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A hand holding a smartphone in a dark, bokeh-lit environment. The phone screen shows a video of a stage performance. The background is dark with blue and purple bokeh lights.

Avoiding the 84% Failure in Digital Transformation

A conversation with Eric Schaffer
Founder & Head of HFI Laboratories

"CX engineering is not a single skillset. There are focus areas such as customer journey mapping, usability testing, customer analytics, ethnography, human-computer interface design, accessibility, etc. Each practitioner has a unique skillset. Think of staffing as building a solid wall with unique rocks. You struggle to fit the rocks into a solid wall, but, the rocks run off every few years and get different jobs. This means you need internal training so you can fill in the gaps and make sure everyone is speaking the same language and hats at least a baseline skillset. You also need a continuous recruiting operation to manage people exiting the organization, even if you have free coffee and ping pong tables."

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Digital Transformations Fail Around Customer Experience Design

Recently Forbes described the 84% failure rate reported for digital transformation projects (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcou-cl/2019/11/01/why-your-enterprise-keeps-failing-at-digital-transformation>).

They correctly pointed out that the failure is caused by a lack of customer centricity. You can spend a bomb on technology, but your only value is usually from an improved experience for customers and staff. This insight is correct and brilliant, but then they sent readers down a rabbit hole towards more failure.

In 2012, Forrester reported that 97% of organizations had customer experience (CX) as a strategic imperative. So, we have the most powerful people around, grappling with customer experience for about a decade, and the results are still awful. That should be a clue that the mainstream business advice is not working. The rabbit hole leads nowhere.

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The Customer Experience Rabbit Hole

Forbes recommended that you “Be Empathetic Toward Your Customers”. See, it is simple! Your staff has previously been evil and insensitive. They have been working to torture customers with technology. And now, with a few speeches, a spiffy t-shirt, and an offsite, the team will be empathetic, and it will be fine. Sure. Let’s do that again.

Since the staff doesn’t seem empathetic enough with the t-shirts, we need to get serious and give them a class; perhaps in “Design Thinking!” This terminology alone is very scary because it suggests that the solution lies in simply thinking properly about design. This is absolute nonsense as good user-centered design requires a complex web of skills, tasks, and tools. In fact, “Design Thinking” is not a real design process at all; it was created to support innovation. It can give ideas for a business model or software application. However, it does NOT successfully design the required user experience. In fact, there is no awareness training that provides CX design capabilities. It is useful to make awareness training as a part of change management. But it is fanciful to expect that any training will solve the challenge. And “Design Thinking” is perhaps the most insidious because it sounds so comforting.

We naturally find out, about a year later, that coffee cups and awareness training does not work. It is then obvious that our staff simply cannot achieve empathy. We therefore look for a company that utilizes empathy. They have a pretty looking website that scrolls. And they have offbeat executives who dress with style. We hire them as vendors, or we buy the company. Remarkably that also does not work. They might make some impressive and encouraging-looking designs, but you have a wide range of complex facilities and after a couple of years you realize you have not achieved a solution.

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Experience Design is an Engineering Discipline: You Need Real CX Engineers

The customer experience field dates back generations. There are billions of dollars of research, models, methods, and tools that support the work. As industry leaders have begun to pour money into customer experience, there has been a surge of people claiming they are experts. Often, they have a background in visual design, marketing, or coding frontend applications. They don't go deeper into the field. But they sound convincing. There are videos on YouTube showing how to pretend to be a customer experience expert in a job interview.

Luckily, there are better ways to select qualified staff. Some educational degrees are a solid indicator of capability (depending on the program). About 15 years ago we made the Certified Usability Analyst™ certification exam and there are nearly 8,000 CUAs worldwide. We also created an employment test that selects people who have specific kinds of customer experience engineering capabilities.

Perhaps you have a staff of well-qualified customer experience practitioners. You might even exceed the recommended staffing ratio of about one CX designer for every eight software engineers. If so, congratulations! You are now on the road to solving the challenge of engineering your customer experience.

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Designing a Digital Transformation for an Organization: You Need a CX Practice

Having a staff of surgeons does not mean you have a functional hospital. Having staff is good, but there is a lot more needed beyond that. You need a detailed design methodology with templates for project plans, estimates, instruments, and deliverables.

