

Stop Calling It **Digital Transformation** You're Just Catching Up

Cross-Sector Thinking Series

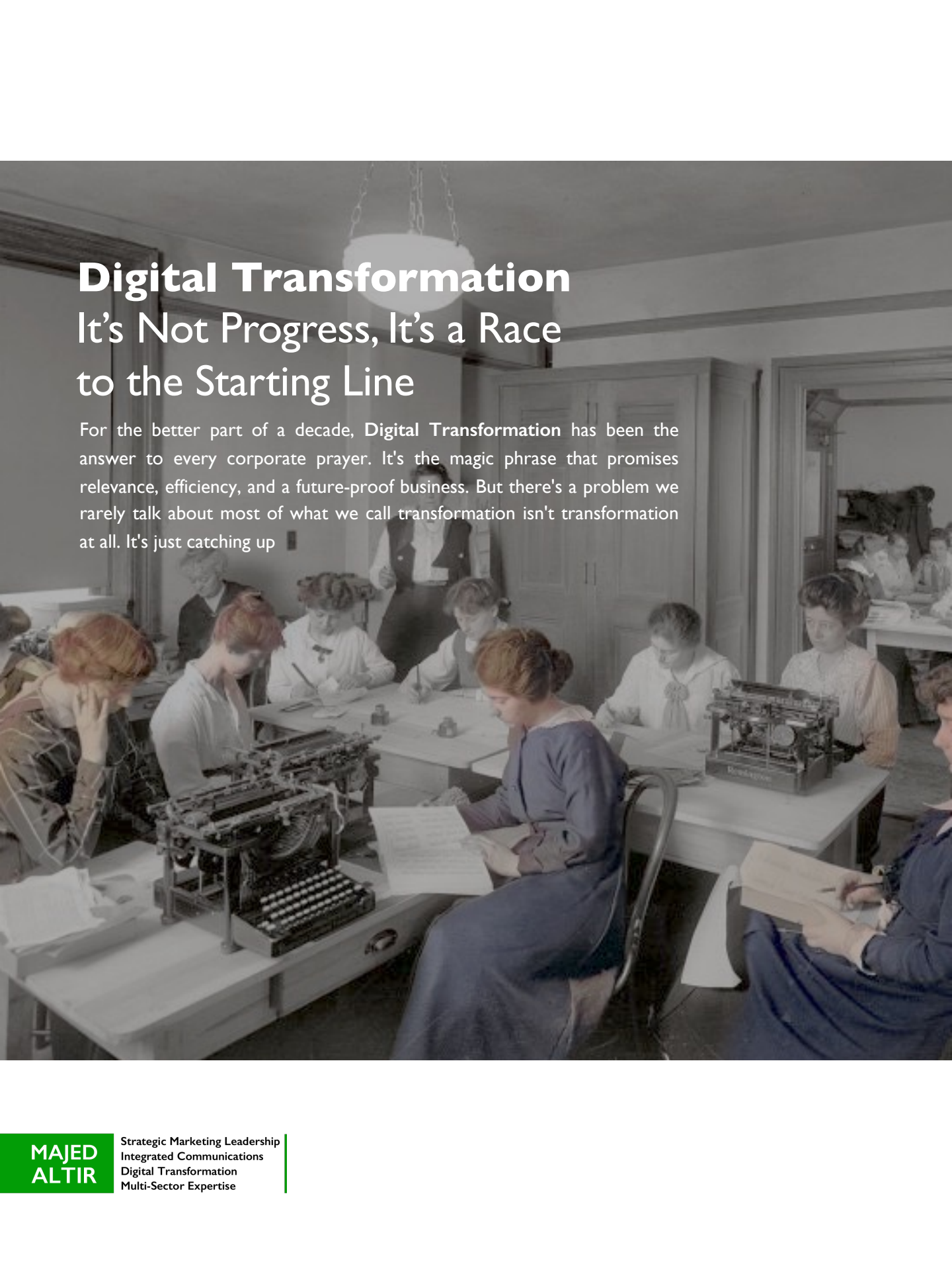
By **Majed Altir**

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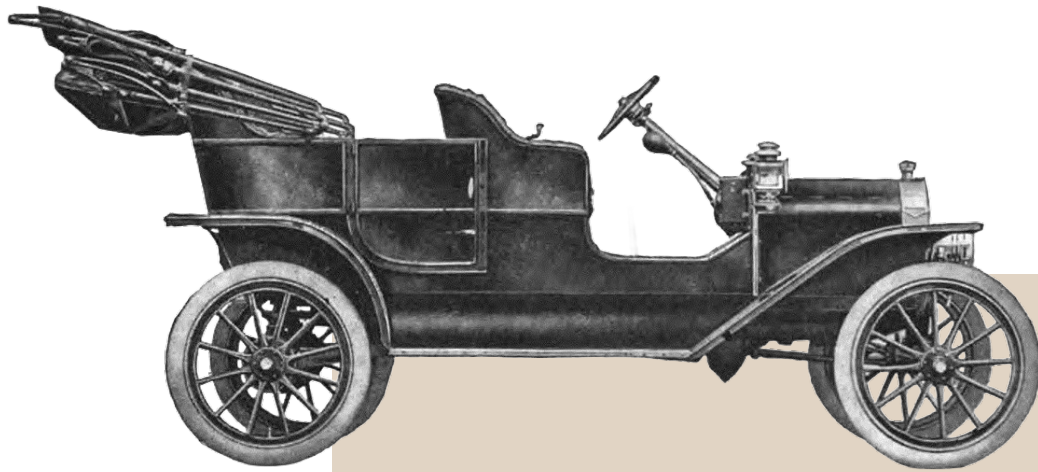
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Digital Transformation

It's Not Progress, It's a Race to the Starting Line

For the better part of a decade, **Digital Transformation** has been the answer to every corporate prayer. It's the magic phrase that promises relevance, efficiency, and a future-proof business. But there's a problem we rarely talk about most of what we call transformation isn't transformation at all. It's just catching up



The Ten-Millionth



The 10,000,000th Ford car left the Highland Park factories of the Ford Motor Company June 4. This is a production achievement unapproached in automotive history. Tremendous volume has been the outgrowth of dependable, convenient, economical service.

Ford Motor Company
Detroit, Michigan

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F. O. B. Detroit
Demountable Rims
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Ford Newspaper 73
800 lines—Week of June 8, 1924

Think about it.

When a business in the 1920s finally replaced its horse and carriage with a Ford Model T, was that a transformation? No. It was survival. It was adopting the new standard to simply stay in the race. Launching a new app, migrating to the cloud, or adopting a CRM today is no different. These are not acts of revolutionary genius; they are the cost of entry in the modern economy. They are the starting line, not the finish line

Confusing these two, catching up versus truly transforming, is more than just a semantic error. It's a costly mistake that burns out our best people and creates a dangerous illusion of progress

The Busywork Trap

Why Your Teams Are Exhausted

We've fallen into a trap of celebrating activity instead of achievement. We launch a new platform and celebrate, but we never stop to ask, "Did this actually make a customer's life better?" We are simply digitizing the same old broken processes and calling it innovation

This is where the human cost becomes painfully clear. I've watched brilliant, passionate people become exhausted and cynical. Why? Because they are trapped in the "Transformation Theatre." They are asked to lead a "transformation," but are given no real power to challenge the outdated thinking that holds the company back. They are measured on whether the project launched on time, not on whether it created any real value

