



THE ADOPTION GAP

WHY MOST TRANSFORMATIONS FAIL ON **PEOPLE**, NOT TECHNOLOGY

A BOYDNORTH WHITE PAPER

IMPLEMENTATION

ROI

THE 5A METHOD™

THE GAP BETWEEN
DEPLOYMENT
AND ADOPTION
IS WHERE
TRANSFORMATION
ROI LIVES OR DIES.



ASSESS



ARCHITECT



ALIGN



ACTIVATE



ANCHOR

The technology was never the problem.

Roughly seven in ten transformations fail to deliver what they promised. The pattern behind that number is consistent and counterintuitive: the initiatives that stall rarely fail on the technology. They fail on adoption, the human and process change that is supposed to turn a working system into a working organization.

The systems get installed. The training decks get delivered. Then usage drifts, workarounds return, and an expensive platform quietly settles into a fraction of its intended value. Leaders are left holding a capital expense that never converted into a capability. The gap between "deployed" and "adopted" is where the return on a transformation lives or dies, and it is the gap most programs are least equipped to close.

What this paper argues

- ◆ **Failure concentrates on the people side.** Decades of research, including McKinsey's transformation work and Prosci's benchmarking, point to the same root cause: change efforts collapse on sponsorship, behavior, and process, not on the underlying tools.
- ◆ **The cost is larger than the line item.** Stalled adoption shows up as unused licenses, productivity drag, rework, eroded leadership credibility, and a workforce that grows resistant to the next change.
- ◆ **Adoption is a discipline, not a phase.** It can be designed, sequenced, and measured. The firms that succeed treat it as the core of the work, not a communications afterthought bolted on near go-live.
- ◆ **The 5A Transformation Method makes it repeatable.** Assess, Architect, Align, Activate, Anchor: one system that redesigns the work, brings the people through it, and reinforces it until the new way is the only way, then transfers ownership so the change survives without us.

SECTION ONE · THE PROBLEM

The seventy percent *that never lands.*

When organizations launch large transformations, the academic and consulting record is sobering and remarkably stable: most of them fall short of their original objectives.

McKinsey has reported for years that roughly 70 percent of transformations fail to meet their goals, and its transformation leaders are direct about why. The failures are not mysterious. They cluster around aspiration set too low, conviction never built, and a change story the organization never bought into. In McKinsey's own analysis, culture and the human response to change, not the technical solution, is the single largest obstacle to digital transformation.

<p>~70%</p> <p>of transformations fail to meet their original objectives.</p> <p>MCKINSEY, TRANSFORMATION PRACTICE</p>	<p>7×</p> <p>more likely to meet objectives when the people side of change is managed well.</p> <p>PROSCI BENCHMARKING RESEARCH</p>	<p>79%</p> <p>meet objectives with highly effective executive sponsorship, versus 27% without it.</p> <p>PROSCI BENCHMARKING RESEARCH</p>
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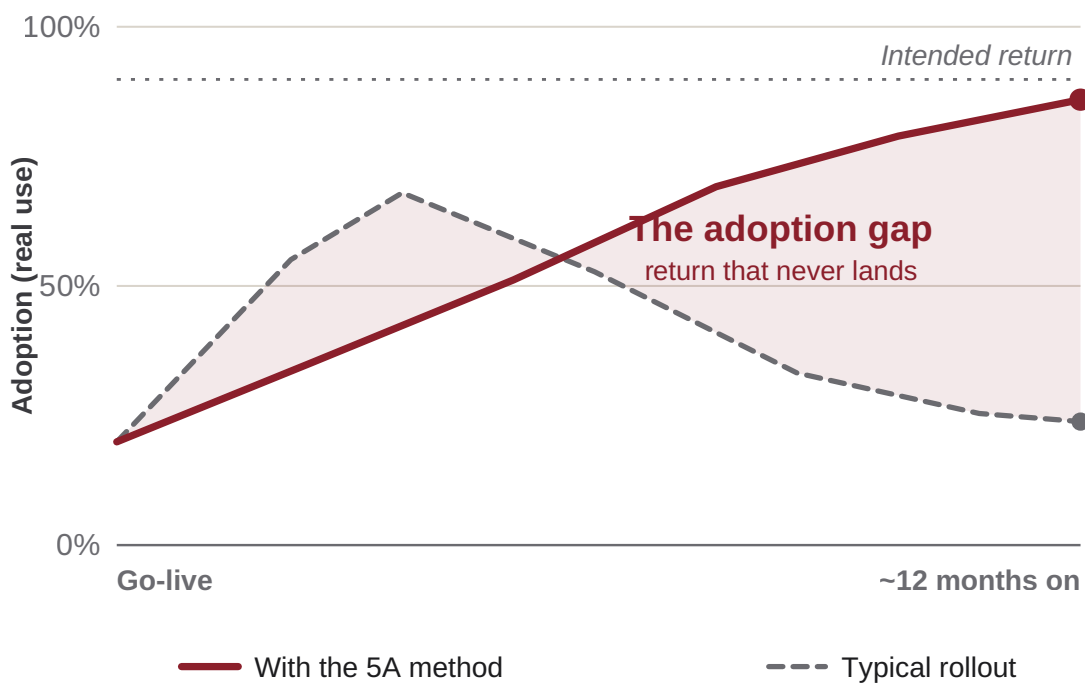


