

Beware of the backlog: Keeping pace with digital transformation

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Given the pace of digital transformation, and near-constant demand from both the business and customers for new features and functions, it's hardly surprising that most IT teams quickly find themselves facing an application development backlog. In many cases, despite a brisk cadence of software releases, this backlog never seems to get any smaller.

In a recent [survey](#) of 3,300 IT professionals worldwide conducted by OutSystems, almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents said their organisation faces an application development backlog. Just 39% said that their backlog had improved – in other words, shrunk – over the past year, while 50% said it had stayed more or less the same. For 11%, meanwhile, the application development backlog was bigger than ever.

Not every backlog is bad. In fact, good backlog management is a key principle of Agile working, because developers find it incredibly useful to have a working list of the ideas, insights and requirements they'll need to build and refine a [digital product](#). It's an important tool in prioritising work according to business needs and [customer experience](#) goals.

But once a backlog gets out of control, it quickly becomes a burden, a rambling wishlist of poorly defined features and functions, many of which will be superseded by more pressing requirements and never see the light of day in any case. This can leave development teams unfocused and poorly prepared to tackle real priorities.

Business leaders, meanwhile, may be left believing that they simply don't have enough developers to get the necessary work done on a digital product – when in fact, what's really lacking is better ways of working, ones that enable developers be more efficient and productive.

At Zühlke, an important aspect of our Digital @ Scale solution focuses on helping organisations that have already made some progress on their digital transformation journeys to build internal practices that enable developers to innovate at speed.

In our experience, high-performing digital product teams are small and cross-functional, and empowered to build, deploy and manage their own digital products in production. Their [product backlogs are regularly refined](#), which involves 'decluttering' to reduce unnecessary work items and fleshing out details for high-priority items on a 'just-in-time' basis, ready for

the next sprint planning meeting.

On top of this, these teams also use automation to replace tasks that might otherwise be performed manually; robust [feedback loops](#) to refine digital products so they better fit customer needs; and [monitoring and metrics](#) to alert them to issues with code and get fixes underway quickly.

All this is extremely important if organisations hope to keep pace with the demands of digital transformation – a key concern for senior executives right now, according to a July 2019 [report](#) from IT market analyst company Gartner. When asked about key risks facing their organisations, more than seven out of ten (71%) cited ‘pace of change’, driven by fears of being disrupted by nimbler competitors and a lack of clear avenues for growth.

Right behind in second place was ‘lagging digitalisation’, according to the report. “Executives expressed concerns that digital budgets were inadequate, a high number of digitisation projects fail, concerns about scaling projects and project delays,” say its authors.

It doesn’t have to be that way, of course. Many of these challenges can be more than adequately addressed through better ways of working. By enabling development teams to quickly progress work items out of the backlog and into production at a steady clip, organisations can do more than keep pace. They can become pacesetters.