This isn't just bad for morale; it's bad for business. Your most talented people don't leave because the work is hard. They leave because the work feels meaningless. They see the gap between the buzzwords and the reality, and they get tired of playing a part in the show





So, what's the difference between **catching up** and **truly evolving**?

When you're just **catching up**, your focus is on implementing new tools. Your goal is to digitize the old way of doing things. You measure success by whether the project launched on time and on budget. Your team keeps asking: "How can we do the same things faster?"

When you're truly **evolving**, your focus shifts to solving real customer problems. Your goal becomes inventing new, better ways of doing things. You measure success by real impact on customer or employee experience. Your team starts asking: "Are we still doing the right things?"

The difference is profound. One is about speed. The other is about direction

A Lesson from Saudi Vision 2030 It's About Purpose Not Platforms

Real transformation is never about the technology itself. The tool is not the goal. The real work is changing the culture and the purpose that the tool is meant to serve. Catching up is about changing your tools. Transformation is about changing your purpose

Real transformation is never about the technology itself. It's about fundamentally changing the relationship between an organization and the people it serves. I saw this firsthand while working on initiatives aligned with Saudi Vision 2030, where the challenge wasn't just to modernize government services, but to reimagine the entire relationship between the state and its citizens

The easy path would have been to simply digitize existing processes and call it progress. But the real ambition was far deeper: to shift from a model of one-way broadcasting to genuine, two-way dialogue. To move from opaque bureaucracy to radical transparency. To transform government entities from distant authorities into partners and service providers

The experience taught me three invaluable lessons that apply to any organization serious about change

From Outputs to Outcomes

The easy path would have been to just create social media accounts for government bodies. That would have been "catching up," and the success metric would have been an output: "Did we launch the Twitter account?" But the real mandate was far deeper. The goal was to transform the very nature of citizen engagement. The desired outcome was a shift from one-way broadcasting to genuine, two-way dialogue. Success wasn't launching a platform; it was building trust. Stop measuring activity and start measuring the impact on the relationship with your customer

