DIGITAL & TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

WHEN THE SEAT IS EMPTY, RISK DOES NOT PAUSE

One of the most expensive assumptions an organization can make is that it can leave a critical technology leadership role open while it searches for the perfect candidate, or worse, rush to fill the seat with the wrong hire. A permanent search is necessary, and a careful process is often prudent, but while that process plays out, risk does not pause.

Hiring a permanent CIO, CTO, Chief Data Officer, or technology transformation leader rarely happens quickly because the right candidate needs far more than technical fluency. They need leadership capability, operational experience, credibility with the board and executive team, and enough cultural fit to lead through complexity. That combination takes time to find.

The business, however, keeps moving.

Customer commitments continue. Reporting cycles move forward. Security risks evolve. Delivery backlogs grow. Transformation programs remain in flight. Deal timelines continue to advance. Across the business, leadership decisions still need to be made, funded, sequenced, challenged, and explained.

Much of a manager's time is spent creating alignment—coordinating work, resolving dependencies and ensuring decisions move forward—but when there is a leadership void, that alignment function is absent. When the seat is empty, this coordination burden shifts to delivery teams and business leaders who must navigate decisions without a clear owner. Without clear technology leadership, even strong organizations can begin to lose pace. Decisions take longer and ownership becomes diffuse. Priorities compete, business leaders hear different answers from different parts of the technology organization, and operations lose a clear sense of direction. Program teams spend more time aligning stakeholders than advancing delivery.

The result is rarely immediate failure. More often, it is execution drift: the gradual loss of decision clarity, accountability, ownership, and momentum at the exact moment when the business needs technology to be disciplined, responsive, and aligned to value.

WHERE THE RISK IS HIGHEST

A vacant technology leadership role creates risk in almost any environment. The exposure is greatest when the business is already moving through a transaction, integration, carveout, or major transformation. These moments expose the difference between technical activity and business readiness. Systems can be separated on paper while the business is still not ready to operate independently. Who owns reporting? Who approves access? Which data definitions will the new company use? Which vendors are strategic and which are temporary? How will cyber risk be managed during transition? These questions require executive judgment, not just project management.

Transactions and M&A Integrations

In transaction environments, technology decisions directly affect deal value and business continuity. Day 1 readiness, transition service agreement (TSA) exits, application separation, infrastructure planning, cyber controls, data migration, vendor transition, and operating model design all require clear ownership. A recurring pattern in M&A environments is that the technology plan looks controlled at a workstream level while enterprise dependencies remain unresolved: finance needs clean reporting, cyber is focused on identity and controls, and operations needs continuity. Each activity may be progressing, but without a senior technology leader connecting the pieces, the plan can become technically active but operationally misaligned.

Carveouts

Carveouts are where leadership gaps can become expensive quickly. Teams may be working through hundreds of applications, data, infrastructure, vendor, and access decisions without a single executive accountable for sequencing them against TSA deadlines and business priorities. Work may continue, but no one is clearly empowered to make trade-offs between speed, cost, risk, and future-state architecture. Application inventories remain incomplete, data ownership is not resolved, and vendor decisions are deferred. Temporary arrangements become harder to unwind, creating extended timelines, additional cost, and avoidable complexity for the new organization.

Transformations

Major transformation programs create a different but equally important risk profile. ERP, cloud, data, AI, and digital initiatives depend on sustained governance, investment discipline, stakeholder alignment, and sequencing. When technology leadership changes midstream, the program may continue moving, but the connective tissue between strategy, funding, execution, and business adoption can weaken. A transformation may have active workstreams, milestones, and vendor updates, but still lack the governance, ownership, and operating discipline required to deliver value. Without an experienced technology leader connecting activity to outcomes, the organization can keep moving while losing control.

THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF EXECUTION DRIFT

How Execution Drift Begins

The first signs are rarely dramatic. Teams wait longer for decisions, and escalations increase. Steering committees revisit the same questions, while business leaders understandably have to create workarounds to address the void. Vendors are asked to expand scope because internal direction is unclear. Program teams spend more time aligning stakeholders before work can move forward.

Over time, local problem solving begins to replace enterprise decision-making. A reporting gap is solved with a newly added tool. A vendor receives broader authority to keep a program moving. A business unit creates its own process because the enterprise answer is taking too long.

None of these decisions may be wrong in isolation. The problem is that they accumulate without consistent leadership connecting each decision back to business priorities, operating requirements, and long-term technology direction.

What Execution Drift Costs

Left unaddressed, execution drift begins to translate into real operational and financial cost. The costs appear as cumulative drag: missed milestones, duplicated tools, delayed integrations, extended TSAs, unclear data ownership, fragmented architecture, increased vendor dependency, and avoidable rework.