Figure 1. Illustrative. In a typical rollout, adoption spikes at go-live then fades as workarounds return; with the 5A method it climbs and holds. The shaded area between the curves is the adoption gap, the return that never lands.

Notice what these numbers describe. The variable that most strongly separates success from failure is not the platform chosen, the vendor, or the size of the budget. It is how well the organization manages the people who have to work differently the day after go-live. Prosci, whose research underpins much of the change management profession, finds that initiatives with excellent change management are about seven times more likely to meet their objectives than those with poor change management, and that active, visible executive sponsorship is the strongest single predictor of success.

The organization did not buy the wrong system. It under-managed the only thing that makes any system pay off: the people who use it.

This is the quiet crisis inside modern transformation. Leaders are sold technology, measured on deployment, and surprised by adoption. The result is a portfolio of initiatives that look finished on a status report and unfinished on the floor.

SECTION TWO · THE DIAGNOSIS

Where transformations *actually* break.

If technology rarely fails, what does? In our experience, stalled change traces back to a small number of recurring breakpoints, and they are all human and procedural.

1. Sponsorship goes quiet after kickoff.

Executives launch the initiative with real energy. They give the all-hands address, they fund the program, they stand on the stage. Then they return to their day jobs, and the organization quietly concludes that the change mattered for about a week.

This failure mode is so damaging precisely because it is invisible. Nothing dramatic happens. The sponsor has not changed their mind; they simply believe their job is done now that the program is underway. But behavior change does not respond to a one-time push. It responds to a leader who keeps showing up, models the new way, and removes the barriers their teams cannot remove themselves, long after the launch energy fades.

The research is blunt about the stakes: Prosci's benchmarking consistently identifies active, visible executive sponsorship as the single strongest predictor of whether a change meets its objectives. The tell is easy to find if you look. Ask when the sponsor was last visibly engaged with the change. If the honest answer is "at the launch," the initiative is already at risk.

2. The process was automated before it was redesigned.

A flawed workflow encoded into a new system does not get fixed by the system. It gets faster, more rigid, and far more expensive to change. The dysfunction now wears the authority of the platform, and the work-around people quietly relied on has been blocked without anything better put in its place.

This happens to capable teams because redesign is hard and the clock is loud. Mapping how the work should actually flow, renegotiating who owns what, and deciding what to stop doing entirely is slow and political. Configuring the new tool to match what already exists is fast and uncontroversial, so the path of least resistance wins, and the organization automates the past instead of architecting the future.

The distinction that prevents it is simple to name and rare to practice. Configuration asks how to set up the tool; redesign asks how the work should flow regardless of the tool. A program that only ever asks the first question inherits every assumption baked into the old way, including the broken ones.

3. Readiness is treated as training.

A few sessions near go-live get mistaken for change management. People attend, pass the quiz, nod in the right places, and then slide straight back to the old way the moment the pressure returns. Attendance is not adoption, and awareness is not ability.

Real readiness rests on two things training rarely touches: desire and ability. Desire is the genuine reason the change is worth it to the individual, not to the enterprise. Ability is the skill to perform the new way under real conditions, with support available at the moment someone gets stuck, not a recording of a session from three weeks earlier. When the why is never made personal and the support evaporates the day after launch, people are left to fail quietly.

