THINK FORWARD

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The Pre-Investment Checklist

Twelve questions to ask before you sign a £100K+ transformation budget.



Built on a decade of peer-reviewed research at the University of Aberdeen Business School. Currently in Innovate UK's ICURe Explore programme.

Before you read this...

94% of executives expect their technology investment to deliver a return within a year...

Around 30 per cent report it does (Forvis Mazars C-Suite Barometer, 2026). The strategy is rarely the problem. The technology is rarely the problem. The problem is almost always something the organisation knew on day one but never named out loud.

Twelve questions. Neither strategic nor technical. They are the questions an organisation asks itself before committing capital it cannot easily get back.

Use them in a board meeting. Take them into a one-to-one with your CEO. Or read them slowly on a long drive home before you sign the contract.

If you cannot answer six of them with confidence, you are not ready to spend the money yet.

Dr Iva Atanassova
Founder: ThinkForward CABAS™

Part 1: The Honest Diagnosis

Before you commit money, you need to know where you actually are. Not where the strategy deck says you are.

1. What does the leadership team believe is happening, and what is happening on the ground?

Why this matters.
A decade of peer-reviewed research at the University of Aberdeen finds the same pattern across sectors: leadership and frontline describe different versions of the same organisation, and the gap is almost impossible to see from the inside. You cannot fix a gap you have not measured.

Listen for.
If the answer is "we know our people," you do not have an answer. If the answer is "we asked them and the responses match the leadership view," ask who they reported to.

2. What is the last thing the organisation tried to change, and what actually happened?

Why this matters.
Past behaviour predicts future behaviour. An organisation that quietly reverted to old habits after the last initiative will do the same with this one, unless something has changed since.

Listen for.
"It was successful" is not an answer. The answer is what people are doing differently today, six months later. If nothing visible changed, that is your data point.

3. Where in this organisation does information flow slowest?

Why this matters.
Transformations fail at the hand-offs. The slowest information flow is where the friction lives, regardless of what the org chart says.

Listen for.
People will name the bottleneck before they finish the sentence. If nobody can name one, that itself is the answer: nobody is looking.

4. Who would lose status if this transformation succeeds?

Why this matters.
Every transformation reorders who matters. The people who lose visibility, autonomy or expertise often do not block change loudly. They block it quietly, and they are usually senior enough to do so without anyone noticing.

Listen for.
If the answer is "nobody," you have not thought about it carefully. There is always someone.

Part 2: The Capacity Test

Strategy without capacity is decoration. These four questions are about whether the organisation can absorb what you are about to spend.

1. What are we already doing that this will replace, retire, or contradict?

Why this matters.
Most transformations are added on top of an organisation already running at capacity. If nothing is being retired, the new initiative will compete for attention with everything else, and lose.

Listen for.
“We will integrate it” usually means “we have not decided what stops.” Push for the specific list of things that will end.

2. Where is the spare bandwidth coming from?

Why this matters.
Transformation requires sustained attention from the people closest to the work. If they are already at 100 per cent, asking them to also lead change is a recipe for slow failure.

Listen for.
If the answer is “we will manage,” you will not. If the answer is “we are hiring,” when, who, and what do they replace?

3. Who is accountable for the outcome, and what happens to them if it fails?

Why this matters.
Accountability without consequence is theatre. Most transformation programmes spread accountability so widely that no individual is responsible for the result.

Listen for.
If three people are accountable, nobody is. Name one person. If no one person can be named, the governance is not ready.

4. What is the smallest version of this we could test in 90 days?

Why this matters.
Big-bang transformations fail more often than incremental ones. An organisation that cannot articulate a 90-day version of the initiative has not understood it well enough to spend on it.

Listen for.
“It does not work at small scale” is sometimes true. More often it means the team has not done the work to find the test.

Part 3: The Decision

These four questions decide whether to sign, delay, or kill it.
They are the hardest of the twelve.

1. If we spend this money and it does not work, what have we lost beyond the money?

Why this matters.
The capital is the smallest cost of a failed transformation. The bigger costs are credibility with employees, momentum on other priorities, and the next 18 months of leadership attention.

Listen for.
If the answer is "just the money," you are underestimating the loss. The hidden costs are usually two to three times the financial spend.

2. What would have to be true in twelve months for us to call this a success?

Why this matters.
Most transformations are evaluated on activity completed, not outcomes delivered. "We hit every milestone" is not the same as "the business changed."

Listen for.
Look for outcomes, not deliverables. "We deployed the system" is a deliverable. "Decision time on X dropped from 14 days to 3" is an outcome. If only deliverables are listed, the success criteria are not ready.

3. Who in this organisation will tell us the truth when it starts to go wrong?

Why this matters.
Transformations rarely fail suddenly. They fail slowly, while everyone says it is going fine. The single biggest predictor of recovery is having one person, usually mid-level, willing to say "this is not working" without losing their job.

Listen for.
If you cannot name that person before you start, you do not have one. Build the role into the governance now, not after.

4. If we do nothing, what happens?

Why this matters.
Often the honest answer is "we are fine for another two years." Sometimes it is "we will be irrelevant in eighteen months." The two answers should produce very different decisions about urgency, scope, and risk appetite. They often produce the same decision because nobody asked the question.

Listen for.
If the answer is "we cannot do nothing," find out why. The reason is the actual driver. That is what your transformation should be designed against, not the strategy deck.

Part 4: How to use this

In the boardroom.

Print the twelve questions. Hand them out. Ask each director to score how confidently the organisation can answer each one, on a scale of one to five. Discuss the gaps before you discuss the budget.

With your executive team.

Run a 90-minute workshop. Question by question. Capture what you do not know. The unknowns are your project plan.

Reading it solo.

Read it slowly. Note which questions you cannot answer without asking someone else. Those are the conversations to have before the next budget meeting.

If this checklist surfaced more questions than answers.

That is the point. The checklist is the cheap version of the diagnostic. CABAS is the deep version: three levels, multi-source, mapped to the published research, delivered in days, not months.
If three or more of the twelve questions are giving you a knot in your stomach, that is the moment to talk.

There are two ways forward from here, depending on where you landed. If the gap feels real and you want it measured properly across your team, book a twenty-minute conversation with me. If you would rather first step back and look at the bigger pattern, take the research survey: the Scottish

Transformation Readiness Index if you are in Scotland, the Explore Survey if you are elsewhere in the UK. It is short and anonymous, and if you opt in at the end we will send you the findings when they publish. Both are at thinkforwardcabas.com.

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