and operations leaders. The IdeaShare focused on examining the persistent gap between digital objectives and actual results, and identifying practical solutions to improve adoption and maximize value.

Participants represented a cross-section of service leaders from industries including healthcare, life sciences, manufacturing, heavy equipment, transportation, and technology. Functions spanned global service operations, field logistics, digital transformation, contact centers, and customer support. Despite differences in scale and sector, many shared similar challenges and experiences.

This report captures the core findings and shared learnings from the IdeaShare workshop and explores where and why digital initiatives fall short. It will also look at closing the gap between planned adoption and actual use, and outline ways to design with purpose, empower without overwhelming, and align transformation goals with day-to-day realities.

THE LEAKS FROM INTENDED TO REALIZED VALUE FROM DIGITAL INITIATIVES

Service innovation has remained a top priority for industry leaders year after year, fueled by new technologies and growing expectations for improved speed, quality, and customer experience. But despite strong intentions and investment, the value of these digital efforts often falls short in practice. Too often, the tools and platforms introduced aren't embraced by the frontline, limiting impact and stalling momentum. What emerges is a growing gap between what these initiatives are meant to deliver and what actually takes hold in day-to-day operations.

Many leaders continue to experience a persistent gap between the technology that's implemented and the value that's actually realized. This disconnect often begins with a fundamental issue: frontline teams aren't consistently using the tools as intended. When adoption is intermittent or superficial, the ability to scale improvements or generate meaningful insights from captured data is quickly compromised.

One of the most commonly cited issues is that frontline staff use digital systems only when they have the time or mental bandwidth, often defaulting to manual workarounds or incomplete entries when workflows become complex or pressure increases. This inconsistency leads to partial data capture, which in turn erodes the reliability and utility of the data that's available for decision-making, resulting in a vicious cycle.

A second, closely related issue is the low quality of the data that is captured. This was a frustration shared by some IdeaShare participants, who described the widespread use of placeholders or meaningless inputs in mandatory fields—entries made simply to move through a system, rather than to inform any

downstream use. This 'check-the-box' behavior renders many fields analytically useless and undermines trust in what the data claims to represent. When decisions are made based on flawed inputs, organizations risk misallocating resources, misdiagnosing root causes, or failing to act on emerging trends altogether.

“Tools are not just data repositories. Capturing information is only the beginning. What we do with it is what drives value.”

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The incorrect use of tools also emerged as a major concern. In many cases, frontline workers may not fully understand the intended workflows, the purpose of specific fields, or the downstream impact of their inputs. Whether due to rushed onboarding, a lack of ongoing coaching, or changes in team composition, this unintentional misuse results in information that appears valid on the surface but lacks the necessary accuracy, depth, or context.

IdeaShare participants also underscored the importance of trust—not just in the data itself, but in the systems and processes that surround it. If frontline staff don't see how the information they enter is used, how it benefits them or their peers, or how it ties into larger organizational objectives, their motivation to engage fully and consistently will wane. This “black hole effect” where data goes in but nothing of quality comes out can quietly erode compliance, morale, and retention over time.

As one participant aptly put it, “Tools are not just data repositories. Capturing information is only the beginning—what we do with it is what drives value.” Without purposeful feedback loops, clear expectations, and aligned accountability, even well-designed tools can fall short.

THE GOOD: TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION'S APPEAL TO THE FRONTLINE

Despite the well-documented challenges in realizing value from digital transformation, one area of clear momentum is the growing appeal of emerging technologies among frontline workers. Across a range of tools (including artificial intelligence, IoT-enabled insights, augmented reality, and virtual reality) the sentiment on the frontline is largely positive. In fact, according to Service Council research, more than two-thirds of frontline professionals report a favorable perception of these innovations, and over 85% rate their impression as at least neutral. This reflects a widespread recognition that new technologies have the potential to make their work more efficient, informed, and engaging.

This enthusiasm for the *what* of technology, such as its features, capabilities, and possibilities, offers a strong foundation for adoption. Tools that can guide decision-making in real time, connect experts remotely, or provide richer context for field tasks are increasingly welcomed as assets, not burdens. For many, these innovations signal a shift toward more modern, empowered service roles.

Beyond performance, technology also serves as a strategic differentiator in attracting and retaining talent. When frontline roles are equipped with modern, intuitive, and “cool” technologies, they become more appealing to younger, tech-savvy workers entering the labor force. These tools can shift perceptions of field service work from manual and routine to dynamic and future-facing. In an industry grappling with labor shortages and skill gaps, the presence of innovative technology not only enhances execution, but elevates the job itself.

THE BAD: CLARITY, CHANGE AND DATA CHALLENGES

While technology is viewed positively by the frontline, ongoing issues with process clarity, change management, and data usability continue to limit digital transformation's value. Only about half feel that process clarity has improved, leaving teams to navigate unclear expectations amid rising demands. Constant system updates often create confusion, especially when training and support are insufficient, making information retrieval a daily challenge for both remote agents and field technicians.

