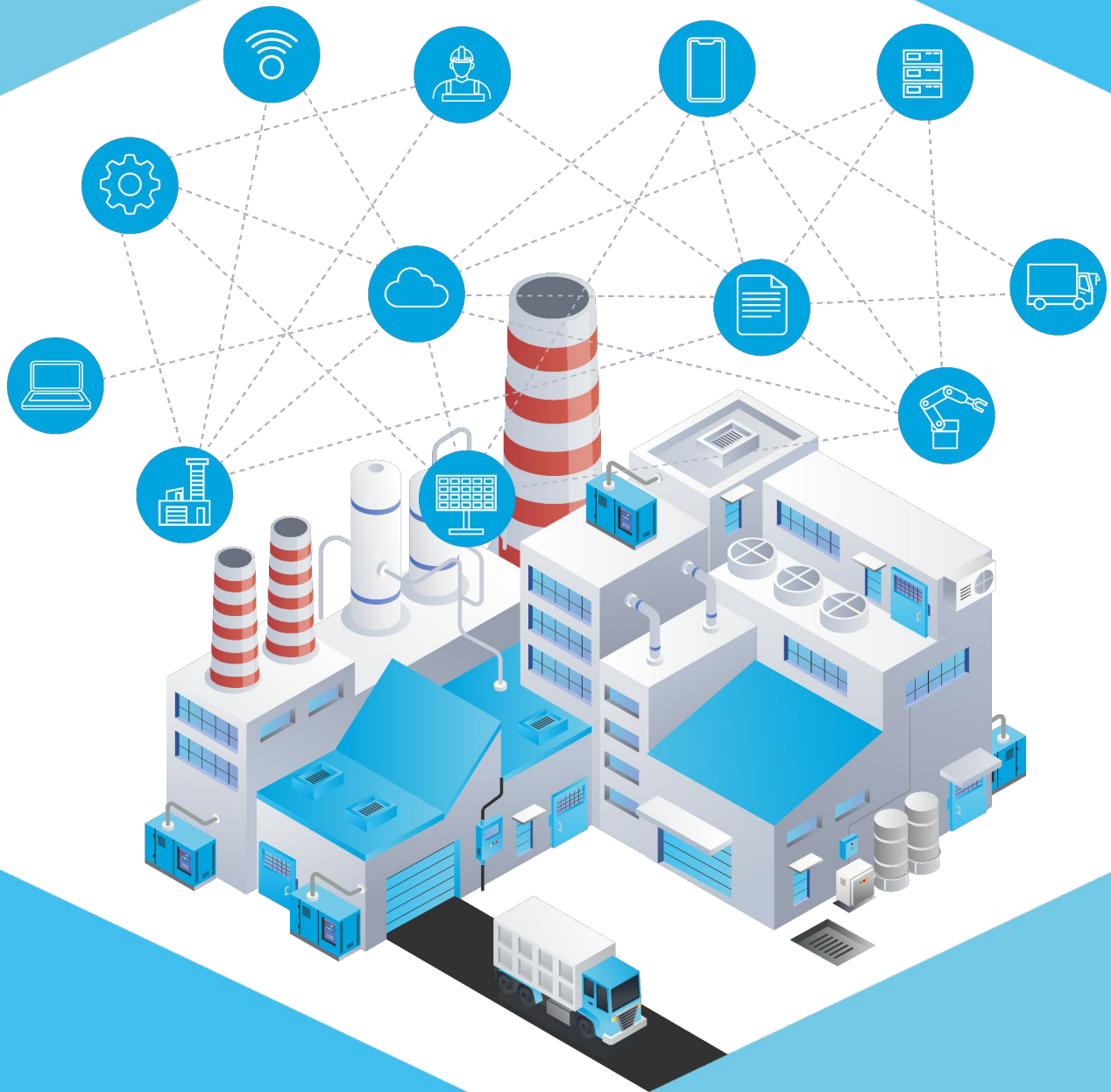


# 5 steps to make sure your digital pilot is a success



# 5 steps to make sure your digital pilot is a success

How do you maximise your chances of success in digital transformation?

Going by a lot of the press you'd be forgiven for thinking that all you need is a super clever machine learning platform and a few gigabytes of data.

Well, you won't be surprised to hear us say it's not quite that simple!