The tell is a training plan with no answer to a plain question, asked role by role: what gets easier for this person, and who helps them when the new way breaks at four o'clock on a Tuesday?

4. Nobody owns reinforcement.

The program team disbands at launch, the consultants leave, and the cadence that would have embedded the new behavior never gets built. Adoption is a curve, not an event, and curves slide back. Old habits have years of muscle memory behind them; the new way has weeks.

Reinforcement fails the same way readiness fails, by being reduced to a reminder email. What actually holds a change is structure: the new way wired into the metrics that get reviewed, the management routines, and the systems themselves, so that doing it right is easier than reverting. If reverting is still the easy path, people revert, no matter how many times they are told not to.

Most efforts stop measuring the moment the system is technically live, which is the precise moment the real work of adoption begins. The tell is whether anyone owns the adoption metric in month six. Usually no one does, and the value leaks away with no one watching.

Adoption is not the last phase of a transformation. It is the discipline that has to run through all of them.

Each of these breakpoints is predictable. That is the good news. A failure mode that recurs this reliably can be designed against from the start, rather than discovered after the budget is spent.

SECTION THREE · THE COST

What the gap is *costing* you.

The price of stalled adoption is rarely a single visible number. It is distributed across the organization, which is exactly why it goes unaddressed for so long.

Stranded capital

Licenses, platforms, and implementation fees paid in full for a system the organization uses at a fraction of its capacity. The invoice cleared; the value did not.

Productivity drag

A prolonged dip as people fight the new way, maintain shadow processes, and route around the official system. The dip that should be temporary becomes the new baseline.

Rework and rescue

Emergency consulting, re-training, and re-launches to recover an initiative that was declared complete. The second attempt almost always costs more than doing it right once.

Eroded credibility

Each visible stall teaches the workforce that change does not stick and leadership does not follow through, raising the resistance the next initiative will face.

There is a fifth cost that is easy to miss and often the largest. When the real data lives in a private spreadsheet rather than the system, every decision built on the system's reporting rests on a partial picture. The price of a worse decision never appears as a software line; it shows up as a missed forecast, an overstaffed shift, or an inventory call that went the wrong way.

COST	WHERE IT HIDES	HOW TO SIZE IT
Stranded capital	Renewed licenses and premium tiers for capability that is never switched on.	Paid capacity minus actually-used capacity, per system, per year.
Productivity drag	Shadow spreadsheets and duplicate processes maintained beside the official system.	Hours per week on workarounds, across affected roles, costed out.
Decisions on bad data	Reports that do not match the reality being tracked off to the side.	Frequency and stakes of decisions made on incomplete system data.
Rework and rescue	Re-training, re-launches, and emergency consulting after a "complete" rollout.	Total spend on the second attempt versus the original budget.
Eroded credibility	The premium every future change pays in resistance and slower adoption.	Adoption speed and attrition trend across successive initiatives.

That last cost compounds. An organization that has watched two or three transformations fizzle does not arrive at the next one neutral. It arrives skeptical, and skepticism is the most expensive starting condition there is. The work of the fourth transformation now includes undoing the scar tissue of the first three.

Quantifying this is the first thing we do with a client, because the cost of the status quo is almost always larger than the cost of fixing it, and leaders cannot prioritize a problem they have not sized.

SECTION FOUR · THE METHOD

The 5A Transformation Method™

One repeatable system underneath every engagement. It works on any organization moving through change, because the thing that makes transformation stick is always the same: redesign the work, bring the people through it, and reinforce it until the new way is the only way.

The integrating principle, and the actual differentiator, is this. Most providers fix either the process or the people. A process shop redesigns the workflow and walks. A change coach manages feelings but cannot rebuild operations. Durable transformation requires both, plus someone who stays until the new way is the only way and then transfers ownership so it survives their exit.



Assess. Establish the true picture and the value case.

"How does the work really flow, where is adoption breaking, and what is the status quo costing us?"

See how the organization actually runs, not how the org chart says it runs. Locate the friction, map the real process, and quantify the cost of the current state through process mapping, data review, and candid stakeholder interviews.

The output is not a list of complaints; it is a quantified value case. A vague sense that things are inefficient does not get funded or prioritized, but a credible number, what the status quo costs in time, money, and risk, turns a feeling into a decision leadership can act on. It is the step most teams rush past, and the one that makes everything after it possible. Diagnosis before prescription.