Moreover, frontline employees increasingly report that new tools and workflows feel too rigid to address the real-world challenges they face. Processes designed with top-down intent may not account for the flexibility required in dynamic, customer-facing environments. In fact, 1 in 5 field service technicians cite the speed and misalignment of new technologies and processes as a top frustration in their day-to-day work.

THE BAD: CLARITY, CHANGE AND DATA CHALLENGES, CONT...

Finally, Service Council research has uncovered that frontline teams are increasingly caught between two extremes when it comes to data: too little or too much. While 31% of technical remote support agents and 32% of customer support agents report they lack the information needed to effectively troubleshoot customer or technical issues, 41% of field service engineers report being overwhelmed by excessive amounts of data. In both cases, the result leads to frustration, inefficiency, and a reliance on informal workarounds, like calling a colleague, rather than using the systems in place.

The concern relates not only to the amount of information but also to its usability and reliability. Remote agents may struggle to locate or interpret the data, or lack confidence in its completeness. Field technicians, meanwhile, must sift through large amounts of unprioritized information in real time, making it harder to identify what's relevant. This imbalance erodes productivity and undermines confidence in digital tools.

Year over year, these challenges are becoming more pronounced. Without deliberate efforts to right-size data (i.e. delivering the right insights, at the right depth, at the right moment), organizations risk diminishing the return on their technology investments and disengaging the very teams they aim to empower.

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN INTENDED ADOPTION AND ACTUAL UTILIZATION

Many organizations enter digital transformation with high hopes but encounter roadblocks when translating intentions into real frontline adoption. During the IdeaShare, participants highlighted three major challenges that they face. These were difficulty using technology, unclear processes, and the failure to close the feedback loop.

The reality is that frontline workers often face tools that are hard to use, poorly integrated into their day-to-day work, or are constantly changing. This leads to low usage, inconsistent data capture, and ultimately, missed value. The biggest source of leaked value appears to be adoption driven, whether consciously taking shortcuts or deviating from the intended path, or unintentionally failing to comply with the intended adoption due to lack of skill or clarity. From an impact perspective, even when tools are available, they're not being used as intended, breaking the link between investment and impact.

The incidence of these breakdowns is widespread. Participants noted that when tools aren't used properly, it causes cascading problems: untrusted data, misleading metrics, increased time spent validating inputs, and poor customer or employee experiences. Whether it's the field technician making a phone call because they can't find what they need in the system, or the support agent second-guessing the quality of the information presented, the gap in adoption ripples through the entire value chain.

REPAIRING THE LINKS THAT MATTER

Bridging the gap between intended adoption and actual utilization requires more than just deploying the right tools. It demands deliberate choices about how those tools are designed, introduced, and embedded into everyday workflows. Service Council suggests that organizations focus on three essential areas for a more sustainable and impactful digital transformation.

DESIGN: INTENTIONAL SYNERGIES BETWEEN HUMAN AND TECHNOLOGY

To repair these broken links, organizations must begin with intentional design. Digital tools need to be not only functional but purpose-built for how the frontline actually works. This means designing systems that are intuitive, reducing unnecessary complexity, and ensuring that processes complement rather than compete with human workflows. Simplicity and clarity should be design principles, not afterthoughts.

ENABLE: EMPOWERING VS. OVERWHELMING THE FRONTLINE

The burden of change often falls too heavily on the frontline. As one participant noted, when technology changes too frequently or feels disconnected from reality, it breeds frustration and disengagement. Teams must be enabled, not overwhelmed. That requires better onboarding, continuous coaching, and more deliberate change management. Organizations that succeed in closing the adoption gap invest in regular reinforcement, visible leadership support, and structured communication around why the change matters.

ALIGN: PURPOSE AND REQUIREMENTS IN THE FRONTLINE'S DAY-TO-DAY

Finally, alignment matters. Frontline workers must see how the data they input and the tools they use connect to broader goals. Participants emphasized the need to make expectations clear and close the loop by demonstrating how their actions influence organizational outcomes. When the frontline feels disconnected from the strategy or unaware of how their data is used, adoption suffers.

MAKING STRATEGIC SENSE

Closing the adoption gap isn't just a frontline issue. It's a strategic one. Many digital initiatives falter not because the technology is flawed, but because organizations misjudge the nature of the challenge. From poor visibility into the problem to unreliable metrics and misaligned resources, systemic cracks can undermine even the most promising efforts. Service Council suggests organizations take a more grounded, consistent, and proactive approach to strategy, thus ensuring digital transformation is not only implemented, but truly absorbed and sustained.

MAKING STRATEGIC SENSE, CONT...

NO PROBLEM VS. TOO FAR REMOVED FROM THE PROBLEM

A common issue is that many leaders either underestimate the problem or view it from too far away. Some assume their teams are using tools correctly without validation, or are unaware about the time spent by middle management in cleaning up the data. Others recognize problems but fail to connect them to systemic issues. This disconnection leads to reactive strategies and course corrections instead of proactive planning.