In this emerging space of 'digital' it's very easy to be blinded by all the amazing technology; the machine learning algorithms, the big data solutions, the virtual reality super-doooper-verses.

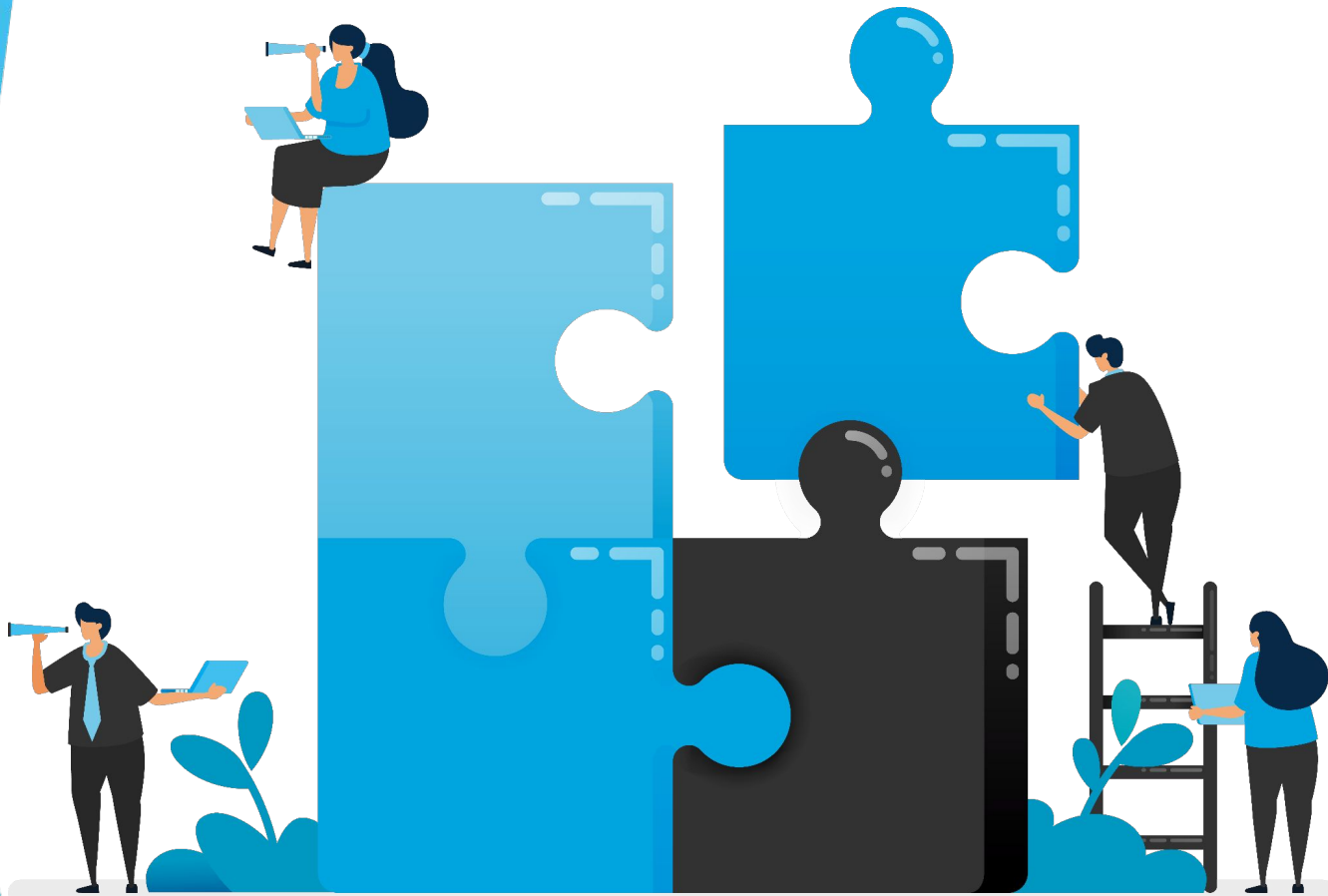
But digital transformation is about more than just the tech. Tech without a purpose is just a white elephant, and tech without people is just, well, Skynet.

And that's not what we're aiming for at all.

So how do you put together and run a successful pilot project? One that will be more than a standalone experience. Something that can drive the wider digital transformation within your company.

Well, as always, we've got you covered.

Read on for our five key steps that will boost your chances of kicking off your digital campaign with a win.