Technology as Vehicle, Not Destination

Technology was just the vehicle for the real transformation, which was a change in mindset. The destination wasn't a new app or a cloud server; it was a new culture of radical transparency and partnership. It required a deep cultural shift in how government entities saw their role: not as distant authorities, but as partners and service providers to the public. The tool is not the goal. The real work is changing the culture and the purpose that the tool is meant to serve

Change the Role, Not Just the Process

Digitizing an old, broken process doesn't create transformation; it just makes a bad process faster. Our work on the national narrative wasn't about optimizing bureaucracy, but about questioning its very existence. By shifting the role from "authority" to "partner," the entire dynamic changed. The questions were no longer about "How do we broadcast our message?" but "How do we listen better?" and "How do we serve more effectively?" This is the heart of the matter. Catching up is about changing your tools. Transformation is about changing your purpose and your role

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Beyond Transformation

The Shift to Strategic Evolution



Perhaps the phrase "Digital Transformation" has outlived its usefulness. It suggests a project with a beginning and an end, a mountain to be climbed and then conquered. But in today's world, there is no finish line. There is only constant, unending change

I believe a better framework is Strategic Evolution

Evolution isn't a project; it's a permanent state of being. It's a commitment to building an organization that is perpetually learning, adapting, and improving. It's less about dramatic, one-off disruptions and more about creating a resilient culture that thrives on change

Are you defending the past or creating the future?

1

Tools or Culture?

Look at your team's core metrics. Are you primarily measuring how fast you complete old tasks? Or are you measuring how effectively you are solving new problems? True evolution begins when you shift your focus from efficiency in the present to impact on the future. But this requires more than new KPIs. It requires a cultural shift in what your organization values. Are you celebrating activity or achievement? The tool is not the goal. The real work is changing the culture and the purpose that the tool is meant to serve

2

Silos or Systems?

Digital transformation is not a technology project; it's a system of change. Identify one area where your technology, people, and processes are disconnected. How can you build a bridge? Fostering collaboration between your IT, marketing, and operations teams on a single, customer-focused goal is more transformative than launching a dozen new apps. This requires leadership that breaks down silos, not just technology that connects systems

3

Present or Future?

The future isn't built in five-year plans anymore; it's discovered through small, scalable experiments. Instead of aiming for a single, massive transformation project, identify one bold idea that represents a new way of working. Pilot it with a small team. Learn, adapt, and then scale. This is how you build a resilient culture that thrives on change. But it requires leaders who are willing to experiment, fail, and learn, not leaders who defend the past

The future will not
be led by the companies
that are **the best at**
using today's
technology

It will be led by those who are the best at building a new way of thinking. **The real work is not about digital. It's about leadership**

So, the final question isn't just whether you are transforming. It is: **Are you building an organization that is designed to perpetually evolve, or one that is simply designed to last?** The former is the essence of leadership; the latter is a defense of the past

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About the Author

Over the past fifteen years, I've learned that moving across industries isn't just a career path; it's a way of understanding how the world actually works. When you shift from banking to telecom, then to government, media, tourism, technology, culture, and beyond, you notice something important: every sector holds part of the picture, but the full story only appears when you connect those parts together

My work has always centered on marketing, communications, and positioning. The core stayed the same, but the context around it changed every time. Some environments taught me to go deeper, study the structure behind decisions, and understand the narrative that drives them. Others pushed me to experiment, question assumptions, and build solutions with speed and clarity

I learned from Europe how to read context, analyze meaning, and understand the logic behind systems. And I learned from the United States how to innovate, move fast, and turn ideas into action. Through working on Saudi Vision 2030, I learned how to blend innovation and modernity with culture and heritage in ways that honor the past while building the future. This combination of depth, impact, and cultural intelligence shaped the way I think and the way I build strategy

One part of my work has always been turning complex objectives into clear messages—messages that people understand, connect with, and act on. Whether it is a national program, a digital platform, or a cultural initiative, the challenge is the same: translate ambition into a narrative that moves people

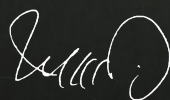
Through national programs tied to Saudi Vision 2030, I've seen how a clear idea paired with strong execution can redefine how institutions engage with the public. I've seen digital platforms grow, cultural content regain relevance, and narratives reach millions because they were built with intention rather than routine

All of these experiences led me to one conclusion: the strongest ideas come from crossing boundaries, not staying within them. When you understand how different sectors, cultures, and systems think, you begin to see patterns others overlook—and you learn how to turn those patterns into strategies that actually work

This series, Cross-Sector Thinking, is a space to explore those patterns. It is not a list of steps or a set of ready-made frameworks. It is a way of thinking about strategy, about change, and about how we create meaning in a world that never stops shifting.

If you are someone who aims to shape the future rather than simply keep up with it, this series is for you.

Majed Altir
1st Dec 2025



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