- **Programs lose coordination and timelines extend**. Delivery teams spend more time aligning decisions than executing them. Technology investments continue, but fewer decisions connect back to a clear operating model, enterprise architecture, or long-term business priority.
- **Transformation programs can be left exposed**. ERP, cloud, data, AI, and digital initiatives depend on clear sequencing, disciplined governance, and executive sponsorship. When leadership accountability becomes unclear, these programs continue with more meetings, escalations, and friction.
- **Vendor complexity increases**. Vendors play an important role in execution, but they should not become the default source of strategic direction. Without a technology executive setting priorities, assessing trade-offs, and managing commercial tension, organizations risk accepting recommendations that solve immediate problems while creating longer-term cost or complexity.
- **Business confidence declines**. Leaders rely on technology to support growth, integration, reporting, compliance, customer experience, and operating performance. When decisions slow or priorities shift without explanation, business stakeholders begin to work around the function rather than through it.

The longer the gap lasts, the more the incoming permanent leader inherits. Instead of arriving to advance the next phase of the strategy, they often spend their first months rebuilding context, reestablishing governance, resetting priorities, and unwinding decisions made during the gap.

The Hidden Cost of Getting Technology Leadership Wrong

A vacant technology leadership role creates risk, but filling it too quickly with the wrong person can create more.

The visible costs are easy to count: search fees, compensation, separation costs, and another hiring process.

The hidden costs are harder to measure: lost time, repeated onboarding, delayed decisions, shifting priorities, and declining confidence. Teams explain the same issues again, roadmaps are reopened again and again, and momentum slows.

Interim leadership helps avoid the pains associated with that pressure. It keeps the business moving while creating the time and space to search for the right person.

WHERE INTERIM LEADERSHIP CHANGES THE EQUATION

An experienced interim technology leader heads off these problems by bringing immediate ownership to a moment when the business still needs decisions made.

The role is not simply to keep the seat warm. It is to stabilize the environment, clarify priorities, protect value, and help the executive team make informed decisions while the organization conducts a deliberate search for the long-term leader.

- **In a transaction**, an interim leader can align technology execution to deal priorities, clarify decision rights, surface risks early, and keep Day 1, TSA exit, cyber, data, vendor, and operating model decisions connected to the business outcome.
- **In a carveout**, an interim leader can force clarity on which systems must be separated first, which transitional services carry the greatest risk, and where leadership needs to intervene before timelines or value are affected.
- **In a transformation**, an interim leader can strengthen governance, resolve decision bottlenecks, credibly challenge workplans, restore investment discipline, and keep stakeholders aligned around the practical next steps required to move from activity to outcomes.

The value is far more than continuity. It is the ability to maintain momentum without rushing into the wrong permanent hire. Organizations should not have to choose between execution stability and a thoughtful executive search. With the right interim leader, they can do both.

WHY FORMER OPERATORS MATTER

Interim technology leadership requires more than advisory perspective. The most effective interim leaders understand from experience what it means to sit in the executive chair.

Former operators know how decisions move through complex organizations. They have managed competing priorities, imperfect information, board expectations, executive pressure, vendor tension, budget constraints, and delivery risk. They understand where programs typically stall and where a green status report may be masking deeper issues.

That experience matters because interim leaders often have to act before all the facts are available. A former operator can step into a complex situation, assess what is happening quickly, identify the decisions that matter most, communicate trade-offs in business terms, engage the board on strategic risk, and give technology teams the leadership clarity they need to execute. Ultimately, a former operator can distinguish between activity and progress and build the bridge between them because they have already been accountable for closing them.

Just as importantly, interim leaders help prepare the ground for the permanent executive. By documenting priorities, clarifying open decisions, strengthening governance, surfacing risks, and creating transparency around critical initiatives, they reduce the time the incoming leader spends reconstructing the current state. Whether it's a decision log, risk register, clarified governance model, TSA exit roadmap, vendor assessment, or prioritized 90-day agenda, an interim leader with operator experience knows what materials are needed to continue moving forward once they step away. Equipped with these, the permanent leader can move more quickly from assessment to action.

PROTECTING VALUE DURING TECHNOLOGY LEADERSHIP GAPS

Technology leadership gaps often occur during the moments that matter most: M&A, integrations, divestitures, carveouts, ERP programs, and broader digital transformation. In these high-risk environments, organizations need executive ownership, operational judgment, and decision clarity more than ever.

A&M helps organizations navigate these transitions by providing experienced interim CIOs, CTOs, data leaders, and technology executives who establish ownership, stabilize operations, and keep critical initiatives moving. These leaders bring former operator experience, board readiness, transformation discipline, and practical execution focus to moments of complexity and change.

Beyond operational stability, the result is the ability to reduce execution risk, preserve value, maintain business confidence, and create the foundation for a smoother transition when the permanent leader arrives.

While leadership transitions are inevitable, execution drift is not.

Organizations should not have to choose between maintaining momentum and identifying the right long-term technology leader. A&M helps clients do both: preserving execution today while creating the conditions for faster value realization tomorrow.

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