## 1. *Build your crew*

People are your most important resource.

It's a common phrase in business that's become almost cliché, but it's exactly right and it's worth keeping in mind for your digital transformation.

Before you do anything else for your pilot project make sure you have the right people.

It's the part of the movie where the protagonist goes around trying to persuade the best people to join the mission. You need to assemble the team that will have all the skills, knowledge and resources necessary to execute.

# 1. *Build your crew*

*So who do you need and who should you include in your digital pilot team?*

## *Money people*

Money makes the world go round. Without it your digital transformation pilot won't even move beyond that page in your ideas notebook.

Unless you've got a generous fund earmarked for all things digital you will need to get some budget-holders onboard. These can be from executive or board level through to project managers who might be persuaded that a digital component to one of their new projects could be a valuable addition.

If they are project managers you get the added bonus of day to day management of the project and team.

## *Doers*

With the financing sorted, you can now turn your attention to the doers. These are the engineers, the programmers, the technicians who can get stuff done.

Often it is a good idea to seek out those who have shown interest in new technologies. People like this are often easy to spot as they likely have hobbies that align well with the digital theme. Think homebrew electronics enthusiasts, Arduino and Raspberry Pi fans.

Doers will make sure that the project's overall aims are realised.

# 1. *Build your crew*

## *End users*

You have the money. You have the doers. But if you don't add this last group to the mix, your project will definitely suffer.

Complete your team by adding some end users

It's easy to forget them or only pay lip service to them but their input can be pivotal.

If you are planning a digital pilot project and aren't including some end users in your team then allow us to try and convince you to reconsider.

Imagine you have completed your digital pilot and you have some tangible output. It could be a piece of software or hardware or mix of both.

You're excited to demonstrate it and get it out in your organisation.

Who do you think will be the most open to using the hardware or software in their work? Will it be the people who are seeing it all for the first time after knowing nothing of its development?

Or maybe it will be the team members who were brought in on the ground floor and genuinely contributed to its development?

People are far more likely to engage and give things a fair chance if they are involved in its actual development. This is particularly true of new technology; think about all the negative perceptions of automation, robotics and AI.

# 1. *Build your crew*

## *Bonus: 3rd party partner*

Sometimes your organisation just won't have the inhouse expertise in some areas; that could be data science or coding or maybe data acquisition.

In these cases it can be wise to engage with a partner to fill that gap.

These relationships can be very productive and give your digital transformation journey a boost.

But choose your partners wisely.

Check out our post on how a [digital project can fail](#). Poor partners is one factor we identified that increases the chance of a digital project failing.



## *2. What's the problem?*

Right, you have the people and they're ready to take on the world. Now you all need is a challenge.

Challenges can come from all sorts of sources depending on your company and industry. But beware of falling into two traps that can scupper even the most hardy crew of digital pioneers.

## 2. *What's the Problem?*

### *Start small*

The first trap is about scale.

Our advice when thinking about doing a digital pilot project is to start with something small.

Small means focusing the scope down to a narrow problem within your company.

Your objectives should be clear to everyone and measurable. This puts you in a better position to know what success looks like which in turn makes it easier to build on the pilot and move further in your digital transformation journey.

Small also means putting a reasonable timescale on the project. Start with something that can be achieved in three months, not three years!



## 2. *What's the Problem?*

### *Seek out the value*

The second trap to avoid involves deciding what the pilot project will actually be about.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking small means useless or insignificant.

It's all too easy to do.

Imagine a forward-looking company sets up a pilot to explore digital. They decide to start small; good so far. But, after much debate on what to actually do, they end up selecting a piece of machinery due for decommissioning in a month. Or worse, a machine that has already been decommissioned and has been lying in storage for a year; but the thing is there, so why not make use of it?

Going down this route they are very likely to end up with nothing more than a toy demo. It will look okay-ish when shown off at the end of the project. They might get some polite noises of approval. But after that it will just gather dust in a corner of the factory.

To push your organisation's digital transformation in the right direction we really recommend avoiding things that have little to no use. Toy projects can be fun (and easy) but unless fun is the only KPI of your organisation (or you can afford it) our advice is to steer clear.

## 2. *What's the Problem?*

### *What should you do then?*

How do you source the ideas that will actually have real value? Well, remember those end users that you made part of your digital pilot team? This is their time to shine!

