

## Summary session 4: Transforming legacy systems

### Speakers:

**Peter Howard**, *Head of Change, WTW*

**Rachel Dickson**, *Group Chief Information Officer, Lancashire Insurance Group*

### Chair:

**Ian Cartwright**, **Softwire**

The session explored the complexities of transforming legacy systems within organisations, focusing on the challenges, cultural factors and decision-making processes that influence the success of such initiatives. The discussion emphasised that legacy replacement is often an IT-led effort that lacks proper collaboration with the business, resulting in unclear success metrics, project fatigue and resistance to change. Many replacement projects fail due to an inability to fully retire the old system, inadequate planning for future integration and a lack of clear business value from the transition.

A key issue raised was **the impact of organisational culture on transformation efforts**. Legacy replacements often replicate existing inefficiencies when organisations approach them with the same mindset and governance structures that created the outdated systems in the first place. Resistance to change is common, with business users reluctant to abandon familiar processes, even when they are inefficient. Rather than simply replacing technology, transformation should focus on improving business processes and removing outdated constraints.

The session also explored **strategic approaches to modernisation**. Organisations often face a dilemma between building bespoke solutions to maintain competitive advantage or adopting off-the-shelf systems to reduce costs and complexity. While customised systems may offer differentiation, they also increase maintenance burdens and reliance on niche skills. A more effective approach is to prioritise **simplification and standardisation**, ensuring technology choices align with long-term business strategy. Decision-making should be guided by factors such as security, resilience, integration capabilities, compliance risks and scalability.

To navigate these challenges, businesses must establish **clear governance, strong leadership and a collaborative decision-making process**. The best strategies focus on delivering incremental value rather than pursuing multi-year 'big bang' replacements that may never materialise. Leaders should regularly reassess the transformation's scope and be willing to pivot based on changing business needs.

Additionally, the **role of vendor partnerships and AI in modernisation** was discussed. Vendor selection should not be based solely on functionality but should consider long-term licensing, service models and ongoing support. AI's rapid evolution means organisations must adopt a **deliberate and adaptable AI strategy**, ensuring platforms are flexible enough to integrate emerging AI capabilities without being locked into a single vendor's ecosystem.

Finally, the session concluded with **the importance of recognising and leveraging internal expertise**. Employees with deep institutional knowledge of legacy systems should be engaged early and given a role in shaping the transformation. Celebrating milestones and maintaining momentum throughout long-term projects can prevent fatigue and ensure sustained engagement.

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## Key Takeaways

- 1. Legacy transformation requires cultural change as much as technological change**  
Many failures occur because organisations try to replicate old processes on new systems rather than rethinking how they operate. Success depends on engaging business users, challenging outdated workflows and ensuring IT and business strategies are aligned from the start.
- 2. Simplification and incremental progress are more effective than large-scale overhauls**  
Instead of aiming for a single massive replacement, organisations should focus on delivering tangible business value in smaller steps. Decision-making should balance standardisation and differentiation, ensuring custom solutions are only built where they create a competitive advantage.
- 3. Governance, vendor management and future readiness are critical to long-term success**  
Vendor relationships should be managed carefully to avoid hidden costs, service issues and lock-in risks. Future AI integration should be planned upfront, and organisations should continuously reassess their transformation strategy to remain adaptable in a rapidly evolving market.