DELIVERABLE: current-state diagnostic · quantified value case · prioritized roadmap.

A

Architect. Design the target operating model.

"What should the work look like, and in what order do we change it?"

Redesign the processes and define the future state, sequenced by return rather than by what is loudest. Set roles, decision rights, and the order of moves so that the highest-value changes land first and build momentum for the rest.

The hardest part is rarely adding better steps; it is removing the ones that no longer earn their place. Every organization carries process barnacles, approvals and handoffs that survive long after the risk they guarded against is gone. Redesign is the rare chance to question them, and doing it before any technology is configured ensures the system encodes the future state rather than enshrining the past one.

DELIVERABLE: target operating model · sequenced change plan · success metrics tied to objectives.

A

Align. Build sponsorship and human readiness.

"Are the leaders visibly behind this, and are the people ready and willing?"

Build the leadership sponsorship and the individual readiness that most transformations skip and then die on. This is the highest-leverage phase, the one the research consistently identifies as the strongest predictor of success, and the one most programs treat as a communications task instead of the core of the work.

In practice this means a sponsor coalition on a standing cadence rather than a single launch speech, and a readiness effort that translates the why down to each affected role. It is the work that has to happen before the change goes live, not alongside it as an afterthought. Get it right and the change has somewhere to land; skip it and activation becomes a fight the program was never set up to win.

DELIVERABLE: sponsor coalition and cadence · readiness plan · resistance map.

A**Activate. Install the change under real conditions.**

"Is the new way working where the work actually happens?"

Put the new processes and systems into live operation and manage resistance as it surfaces, in real time, rather than pretending it will not. Activation is where plans meet reality, and where a method that anticipated the human response holds while one that did not unravels.

Resistance here is information, not an obstacle. Sometimes the new process has a genuine flaw the people closest to the work found first, and the fix is to change it, fast and visibly. Sometimes it is fear that needs cover, or a why that was never delivered. Each points to a different response, and you can only tell them apart by being present while the change is happening, not by managing it from a status report.

DELIVERABLE: live deployment support · resistance management · early adoption metrics.

A**Anchor. Reinforce, measure, and transfer.**

"Will this survive after we leave?"

Embed the cadence and measure the result against the baseline established in Assess, so the change is demonstrably real and not merely declared. Then transfer the capability to the client's own team, because a transformation that depends on the advisor to stay is not finished. The goal is a change that survives without us.

The final move is to make ourselves unnecessary. A change that depends on the advisor, the project lead, or one passionate champion to keep it alive is a dependency, not a capability. Anchor spreads ownership across enough people and structures that no single departure can undo it, and proves the result against the baseline so the next leader cannot quietly walk it back.

DELIVERABLE: reinforcement cadence · measured outcomes versus baseline · capability transferred in-house.

SECTION FIVE · IN PRACTICE

What this looks like *applied.*

The method is easier to trust when you can see it run end to end. The scenario below is illustrative, a composite drawn from the recurring pattern rather than any single client, and the figures are directional rather than promised. The sequence, however, is exactly how the work unfolds.

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENARIO

A mid-sized manufacturer goes live on a new planning system. The integrator hits every milestone, training is delivered, and the program is declared a success. Six months later, the planners are back on the spreadsheets they trust, the system holds a fraction of the real data, and on-time performance has not moved. On paper the transformation is complete. On the floor it never started.

ASSESS

Mapping the real flow reveals three breaks at once. The planning process was automated as-is rather than redesigned, the executive sponsor went quiet after kickoff, and the planners were trained on the system but never shown why it helped them. The status quo, costed honestly across duplicated effort and decisions made on partial data, turns out to be quietly expensive, and far larger than the cost of fixing it.

ARCHITECT

The planning process is redesigned before anything is reconfigured. The lowest-value approvals are removed and the highest-return changes are sequenced first, so a visible win lands within weeks rather than at the end.

ALIGN

The sponsor returns to a standing cadence rather than a one-time speech, and the case for the change is translated into what each planner actually gains: fewer late-night reworks, fewer surprises, a shift they can trust.

ACTIVATE

The redesigned process goes live with support on the floor. When planners surface a genuine flaw, it is fixed within days, which teaches the team that raising problems is worth it and keeps the feedback channel open.

