

Insight Guide

Digital Transformation in the Housing Association sector



MLR Networks Ltd

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Digital transformation was the buzzword for the early part of the 2000s. Businesses sought to leverage the advancements offered by technology and early adopters paved the way for business as usual today.

Fast forward to now and digital transformation in the Housing Association sector is enabling an agile working culture to thrive. What are we seeing now and what's expected in the future? We'll break down the state of play for digital transformation in the Housing Association sector. And we'll explore the benefits to any HA organisations who've not yet made the plunge.

What is digital transformation?

First, by way of explanation, let's just recap what is meant by digital transformation. A digital transformation is more than just 'moving to the cloud'. It means taking hardware and software, weaving it throughout your business and extracting value for your customers. It also challenges the way we've all worked in the past. Gone are the prescriptive processes and masses of red tape. Everything becomes connected and more easily accessible. Digital transformation moves us towards a more agile framework which is desirable for its faster decision making and peak innovation.

What is agile working?

Agile working means unlocking our teams to work from wherever, whenever. It means tapping into global talent pools to find the best people for the job. And it allows us to make decisions based on all the available data, all at once. It's exemplified by the post-pandemic landscape and the new flexible working arrangements that are demanded by most workers. And agile working isn't hierarchical or structural, it's fluid and adapts to quickly meet the challenges of the day. And it's enabled by great, always-on, secure technology that's easily accessible from the cloud. If that is where you want your Housing Association to be, let's talk. But a big part of successful digital transformation starts with changing approaches and beliefs towards working and data.

Creating a digital culture

According to BDO, "digital success doesn't depend only on the tools, of course, but also on the people using it. Training and support need to be provided to encourage adoption and optimal use. Organisations need to consider too how technology can potentially impede, as well as support, their people. For example, holding virtual meetings at short notice is now standard practice, but too many meetings could prevent individuals actually getting on with their work."

Encourage your teams to note any logjams they face after deploying any new digital product so you can act. If you properly scoped your tech installation in advance, these should be minimal. Remember that your teams are subject matter experts and may identify issues that an external supplier might not. So, consult them at each stage of your roll-out. Not only will this increase buy-in but it might prevent service issues later on.

Benefits & applications

While every single Housing Association will have different requirements and use cases, here are some popular applications and benefits of digital transformation projects:

Data-collection & storage

Start with automating the data-collection experience. Encourage your residents to make an account via your website or app. This will provide you with an opportunity to learn some things about your users and collect passive data. Beyond that, ensure this data is collected and stored centrally. That will provide a better user experience during support queries and allow you to make decisions based on every shred of information that's available regarding that specific account. Impress on your team the importance of keeping accurate records whenever they have a client interaction too. This will further enrich your database. Lastly, remember to keep this data secure. Be mindful of the different regulations around domestic and international personal data storage. If you're not sure, an expert implementation partner can help you navigate the relevant laws.

Digital resident experience

Thanks to the recent past, we're all more comfortable doing business online than we ever were before. And that extends to our personal lives as well. As a result, a true digital resident experience is possible. While the drive to encourage tenants to use voice or web-based portals has existed for several years, recent circumstances have accelerated the shift to digital channels. Digital adoption has increased as more tenants become tech-savvy, and since the pandemic has restricted access to face-to-face interaction, tenants are ready to accept self-service options. Although a proportion of tenants still rely on person-to-person support, a growing number of tenants prefer to manage their own accounts through apps or online portals which make it easier to check rent payments, report maintenance issues or simply update personal details. So, if you don't provide these self-service options, it's time to implement them as a high-priority digital transformation item.

Automation

For those in housing, this translates to machines making decisions that usually would have needed a human operator. Anything that is rules-based can be automated. This means that once parameters are decided, the software can execute a range of tasks. And that ensures your teams are freed up for more delicate or high-level strategic work. Generally, 60-70% of tasks within a Housing Association are rules-based. And before you start an internal revolt, automation rarely replaces human workers, it just reallocates their time to more valuable tasks. Some popular automation tasks include affordability checks, weekly reporting runs and workforce scheduling.

Proactive decision making

One element AI and machine learning allows for are proactive instead of reactive decisions. Here is digital transformation at its best. According to Forbes, "Artificial Intelligence is the broader concept of machines being able to carry out tasks in a way that we would consider "smart". And, machine learning is a current application of AI, based around the idea that we should really just be able to give machines access to data and let them learn for themselves." With internet of things (IoT) devices like sensors, you can collect real-time data. This data will enable predictive modelling to take place that's totally AI-driven. No longer will you need forecasts based on manager assumptions. With predictive modelling, past trends are input to output the most likely future scenario. Start with one process first to execute a test and learn strategy before doing an operation-wide rollout to prevent errors in logic creating unnecessary delays. After all, it will take time for even the machines to learn.



Reporting & transparency

Every level of management within your Housing Association needs access to accurate reports. And digital transformation allows for a vast array of reporting dashboards and forecasting tools. It can also offer greater trust and transparency with the public and prospective residents. These reports can be made available on accessible platforms or published annually to support strategic decisions. The best reporting tools are cloud-based. This allows teams from anywhere to quickly access and base their decisions on the most up-to-date information without having to manually analyse disparate data feeds. Work with your management teams to determine what analysis is needed and which data feeds are useful. Look at the most common KPIs and build reporting interfaces to offer a one-stop view. Then train them in the proper use of these tools. Make them accountable for the figures and trends represented. Only then will you build a culture of data-driven decision making.

Pitfalls to avoid

Over-designed and under-funded digital transformation projects are the bane of every enterprise and organisation. While Housing Associations might not have the resources of Amazon, ASOS or Apple, it's possible to get a large amount of functionality with smaller budgets. Just start with one process that you want to transform. And don't be afraid to fail. Inside Housing cautions, "Housing associations often feel that if they invest money in a big technology project and it fails, it will be very wasteful and their reputation might be damaged. They may also fear taking the [plunge because the functionality] is changing so fast." Another big risk is embarking without a transformation champion. If there are no senior executives with an appetite for digital transformation, the project is likely to fail anyway. Since these projects require significant investment, scoping and training to roll out successfully; stakeholder buy-in is key. Create a feasibility document before taking the project further to get a C-level presence on your project team.

Summary

Overall, digital transformation allows Housing Associations to compete in this connected world. It enables remote working, global talent pool access and streamlines workflows. It frees up mental capacity for more complex tasks and it gives management the right information at the right time. Lastly, it ensures transparency throughout the organisation. Launching a digital transformation project doesn't need to be daunting. With the right scope, budget and stakeholder support, any organisation can get started on digitising just one process. When you prove that the initial project is a success, you can set your sights on total transformation. Remember to include culture-shift initiatives too. This will feed an appetite for change and agile working methods across the organisation, longer-term.

We'd love to help to get started on this path. If you're looking to scope a digital transformation project for your Housing Association, get in touch.

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