Tips for Improving Front Line Technology Adoption

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It's an exciting moment that the team has been building up to for months. With all the buzz about new technologies out there in the marketplace, you have just implemented a great new technology that should make front line employees more productive and is an important part of the digital strategy recently adopted.

So how is it that the usage stats are so disappointing? Why are the folks at the front line not embracing the change? Are they just determined blockers, trying to avoid all progress for the business?

I deliberately left the details of this change fuzzy. Could be a new data analytics platform, could be an IOT platform with more and better sensors, could be drone or AI related, or some kind of automation. There are many types of platforms that can impact front line operators, maintainers, and supervisors. My experience has been that the people at the front line of an industrial business are generally not the anti-tech curmudgeons that some may think they are. If you are having difficulty with front line adoption, here are a few suggestions.

1. **Be formal in your communications planning**

There is a science to proper stakeholder engagement. Effort expended in mapping out the stakeholders and impacts from the change that you are contemplating can be richly rewarded. A few examples:

- Have you considered the safety or environmental impacts, and are safety personnel cheerleaders for your change, or suspicious about the potential for distraction?
- What are the levers that you have for engaging the front line directly? Is someone from the project team attending shift changeover meetings regularly? How about investing some time in ride-along observation of the tasks at hand?
- How about front-line supervisors? Is there a regular forum with them that can be leveraged?
- Are you taking advantage of space in break rooms or meeting rooms to advertise?
- If the change is being driven by senior management, do the layers in between understand and support what is happening?
- What, if any, training is likely to be required? And, post-training support?
- Can you identify people who are likely to be change champions, and get them involved early?
- Are you aware of other changes happening that are impacting the front line? Are there ways to work together with those projects rather than creating additional headaches for supervisors?

All of this may seem a bit elementary, but as you're putting together project plans, the communications can be a tempting target for budget reductions. Whether you have a dedicated professional on the team or not, someone needs to own this.

2. **Work with line management to make sure that performance management systems are supporting your change**

This one gets into a deeper area of change management. What happens if you are implementing a change intended to provide deeper visibility for engineering to identify trends and make corrective changes, but for front line operations it only appears to be a bother? If they are only being measured on their daily shift performance, it will be harder for them to buy into a change that could distract from shift targets.

The technology team should absolutely be willing to raise a flag if this type of situation is coming up. If the organization is serious about a digital transformation, merely throwing new tools into people's hands is only a small part of the change required. People have to start thinking about things differently. For some, this is quite natural. For most, if the overall organization is tuned to work in a specific way, turning can be quite hard.

So, what are the measurements in place for managing performance? Is it possible to add one in support of the change? Or, in fact, is there a deeper problem in measurement that will naturally push people into the opposite direction? Obviously not every system implementation requires a review of operational metrics, but for large changes this can be quite important.

3. **Truly partner with the front line**

If you are still seeing the front line as an adversary that needs to be overcome, you may need to step back and look again. Front line supervisors and operators need to be front and center in your effort. To the extent that they feel that they are driving and contributing, the buy in will increase.

Depending on the nature of your project, this is where the formal Agile methodology can be an exciting approach, as it stresses both buy-in and contribution from the customer organization. However, if the project is for procurement or HR or engineering but touches the front line, the 'customer' or 'product owner' can't just be that host organization without adequately understanding front-line impacts.

4. **Be ready to find and correct problems**

This is a corollary for #3. Some of the most frustrating adoption problems occur when the technology isn't actually working as well as intended, or even seems not to function correctly. People will try once or twice, and then shrug their shoulders and give up. No one comes into work trying to make things worse than they found them. Everyone has a job to do, and if your technology project feels like it's getting in the way of someone doing their job, they'll do their best to go around it. A wise plant manager said to me once, "Brad, there's nothing you can do to make these guys shut the plant down." Of course, none of us want to shut the plant down, but it may be that the project is viewed in this light.

So, structure your project so that you can keep your eyes open for technology blockers. Things like network performance, wi-fi coverage, badly written queries, or lack of off-line capability in a mobile app can all get in the way of a successful implementation, even if they're not specifically in scope. Maybe you'll even get to increase your standing and reputation with operations by solving a problem that they've had for a while.

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In any heavy industrial company, the safety and productivity of front-line employees and contractors is crucial. Trying to engineer a digital transformation without the input and buy-in of this group is perilous at best. Over the coming years, the way they work is likely to change dramatically, so they need to come on the journey. Digital transformation is much bigger than just a technology function running down a list of projects and tossing tech into people's hands.

For more information or to schedule a complimentary consultation, please contact brad.barton@govci.com