MISLEADING AND STERILE PERFORMANCE METRICS

When adoption lags, the metrics that organizations rely on can become unreliable. If frontline data is incomplete or captured incorrectly, it skews performance dashboards and undermines decision-making. Participants noted the additional cost of needing to manually reconcile data or rely on assumptions rather than facts.

CONSISTENCY BETWEEN OBJECTIVES AND RESOURCES

There's often a misalignment between what leadership wants to achieve and the resources available to drive that change. Technology projects are funded, but the organizational change effort that ensures their success is often under-resourced. As one participant noted, transformation can only succeed if it's treated as a journey, not a project with a fixed end date.

EARNING AND TAKING THE VICTORY LAP

To sustain progress, organizations must track and celebrate wins, which may require a different set of performance indicators than those already in use. Recognizing early successes not only builds momentum but reinforces positive behavior. Adoption needs to be visible, measurable, and meaningful. Participants emphasized the importance of defining what adoption looks like. This includes not just deployment, but ongoing usage, value realization, and frontline buy-in.

LEARNING FROM THE INDUSTRY EXPERTS

To understand why digital tools succeed or stall, it's essential to look at the broader service landscape. Through a mix of live polling and open discussion, IdeaShare participants identified several common

LEARNING FROM THE INDUSTRY EXPERTS, CONT...

themes, revealing the pressures, gaps, and misalignments that often stand in the way of meaningful adoption. From trust in data accuracy to the urgency of real usage, these insights offer a candid snapshot of what leaders are navigating today.

TRUST: CONFIDENCE IN CAPTURED DATA'S ACCURACY

A major barrier to digital transformation is frontline trust in the data being collected and used. Many organizations report that their teams either question the accuracy of existing records or don't see the value in entering detailed information. Even when structured capture is in place, doubts about data reliability lead to poor reuse and duplicated effort.

IMPACT: CONSEQUENCES FROM UNRELIABLE DATA

The underlying obstacles to making the most of new technology often stem from several interconnected factors. Rapid tool rollouts can cause change fatigue, while misaligned technology and actual job needs breed skepticism. Complex systems and poor workflow integration further hinder usage. When collected data isn't visibly applied or metrics aren't meaningful to frontline staff, adoption falters.

SCOPE: TECHNOLOGY THAT FALLS SHORT

Tools that are global in scope often miss the mark at the local level. While leadership focuses on scalable systems, the real value often emerges when frontline teams personalize tools for their specific needs. When there's no room for local adaptation, usage drops or legacy workarounds reappear.

URGENCY: PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF THE ADOPTION PROBLEM

Across the board, leaders agreed: adoption is not optional. Whether consolidating systems, launching AI-based field tools, or enabling remote fixes, the need to drive true usage is urgent. Several leaders described adoption as foundational to delivering ROI, enabling self-service, and avoiding service delays.

SUCCESS STORIES

To bridge the gap between intended and actual digital adoption, participants shared practical strategies that have delivered real results:

SUCCESS STORIES, CONT...

- Some organizations embedded data entry into the process flow itself, creating "conversational" systems where input becomes a natural part of task completion.
- AI-driven service summaries reduced typing and improved documentation consistency.
- Homegrown tools that fit real-world needs showed high impact when paired with change management investment.
- Organizations that tied digital adoption directly to apprentice training and knowledge transfer found it became a competitive advantage for talent development.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

In addition to success strategies, leaders shared common pitfalls that can derail adoption efforts. These cautionary tales highlight the risks of misalignment, overpromising, and overlooking the frontline experience:

- Assuming adoption will happen without active engagement and support
- Overpromising on KPI improvements without grounding in frontline reality
- Treating system migrations as "lift and shift" rather than opportunities to fix and refine processes
- Collecting data that no longer serves current business needs
- Ignoring frontline feedback during tool selection and rollout

Leaders stressed the importance of simplifying data entry, showing how data is used, and being honest about what the tool can and cannot do.

LOOKING AHEAD

As organizations mature in their digital transformations, several key themes are emerging for the future. Success must be defined not just by deployment milestones, but by adoption metrics that reflect real usage and impact. Leaders are placing greater emphasis on how value is perceived at the frontline, not just within corporate headquarters. Data collection efforts are being reoriented to align with both current and future strategic goals, ensuring relevance and clarity. Effective partnerships with vendors increasingly depend on openness to adaptation and feedback, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Most importantly, organizations are prioritizing the frontline experience, ensuring that tools make work easier, faster, and more meaningful for the people who use them every day.

Ultimately, the IdeaShare made clear that closing the digital adoption gap is not a matter of deploying more tools, or even a more advanced version of the incumbent tools—it's about embedding them into the reality of frontline work. The organizations that succeed are those that treat adoption as an ongoing, cross-functional commitment, not a one-time event. They design with empathy, enable with intention, and align their strategic ambitions with the day-to-day demands of service delivery. Above all, they recognize that people—not just platforms—are the drivers of transformation. When the frontline is trusted, equipped, and engaged, digital initiatives move from promise to progress.