If you've selected them properly, these end users will have a wealth of subject matter expertise on processes, techniques, existing workarounds, pain points and much more.

Tapping into that will be a powerful driver for a project's objectives.

To access the right information though can be a challenge. You need to be able to ask the right questions of the end users in order to get to the roots of their issues; ultimately these are the real opportunities for a digital project.

We wouldn't ask questions like: "what do you want a digital solution/system to do?" or "can machine learning help with this exact process?"

This can often land you in trouble later on. The end users shouldn't be the ones to dictate the form of the solution. They are there to give insights as the experts in the problems.

What we recommend is a structured approach that really focuses on their workflows. It's often not necessary to even mention technology at this point. Talk about their issues. Tease out concrete examples of problems they've faced. For example, "how many times does this machine break down?" is a better question than "would a machine learning algorithm be useful on that machine?".

## 2. *What's the Problem?*

After this you should have a lot of lovely data that you can cross reference with financial costs. The result will be a set of real problems that have real business value for solving them.

If you want to read more on this subject then look out for future posts on the subject coming soon. We'd also recommend checking out start-up-related material on customer requirement capture and related subjects ([The Mom Test](#) is a really good start).



### **3. *Execute***

Now your team is recruited and your quest defined, the fun can truly begin.

How you run your pilot project can be key to its success.

### 3. *Execute*

#### *It's a sprint not a marathon!*

Whether it's revising for an exam or breakfast cereal, breaking things down into bite size chunks can be a wise strategy.

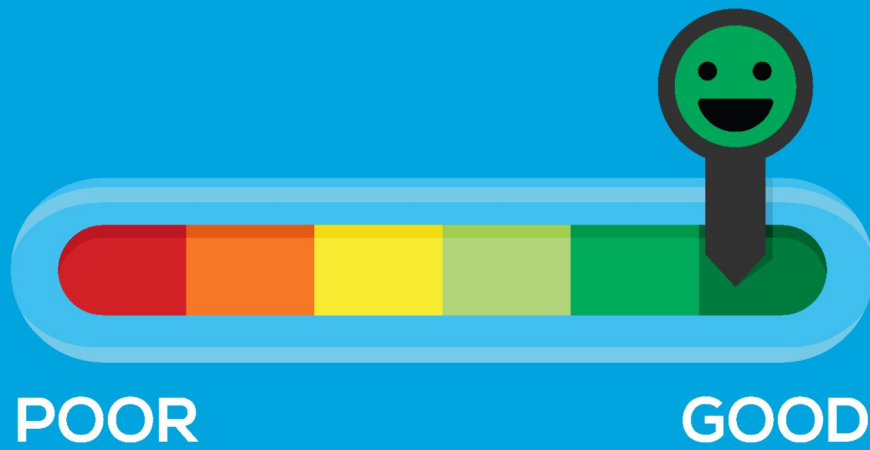
Our recommendation is to split your digital pilot project into "sprints".

Sprints are used widely in software development as part of the Agile framework. They allow your digital team to focus on well-defined tasks with clear aims that will contribute towards the overall aims of the project. All within a defined length of time.

At Smartia we use sprints of two weeks, but you can have as long or short a sprint as you want (within reason). Sprints longer than about a month are rare.

Organising your pilot project into several sprints will give you better control and oversight on what is happening and what's being achieved. It's also really good for focussing the team on very well defined objectives.

We are finding that this way of working is catching on more and more within more traditional industrial companies and usually leads to better project outcomes.



## 4. Evaluate

By now the team has worked hard and delivered the pilot project.

It's done so the hard work is over, right? Well not quite...

## 4. Evaluate

Finishing the project is a major achievement and if you have followed the steps laid out so far, it's likely that you have some pretty good outcomes to show for everyone's work.

But after the end-of-project elation has subsided don't neglect the evaluation stage.

Take a retrospective look at what you did and compare it with what you intended to do at the outset.

Does it match? Was there deviation from the original plan?

If there are differences, what were they and why did they come about? Did the differences and deviations actually make things better? That would be perfect, but understanding them even if things didn't go quite to plan is also very valuable.

We've found that one of the easiest tests to apply to a digital pilot project is whether the output of the project ends up on a shelf or does it get used by real people in their real jobs.

It's one of the most telling indicators of success for a digital project.

