Digital Transformation
ACADEMY



Epidemic of corporate caution gridlocks digital transformation

Well-intentioned C-suites nevertheless hamper progress and hemorrhage their competitive advantage with permanent evaluation committees that perpetually search for perfect solutions when they should be acting more decisively and incrementally.

Nick Haase

What you'll learn:

- When you're responsible for systems that keep factories running and workers safe, the fear of making the wrong choice can be overwhelming.
- Career risk has become asymmetrical: You won't get fired for endless evaluation, but you might for a choice that proves imperfect.
- Every month spent in evaluation is another month of uncaptured data, another month of inefficient processes, another month falling behind competitors.

Three years. That's how long a major American manufacturer—whose products you likely touched this morning—has been "evaluating" digital transformation solutions.

Their decision-making committee of senior executives meets religiously every other week. They've reviewed hundreds of vendors. They've reached unanimous agreement that change is necessary.

And yet, those three years later, their factory floors still run on clipboards, whiteboards, and Excel spreadsheets dating back to the Clinton administration.

See also: Why Industry 4.0 can't succeed without operational efficiency

Epidemic of corporate caution gridlocks digital transformation

This isn't a story about a single dysfunctional company. It's an epidemic quietly crippling American manufacturing. In boardrooms across the industrial heartland, well-intentioned leaders have created a new form of corporate paralysis: the permanent evaluation committee.

These groups, typically composed of functional heads from operations, quality, safety, HR, and IT, are tasked with shepherding their companies into the digital age. Instead, they've become a place where progress goes to die.

The psychology is understandable. When you're responsible for systems that keep factories running and workers safe, the fear of making the wrong choice can be overwhelming.

Add in the dizzying pace of technological change—AI, IoT, cloud computing, predictive analytics—and decision-making can feel like trying to board a bullet train that never stops accelerating. Why commit to a platform today when something better might emerge tomorrow?

See also: AI can expose manufacturing data to risk, so audit your implementations, third-party links

This paralysis is reinforced by corporate cultures that have quietly transformed from rewarding bold decision-making to punishing visible failures. Nobody wants to be the executive who championed the "wrong" platform. Career risk has become asymmetrical: You won't get fired for endless evaluation, but you might for a choice that proves imperfect.

The result? A perverse dynamic where companies willingly spend millions on consulting firms—not for their expertise, but for political cover. They literally pay consultants to recommend the same solutions their own teams might have identified months earlier, adding layers of cost and delay just to diffuse accountability. The consulting invoice becomes an insurance policy against blame.

But this logic contains a fatal flaw. While these committees debate and deliberate, searching for the perfect solution that will never need updating, their organizations are hemorrhaging competitive advantage by the day.

Every month spent in evaluation is another month of uncaptured data, another month of inefficient processes, another month falling behind competitors who chose progress over perfection.

See also: Tips manufacturers should follow to meet the imperative of modernization

The mathematics of delay are brutal and compounding. A plant running on paper-based systems isn't just operating inefficiently today—it's failing to build the data foundation that will power tomorrow's AI-driven optimizations.

When the next generation of manufacturing intelligence arrives, companies with three years of clean, structured operational data will leave their clipboard-clutching competitors in the dust. The careful evaluators won't just be behind; they'll be playing an entirely different game.

Erosion of skilled workforce pressures manufacturers to respond

The human cost may be even greater. Manufacturing faces an unprecedented demographic cliff, with half of skilled technicians approaching retirement within the decade.

Every day these workers clock in without digital tools to capture their knowledge is another day of expertise walking out the door forever. That veteran technician who can diagnose equipment problems by sound? Her knowledge dies with her retirement party unless it's captured and codified.

Perhaps most perversely, the executives who think they're protecting their organizations—and their own pre-retirement years—through extreme caution are amplifying risk. Their pension funds and stock options depend on their company's long-term competitiveness. By freezing progress today, they're essentially shorting their own retirements. The "safe" choice of inaction is anything but.

See also: Manufacturers cite widespread labor shortages, use of automation and AI to help

The tragedy is that these committee members often know they're stuck. In private conversations, they acknowledge the absurdity of three-year evaluation cycles.

They see competitors pulling ahead. They feel the friction of outdated systems every day. Yet they remain

trapped in a web of interdependencies—"We can't choose an operations platform until we know it will integrate with our future quality system"—that creates infinite loops of indecision.

There is no perfect system, so decide already

Breaking free requires recognizing a simple truth: There is no perfect system. There never will be. Technology will always evolve. Standards will shift. New capabilities will emerge. The winners won't be those who waited for perfection but those who started building their digital foundations today, choosing platforms that are flexible enough to grow and adapt.

The path forward isn't complicated. Pick a problem. Run a pilot. Measure results. Scale what works. This isn't recklessness—it's how every successful digital transformation happens. The alternative—perpetual evaluation in pursuit of mythical perfection—is a luxury American manufacturing can no longer afford.

Podcast: Are manufacturers achieving real transformation, or are they just covering up existing inefficiencies?

Some will argue that careful evaluation prevents costly mistakes. They're right that poor choices of technology carry real consequences. But the cost of a suboptimal platform that gets implemented pales in comparison to the compound cost of analyzing options while competitors race ahead. A well implemented B+ solution beats a theoretical A+ every time.

The executives reading this who recognize their own organizations have a choice. They can continue presiding over comfortable committee meetings, postponing difficult decisions while their companies slowly fossilize. Or they can accept that in a rapidly evolving technological landscape, the biggest risk isn't choosing wrong—it's choosing nothing at all.

It's OK to make mistakes, just course-correct

American manufacturing stands at an inflection point. The companies that thrive in the next decade won't be those with the most thorough evaluation processes but those with the courage to act. They'll make mistakes. They'll course-correct. They'll iterate and improve. Most importantly, they'll be building the data foundations and workforce capabilities that separate tomorrow's leaders from yesterday's casualties.

Podcast: The Art of the Practical in digital transformation

The committee meetings can continue. The evaluations can proceed. But somewhere, a competitor just decided to start. Three years from now, while today's evaluators still are searching for perfection, that competitor will be optimizing operations with three years of accumulated data and experience.

The clock isn't just ticking. It's compounding. Every quarter spent evaluating is a quarter of advantages surrendered. The question for every executive isn't whether to transform but whether they'll lead that transformation or explain to shareholders why they watched it happen to them.

The time for perfect decisions has passed. The time for progress is now.

***Nick Haase** is a co-founder and the GTM lead at **MaintainX**, a maintenance and frontline work execution platform. With a background in future technologies, innovation, and e-commerce, he has helped multiple startups and Fortune 500 companies develop strategy and innovation paths for smart factories, IoT, VR/AR, blockchain, AI, autonomous vehicles, robotics, and more.*