ANCHOR

Adoption is tracked against the baseline set in Assess, the new way is wired into the weekly operating review, and an internal owner is trained to hold it. When the engagement ends, the change does not leave with it.

No two situations are identical, and the specific numbers will always be the client's own. What does not change is the order of operations, and the fact that the value is created in the four phases after Assess, not in the software that was already bought.

SECTION SIX · THE DIFFERENCE

Why this works when *others stall*.

The market is full of people who will fix one half of a transformation. The half they leave behind is the half that decides whether it sticks.

THE USUAL APPROACH

- Redesigns the process or manages the people, rarely both.
- Treats adoption as a communications workstream near go-live.
- Measures success at deployment, not at sustained usage.
- Leaves at launch, taking the method with them.
- Bespoke and expensive, hard to repeat or transfer.

THE 5A APPROACH

- Owns the full arc, from operating model to adoption to measured result.
- Builds sponsorship and readiness as the core of the work, from the start.
- Measures against a baseline, after the system is live.
- Transfers the capability so the change survives the exit.
- One repeatable method, sized to the organization and the budget.

The 5A Method is deliberately industry-agnostic under the hood. The engine that makes change stick does not change between a manufacturer rolling out an ERP, a service group standardizing operations across sites, or a portfolio company integrating after an acquisition. What changes is the front door, the specific situation we are pointed at. The method travels; the application is precise.

That combination, a universal engine applied with narrow precision, is what lets a focused firm deliver what large consultancies sell at many times the cost: a standardized methodology, run by an operator who has actually led change under pressure, transferred to your team so you are not dependent on us to keep it.

BEGIN

Find the gap before *it finds you.*

If a transformation is stalling, or one is about to start, the most expensive thing you can do is guess at where the adoption risk sits. The fastest way to find out what it is costing, and what to do about it, is a structured assessment.

A QUICK SELF-CHECK

Five signs you have an adoption gap.

- ✓ **The curve slid and no one is watching.** Usage spiked at go-live, then drifted, and today no one owns the adoption metric.

- ✓ **The real work runs beside the system.** The numbers people actually trust live in spreadsheets and workarounds, not the platform you paid for.

- ✓ **The sponsor went quiet.** Your executive sponsor has not been visibly engaged with the change since the kickoff.

- ✓ **You cannot state the return.** There is no agreed number for what the system was meant to deliver, or whether it has.

- ✓ **People were trained but never sold.** The workforce learned the system without ever being given a reason it makes their own job better.

If two or more of these sound familiar, the gap is already costing you, and it is recoverable. The asset is bought; the return is simply stranded.

TRANSFORMATION ROI ASSESSMENT

Start with Assess.

A fixed-fee assessment that maps how the work really flows, locates where adoption is breaking, quantifies what the status quo is costing, and hands you a prioritized roadmap. It stands on its own, and it is the natural front door to the full 5A engagement.

[Start a conversation](#)

FIXED-FEE ROI ASSESSMENT

ONE REPEATABLE METHOD

MEASURED OUTCOMES

About BoydNorth

BoydNorth is an independent transformation advisory firm. We close the adoption gap that stalls most digital and operational change, turning stalled initiatives into adopted, measured results through the 5A Transformation Method.

The practice is led by a retired United States Army Command Sergeant Major whose career was built on leading large, complex organizations through high-stakes change, and who brings formal change-management and executive-leadership training to the private-sector transformation problem. The promise is simple: own the full arc from operating model to adoption to measured result, and transfer it to your team so it survives our exit.

RETIRED ARMY COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR

PROSCI CERTIFIED

CORNELL EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

ENTERPRISE TRANSFORMATION

SOURCES

1. McKinsey & Company, Transformation Practice. Commentary on transformation failure rates and root causes, including "Why do most transformations fail?" and "Common pitfalls in transformations."
2. Prosci. Best Practices in Change Management benchmarking research and the correlation between change management effectiveness, executive sponsorship, and meeting project objectives.
3. Boston Consulting Group and Gartner. Corroborating estimates on digital transformation success and failure rates.

Figures are drawn from publicly reported research and are cited to indicate direction and magnitude rather than precise, universal measures; definitions of "failure" and "success" vary across studies.

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