The evaluation step might seem simple and obvious but it's all too easy to neglect proper evaluation in fast moving, busy organisations.

Proper evaluation will also give you valuable evidence to push the idea further or to make the right pivot choices for future digital pilot projects.

**COMING  
SOON**

## *5. Future work*

Whatever you do, don't stop now!

You have kicked off your digital transformation programme and have some momentum, so don't let it lose steam and stall.

Losing focus allows distractions to take you away from this hugely impactful activity.



## 5. *Future work*

Planning, running and evaluating a pilot project with new and challenging technologies is a big effort.

It's easy to see the future work section at the end of a report as the home stretch and 'phone it in'. You know roughly what should be done next but as there's no immediacy it's easy to be vague and non-committal and even, occasionally, unrealistic.

Failing to build momentum on the back of your pilot project will only see your digital transformation journey stutter and likely stall altogether.

If possible, we advise you to not let everything just disperse at the end of the pilot. Don't let all the team go back to their normal routines. Don't let the solution you've built stagnate.

Use the pilot as a basis for not only further work but as the start of a dedicated digital capability at your organisation.

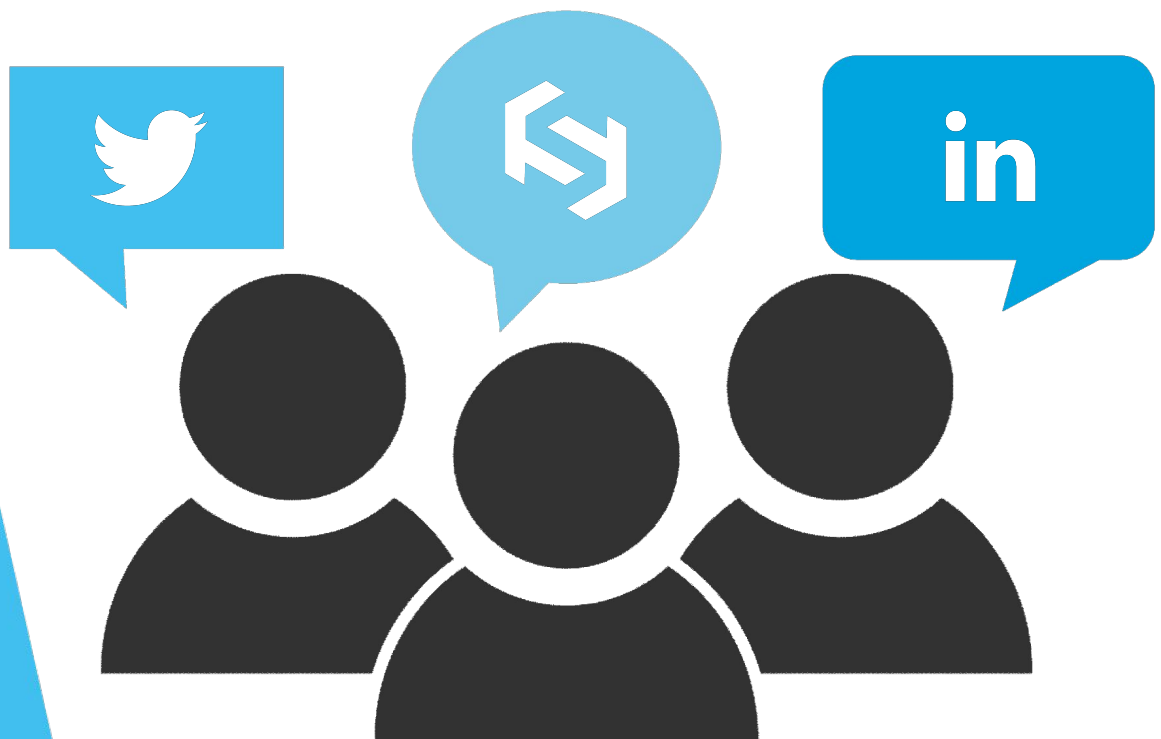
## What next?

We really hope you have found this paper useful. It's based on a lot of learning that we have gathered over our journey in the digital space.

Digital transformation in industrial settings promises much. But to realise the potential, solid and transparent decision making that puts people and their problems first will be key.

As always we welcome your thoughts and questions in the comments. You can also reach us on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

If you haven't already, we also recommend our [paper](#) that covers the five reasons why your digital project will fail and what you can do to avoid it.





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