



BEYOND THE SHOPPING LIST

Your Digital Strategy Is a Shopping List

How the language of transformation quietly became a catalogue of things to buy

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A shopping list in a strategy's clothes

A digital strategy lands on the table. It is handsomely produced, forty slides deep, and by the third page a pattern has set in. Cloud. Mobile. A data lake. A social listening capability. Collaboration tools. An analytics platform. Each item comes with a rationale, a rough cost, and an implementation window. The document is thorough, it is expensive, and it is not a strategy. It is a shopping list wearing a strategy's clothes.

This has become the characteristic document of our moment. Somewhere in the last two or three years, going digital quietly turned into a matter of acquisition — a set of things to buy rather than a set of choices to make. The prevailing vocabulary encourages it. Social, mobile, analytics and cloud arrive pre-bundled as a ready-made agenda, and the agenda is a catalogue. Ask a great many organisations today what their digital strategy actually is, and they will, in effect, read you their procurement plan.

The confusion is understandable, because from a distance the two documents look alike. A strategy answers a small number of genuinely hard questions. Where will we compete, and where will we deliberately not? Which customers, and to do what for them that they value and that a rival cannot easily copy? What will we stop doing to pay for the answer? A technology list answers a different and far easier question: what shall we buy? The second masquerades as the first because a list of platforms is legible to a finance committee, it can be costed and set out on a plan, and it has the reassuring appearance of action. The hard questions have no line item.

Why the list always wins

There is a quiet engine driving the substitution, and it is worth naming plainly. Every capability on the list has an owner and, usually, a supplier — someone whose budget, role or margin depends on it being bought. The genuinely strategic questions have no such champion. Nobody's number depends on the organisation choosing to serve fewer customers better, or to walk away from a product line that no longer earns its place. So the document steadily fills with the things that have advocates and empties of the things that require judgement. Procurement, in the end, is what strategy decays into when no one is willing to make the choice.

You can recognise the shopping-list strategy without reading a word of the detail:

- Every noun in it is a technology, not a customer, a market, or an outcome.
- Success is measured in deployments — systems live, apps shipped, users migrated — rather than in anything a customer or colleague now does differently.
- The roadmap is a schedule of installations, and the benefits sit in a column headed expected.
- Strip out the product names and nothing about the organisation's actual position would have changed.

I have watched this reach its predictable ending more than once. An organisation resolves to become data-driven, and the strategy duly specifies a data platform. Eighteen months and a seven-figure programme later, the platform runs beautifully; the dashboards are real and the data is clean. And almost nothing is decided differently than before. The weekly trading meeting reaches for the same three numbers it always did, the same reports travel the same route to the same desks, and the platform's most-used feature turns out to be the button that exports to a spreadsheet. The technology was delivered immaculately. The strategy — the part about changing how decisions actually got made — was never written, because everyone assumed it would arrive in the box.

The moment every organisation can buy the same platform, owning it stops being a strategy. What you do with it — for whom, and to what end no rival can easily copy — is the only part that was ever yours to decide.

The test that costs nothing

The obvious objection deserves a fair hearing. Surely, in a period of upheaval like this one, you must buy the tools simply to stay in the game? You must — and there is a real, compounding cost to letting your infrastructure fall a generation behind. But that is an argument for capability, not a licence to confuse capability with strategy. Sometimes the honest move genuinely is to build the platform before you know precisely what you will do with it; foundations are laid that way. The failure is not putting the platform first. The failure is calling the platform the strategy, and then being surprised when a fully stocked toolshed does not, on its own, decide where to compete.

There is a simple test that separates the two, and it costs nothing to apply. For every technology named in the strategy, ask: what does this let a specific customer, or a specific colleague, do that they cannot do today — and why does that matter more to us than to the competitor who can buy exactly the same thing next quarter? A real strategy has an answer, and the answer is about advantage, not equipment. The shopping list falls silent.

So keep the nouns of your strategy human: a customer, an outcome, a source of advantage that is genuinely yours — and let the technology be the verb that serves it. In a market where every supplier now has digital painted on the door, that discipline is unglamorous and entirely within reach. Buy plenty. Just don't mistake the receipt for a

plan.