You need an interface standard (now often called a design system) which makes most design work a function of working off standard screen types. It saves about 10% of your overall development spending (saving design time, coding time, and maintenance costs). You might hope that all these qualified people know their stuff, but they have a wide range of capabilities and deficits. CX engineering is not a single skillset. There are focus areas such as customer journey mapping, usability testing, customer analytics, ethnography, human-computer interface design, accessibility, etc. Each practitioner has a unique skillset. Think of staffing as building a solid wall with unique rocks. You struggle to fit the rocks into a solid wall, but, the rocks run off every few years and get different jobs. This means you need internal training so you can fill in the gaps and make sure everyone is speaking the same language and has at least a baseline skillset. You also need a continuous recruiting operation to manage people exiting the organization, even if you have free coffee and ping pong tables.

Oddly, the hardest thing is knowledge management. CX research and design throws out a massive amount of data about customers, scenarios, environments, persuasion strategies, etc., and if you have no history, you are bound to repeat the work. Don't think you can toss the content into a common knowledge management system. It makes such a mess that you will end up running six-figure research programs rather than recovering what you already know.

In the end, you might end up with a mature CX design practice. We have a CX practice evaluation method, as well as an online tool for rating organizations. If you can fully mature at Level V, or even a Level IV, you are ready to roll. The problem is this takes so much time, it might only be practical as you look toward your next digital transformation. If you can source an instant Level V organization as a managed service, at least you have a seed team that can be there for your upcoming transformation program.

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“We need people who understand the value of CX engineering and have witnessed the team making a difference during the digital transformation program.”

Your Practice Must be Integrated, Governed, and Sustained

Having a mature CX practice does ensure the capabilities for the work are all in place. But there is some change management work that needs to be done to ensure the practice really operates. When you put an instant mature practice in place, you start to work on this on the first day.

You need an operating model showing how work flows through the CX team. You generally won't need a full RACI analysis, but defining the workflow and swim lanes is important. Included in this operating model you need the various organizational connections in place. You almost certainly need a steering committee and design authority.

There is also an ongoing process of education and proving the value of the CX effort. In essence, a lot of change management is about minting advocates in the organization. We need people who understand the value of CX engineering and have witnessed the team making a difference during the digital transformation program.

Finally, there is a need to protect the CX design capability going forward. I documented 24 common ways for a team to unravel. [Need the hyperlink](#). Most of this is about leadership and sponsorship. Being successful can make every executive want to own CX, start fighting over it, and breaking it into ineffective fragments. The practice won't sustain without top level executive championship, without a village of executives understanding the value, and without the role of the practice institutionalized.

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“To make a digital transformation successful, we don’t start with the technology stack. Instead, we begin with the CX stack.”

NOW We Can be “Fanatical About Measurement”

In addition to “empathy,” the Forbes article recommends being “fanatical about measurement.” This is close to every executive’s heart and we absolutely DO want to measure our success. It is less attractive to measure failure. And if you don’t have a mature practice in place, it is fanciful to think things will magically get better. If you put measurement in place before you have a real practice, the main temptation will be to pick a weak measurement method or adjust to make it less depressing.

Once there is a mature practice in place, adding a solid set of metrics will not just provide support for executive governance; a serious metrics program yields diagnostic data that allows refinement of the CX designs on an ongoing basis.

NOW Your Digital Transformation is the Business Differentiator You Seek

To make a digital transformation successful, we don’t start with the technology stack. Instead, we begin with the CX stack. We begin with the compelling relationship we want with customers and let that drive the transformation. Once you have your CX stack in place select your technology to support a specific customer experience solution, then drive the design through all the stages of user-centered design work. This won’t happen based on empathy, good intentions, and common sense. This doesn’t happen by thinking in a “Design” way. This doesn’t happen with one smart CX designer, or even with one CX designer for every eight programmers. This can only succeed with a mature CX practice operating effectively within your organization. Critically, it is important to get the CX organization in place quickly enough to meet your immediate needs, and to avoid executives becoming frustrated with the slow process of building CX capabilities.

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About Eric



Dr. Eric Schaffer

Founder & Head of HFI Laboratories

Dr. Eric Schaffer is the Founder & Head of HFI Laboratories.

In the last quarter century, he has become known as the visionary who recognized that usability would be the driving force in the “Third Wave of the Information Age,” following both hardware and software as the previous key differentiators. Like Gordon Moore’s insight that processor power would double every 18 months, Dr. Schaffer foresaw that the most profound impact on corporate computing would be a positive online user experience – the ability for a user to get the job done efficiently, easily, and without frustration.

