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Perspective

BEYOND THE REBASELINE

Digital Transformation Restarts Fail When Delivery Resumes Before the Decisions Are Reset

What 2021 revealed from inside the programme: a new plan cannot rescue an unchanged system of authority

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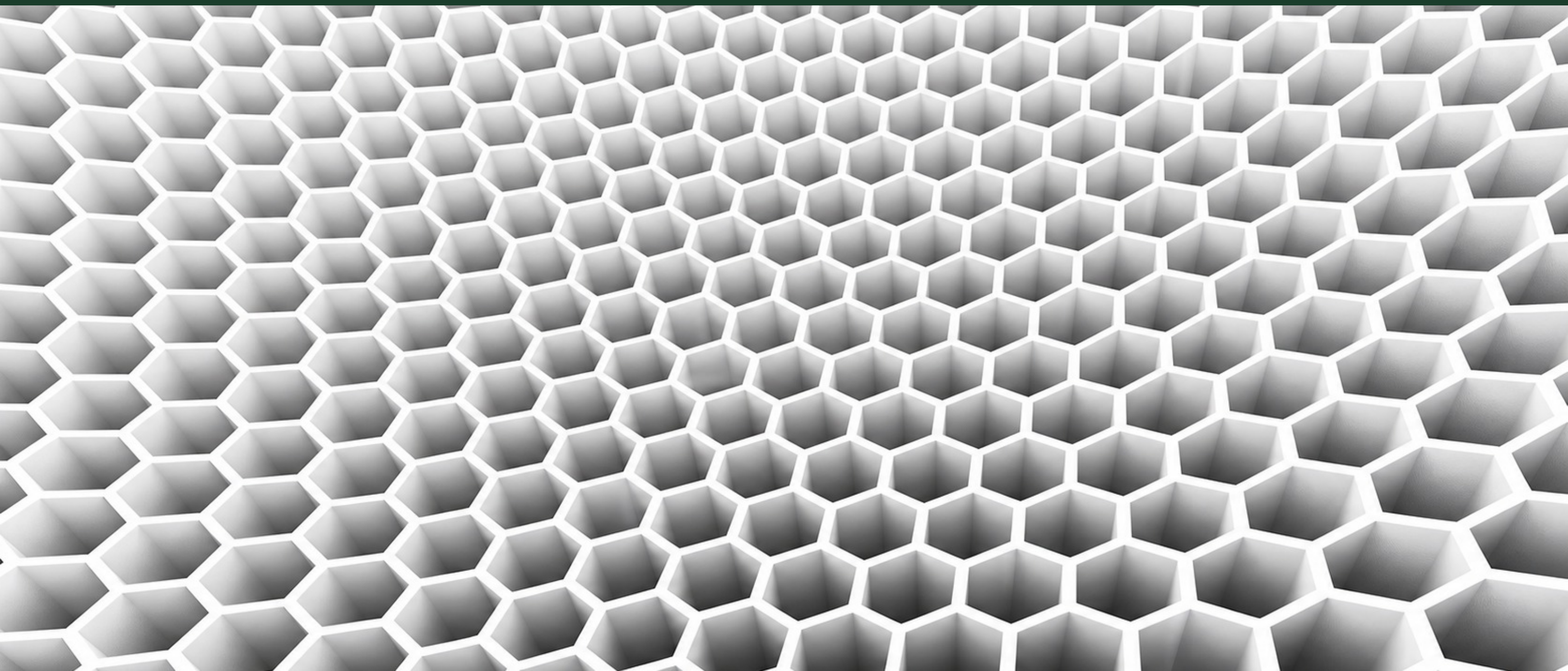

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What 2021 revealed from inside the programme: a new plan cannot rescue an unchanged system of authority

On the first Monday of the restart, the delivery team is shown a revised roadmap containing 186 backlog items, three releases and a fourteen-week mobilisation window. By Friday, the team has identified twenty-three decisions that the roadmap assumes have already been made.

They have not.

The operating model still has two possible owners. The data workstream and the customer workstream use different definitions of an active customer. The supplier has priced a lift-and-shift of existing process, while the benefits case depends on process redesign. The steering group meets monthly. Its first agenda is already full.

The programme is described as restarted because activity has resumed. From the delivery side, nothing important has restarted at all.

This is the flaw beneath many digital transformation relaunches in 2021. Organisations have refreshed plans, adopted remote and hybrid working routines, reactivated suppliers and restated digital ambition. But they have not reset the decisions, authorities and assumptions on which delivery depends. They have treated the interruption as lost time rather than new evidence.

A restart that preserves the old decision system is only a rebaseline with better language.

Delivery does not inherit strategy; it inherits ambiguity

Textbook programme management presents a reassuring sequence. Strategy defines the outcome. The business case translates that outcome into investment. Governance assigns accountability. Delivery then executes within agreed tolerances.

The delivery experience is usually less orderly. Strategy arrives as several compatible-sounding ambitions: improve customer experience, reduce cost, modernise technology and protect service continuity. The contradictions between them are not resolved. They are passed into the programme as scope.

That transfer is where institutional amnesia becomes operational.

Before the disruption, a programme may already have learned that its decision rights were unclear, its workstreams were too independent and its benefits lacked operational owners. During 2020 and 2021, many organisations also learned that progress accelerated when purpose narrowed and authority moved closer to the work. Yet when the wider portfolio resumed, those lessons were often recorded as exceptional crisis behaviour. The original governance was restored because it was familiar.

