

BEYOND THE SPRINT

The Bill for Crisis-Speed Delivery

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Hidden Cost of Crisis-Mode Delivery

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“The organisations that moved fastest during the crisis are discovering that speed without discipline is not transformation — it is borrowing against the future at a rate they are only now beginning to understand.”

The Illusion of Speed

The narrative of the pandemic response is, by now, well rehearsed: organisations that had spent years deliberating over digital initiatives suddenly delivered them in weeks. Customer-facing platforms launched in days. Remote working infrastructure scaled overnight. The impossible became routine.

What is less often acknowledged is what was sacrificed to make that speed possible — and how little of that sacrifice was deliberate.

In my experience, the vast majority of pandemic-era delivery was not accelerated transformation. It was accelerated accumulation of technical debt, dressed in the language of agility. The shortcuts taken were not tactical trade-offs made with clear eyes and a plan to remediate. They were panic responses that became permanent fixtures, and the bill is now arriving.

What We Actually Built

The pattern I have observed across sectors is remarkably consistent. Organisations stood up new digital capabilities at pace, but they did so by bypassing architecture review, skipping integration testing, hard-coding configurations that should have been parameterised, and deploying on infrastructure that was never designed for production loads. Security assessments were deferred. Documentation was abandoned. The principle was: get it live, fix it later.

The problem is that later has a way of never arriving. Once a system is in production and users depend on it, the political cost of taking it offline to remediate becomes prohibitive. The quick fix becomes the architecture. The workaround becomes the standard. And the debt compounds silently, accruing interest in the form of fragility, security exposure, and mounting maintenance cost.

- Systems built without proper API contracts now resist integration with anything else

- Data pipelines assembled from spreadsheets and manual extracts have become load-bearing infrastructure
- Security configurations that were "temporary" eighteen months ago remain unchanged
- Platform choices made under crisis pressure locked organisations into vendor dependencies they did not evaluate

The Strategic Dimension

What makes this more than a technology problem is that the debt is not confined to the technology layer. It has become strategic debt.

Consider what happens when an organisation's core digital capabilities are built on unstable foundations. Every new initiative that depends on those capabilities inherits their fragility. The cost of change rises. The speed of delivery — the very thing the pandemic sprint was supposed to prove — begins to degrade. And the organisation finds itself in the worst of both worlds: it has the complexity of a digitally transformed enterprise without the resilience or adaptability that transformation was supposed to deliver.

Technical debt becomes strategic debt the moment it constrains future choices. When the foundations are fragile, every new initiative inherits that fragility — and the cost of change compounds faster than the cost of standing still.

In my experience, the organisations now struggling most are not those that failed to digitise during the pandemic. They are those that digitised fastest, with the least discipline, and have since treated the results as permanent infrastructure rather than provisional capability that needed to be rebuilt properly.

The Governance Gap

The deeper issue is one of governance. Most organisations have no mechanism for surfacing technical debt as a strategic risk. It lives in the technology function, discussed in terms that the board does not engage with — code quality, refactoring backlogs, architectural runway. It does not appear on the enterprise risk register. It does not feature in portfolio prioritisation. It is, in the language of programme management, an unfunded liability.

This is not an accident. It reflects a persistent failure to connect technology decisions to business outcomes in a way that makes the trade-offs visible. When a programme board approves a delivery timeline that can only be met by cutting architectural corners, it is making a strategic decision — but it rarely recognises itself as doing so. The debt is incurred invisibly, and it remains invisible until something breaks.

The Reckoning That Was Always Coming

The reckoning was always coming because debt, by its nature, must eventually be serviced. The question was never whether organisations would have to address what they had built in crisis mode, but when — and whether they would do so proactively or be forced into it by failure.

What I observe now, late in 2021, is that the forcing function is beginning to bite. Organisations are attempting to build on pandemic-era foundations and finding them inadequate. Integration programmes stall because the systems they need to connect were never designed to interoperate. Security incidents expose vulnerabilities that were known but never remediated. Performance degrades under loads that the original architecture was never stress-tested for.

The pattern that recurs is one of surprise — as though the fragility were unexpected rather than an entirely predictable consequence of the choices made eighteen months ago. This surprise is itself a symptom of the governance gap: if the debt had been visible, the reckoning would not come as a shock.

What a Serious Response Looks Like

A serious response begins with visibility. Organisations need to surface technical debt as a portfolio-level concern, not a technology housekeeping issue. This means quantifying the debt in terms the business understands — not lines of code or refactoring hours, but constrained capacity, elevated risk, and reduced speed to market. It means making debt remediation a first-class portfolio investment, competing for funding on equal terms with new capability delivery. And it means building debt assessment into programme governance, so that every delivery decision that incurs new debt does so explicitly, with a remediation plan and a timeline.

None of this is technically difficult. It is politically difficult, because it requires organisations to acknowledge that the pandemic response, for all its heroism, left them with a substantial liability — and that addressing it will consume resources that leaders would prefer to direct elsewhere.

The Uncomfortable Truth

The uncomfortable truth is that much of what was celebrated as digital transformation during the pandemic was nothing of the sort. It was crisis delivery — necessary, often impressive, but fundamentally different from the disciplined, architecture-led, strategically governed transformation that builds lasting capability.

Recognising this distinction is not a criticism of what was achieved. It is a prerequisite for what needs to happen next. The pandemic proved that organisations can move at speed when survival demands it. The question now is whether they can summon the same urgency for the less dramatic but equally critical work of turning crisis infrastructure into sustainable capability.

The organisations that moved fastest during the crisis are discovering that speed without discipline is not transformation — it is borrowing against the future at a rate they are only now beginning to understand. The reckoning was always coming. The only variable is whether organisations meet it with the same decisiveness they showed when the crisis first arrived.