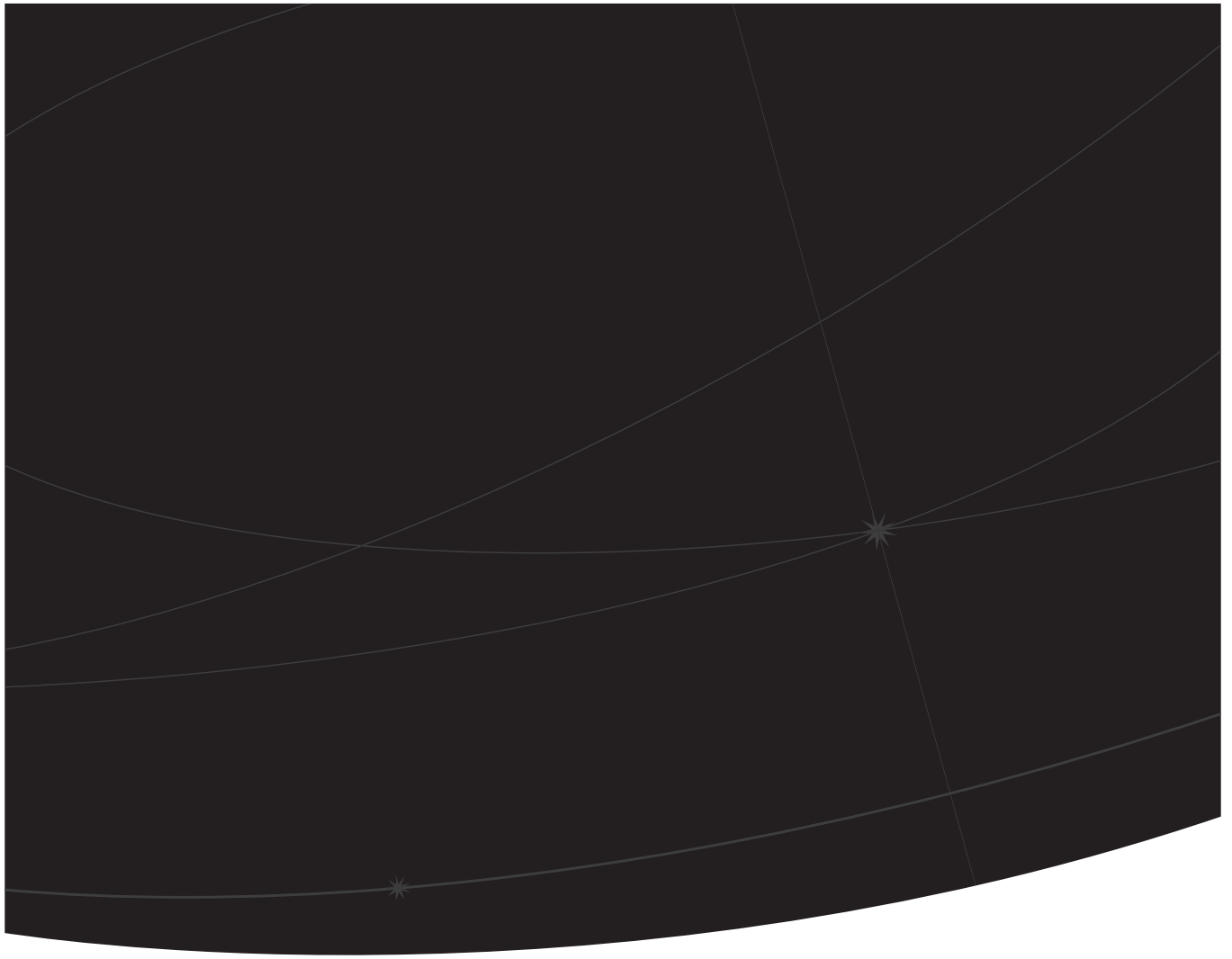
Dr. Schaffer’s book, *Institutionalization of UX: A Step-by-Step Guide to a User Experience Practice* provides a roadmap for companies to follow in order to make usability a systematic, routine practice throughout their organizations. Dr. Schaffer also co-developed The HFI Framework, the only ISO-certifiable process for user-centered design, built on principles from human-computer interaction, ergonomics, psychology, computer science, and marketing.

Dr. Schaffer has completed projects for more than one hundred Fortune 500 clients, providing user experience design consulting and training. He has recently been traveling the world teaching HFI’s course, *How to Design for Persuasion, Emotion, and Trust*.

Dr. Schaffer is a member of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society and a Certified Professional Ergonomist.

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