Delivery teams then received a paradox: work faster in a changed world, but seek permission through the unchanged system.

The predictable response is not open refusal. It is local interpretation. Each workstream makes the decision it needs in order to maintain progress. Those choices are individually sensible and collectively incompatible. The contradiction appears later at integration, by which time it is labelled a technical issue, a supplier issue or poor change control.

It began as a failure to decide.

The restart meeting hides the wrong conversation

A typical restart meeting asks whether the plan is achievable, whether resources are available and whether the business case remains valid. These are reasonable questions. They are also downstream questions.

The earlier questions are more uncomfortable:

- Which assumptions did the interruption disprove?
- Which outcomes now matter more, and which matter less?
- Which decisions were repeatedly escalated because no forum had both the context and the authority to settle them?

- Which controls protected value, and which merely documented delay?
- Which benefits still have an operational owner willing to change the business?
- Where did individual leaders compensate for a weak operating model?

Without answers, the revised plan becomes an agreement to rediscover the same problems at new dates.

This matters particularly in late 2021. Customer behaviour has moved towards digital channels. Teams have demonstrated that substantial work can be delivered without sharing an office. Cloud services and collaboration tools have reduced some constraints while making cross-team coordination more important, not less. Employees are questioning old working patterns. Suppliers are managing stretched skills and competing priorities.

These conditions do not simply increase the need for digital transformation. They change the environment in which the programme must work. A plan designed around stable attendance, predictable capacity, sequential hand-offs and occasional business engagement cannot be repaired by moving its milestones.

A delivery-side example

Consider a composite service transformation with five workstreams and a £24 million investment. The programme restarts after nine months of reduced activity. Its first release is presented as a digital version of an existing application process, intended to reduce handling time by 30 per cent.

The channel team designs a simpler form. The technology team configures the existing workflow. Operations plans staffing against the promised reduction. Data specialists discover that one-third of applications require information held in a separate system, but the integration is outside the supplier’s current scope.

No single decision is extraordinary. The problem is the sequence.

The handling-time benefit requires fewer exceptions. Fewer exceptions require the additional data. The additional data requires integration funding and a security decision. The security decision requires an accountable risk owner. None of that appears as a single dependency in the plan because each element sits in a different workstream.

For eight weeks, all five workstreams report green. At week nine, the programme faces a choice: delay the release, launch with manual reconciliation, or reduce the benefit claim. The board sees three bad options. The delivery team sees one decision that should have been made before the roadmap was approved.

This is not a failure of effort or method. It is the consequence of governing activity separately from outcome.

The strongest defence of resumption

There is a serious argument for restarting with the machinery already in place. Organisations need momentum. Teams have endured uncertainty and fatigue. Reopening fundamental questions can become an excuse for endless redesign. Established governance provides continuity, preserves financial control and avoids turning every programme into an experiment. In many cases, the methods were not the problem; inconsistent execution was.

That argument is right about one danger. A restart can become a strategy retreat in which leaders revisit every principle and deliver nothing. Programmes do need boundaries, commitments and cadence.

But continuity is valuable only when the underlying assumptions remain valid. Preserving a governance structure that repeatedly failed to resolve cross-workstream choices is not discipline. It is repetition. Asking delivery to execute more consistently cannot repair ambiguity created above it.

The alternative is not to redesign everything. It is to reset the few decisions that make coherent delivery possible.

> *The purpose of a restart is not to recover activity. It is to recover a credible chain from outcome to authority to delivery.*

Reset the decisions before the dates

A credible restart begins with a short, explicit decision reset. Before accepting the new baseline, the sponsor, operational owners, delivery leads and key suppliers should settle four things.

1. The outcome hierarchy. When cost, speed, customer experience and risk conflict, which outcome governs the trade-off?
2. The integration decisions. Which choices cut across workstreams, and who has authority to make them with incomplete information?

3. The benefit ownership. Which operational leader will change process, roles or measures so the technology can produce the claimed value?
4. The evidence of progress. What will show that an end-to-end capability works, rather than that separate teams have completed activity?

These decisions should be few enough to remember and concrete enough to test. If the programme cannot express them clearly, it is not ready to rebaseline.

This changes the delivery conversation. A dependency is no longer merely an arrow between plans; it becomes a choice with an owner and a consequence. A supplier issue is not pushed into contract administration when it affects the end-to-end outcome. A benefit is not left as a promise on the cover page while design moves elsewhere. The board receives decisions while they are still decisions, not after they have become delays.

What 2021 should leave behind

The past two years have produced no shortage of lessons. The greater risk is that organisations celebrate adaptability without changing the conditions that made adaptation exceptional.

From the delivery side, institutional memory is visible in small things: whether the same unresolved assumption returns under a new project name; whether the same issue travels through three forums; whether the plan rewards local completion while integration waits; whether leaders praise speed but keep authority distant from the work.

Digital transformation programmes do not repeat their flaws because nobody noticed them. They repeat them because noticing was mistaken for learning.

Learning is visible only when the next programme is governed differently.

That is the longer view of the restart. The interruption did not merely delay transformation. It exposed which decisions the programme had avoided, which boundaries prevented coherence and which controls had become substitutes for judgement. If those findings do not change the restart, the organisation has preserved the record of experience while discarding its meaning.

A new roadmap may restore confidence for a quarter. Only a new decision system can restore the programme's ability to deliver.