



10 Reasons Digital Strategies Fail And How To Help Them Succeed

Authors:

[Sarah Clark](#), Head of Medical Affairs Biogen Digital Health

[Rahela Penovski](#), Founder & Director, COGNEDT

[Vandana Garg](#), Medical & Scientific Affairs Lead, Southeast Asia & Taiwan, Haleon

[Stacey Gorski](#), Head US Medical Excellence, AstraZeneca

[Bora Erdemli](#), Principal, ZS Associates

This article represents the opinions of the authors and not those of their companies.

Introduction

Digital technologies are transforming Medical Affairs – from virtual engagement and insights platforms, to sophisticated big-data analysis tools, Generative AI in content creation and much more. However, in many organizations digital strategy remains disconnected from overall Medical Affairs strategy, and strategy implementation remains challenging. So often, we are hesitant to share the stories of our failures, leading to “failing in silence.” The purpose of this paper is to learn from our failures in a way that moves the field forward. Following are 10 reasons digital strategies fail along with examples and suggestions that may help you and your teams navigate between the icebergs of these failures on the way to success.

1

Lack of Integration with Overall MA Strategy

The vision for a Medical Affairs department is guided by a cascade of strategic plans, from overall brand strategy, through the Medical Affairs plan itself, and then into function and subfunction strategic plans. Integrated with these plans (or, unfortunately, often alongside them) are plans guiding therapeutic areas and global/regional/local strategies. A danger exists for digital strategies to be siloed within one of these strategic plans (or siloed altogether!) without aligning with the others. Without linking to a shared objective, it is difficult for companies to make clear trade-offs and decisions.

Example

Company A had a centralized digital function that developed solutions to solve patient unmet needs and improve care. They operated with their own plans and budgets for the design and development of these solutions. However, the launch execution was managed by Medical Affairs, who were expected to contribute resources and budget to the launch. When budget trade-offs were being made, some country medical teams would cut these initiatives, unclear of the impact this solution could make to their overall objectives.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Strategic Alignment:** Ensure that digital activities are embedded in the Medical Affairs' overall strategy and roadmap. It is not something else that you do, it is how you do things now.
- ◆ **Cross-Functional Meetings:** Regular strategy meetings with other functions can help align digital activities.
- ◆ **Shared Objectives:** Use shared KPIs to drive cross-functional alignment and collaboration. These KPIs are also directly linked to how functions measure their overall impact / performance. Connection is key.

2

Lack of Leadership Support

Team members who are actioning strategies may be the first to identify the need and promise of digital initiatives. But if teams move forward to implement digital tools or platforms without securing leadership buy-in, initiatives may struggle with resourcing or wide adoption. Like any shift in direction or processes, it is essential to have the culture of change driven from the top. Without leadership support, digital initiatives that seem promising at the individual, team or subfunction level often fail.

Example

Company B, a top global pharmaceutical organization, saw an opportunity to leverage digital technology for educating healthcare professionals about their latest oncology asset. The Medical Affairs team spearheaded an initiative to develop a sophisticated online education platform. They envisioned a tool that not only disseminated information but also enabled interactive learning and feedback. The team, passionate about the project's potential, proceeded without securing explicit support and active engagement from the company's leadership. As the project unfolded, the lack of leadership buy-in became increasingly problematic. Without senior executives' backing, the initiative struggled to obtain necessary resources and broader organizational commitment. The leadership, not being involved from the outset, remained unaware of the platform's strategic importance and potential impact on healthcare professional engagement and drug adoption. Consequently, when budget allocations were decided, the project received minimal funding, insufficient to cover the advanced features and comprehensive content initially planned. The resulting platform, underdeveloped and lacking key functionalities, failed to gain traction among healthcare professionals.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Get C-Suite Involved Early:** Involve C-level executives in discussions and planning sessions around digital initiatives to secure their buy-in. If you're not in a position to engage C-level yourself, ensure that your management team is ready to advocate for you to the C-suite.
- ◆ **Communicate Anticipated Impact Clearly:** Show how the digital strategy aligns with the company's broader objectives and the impact it promises. Explain expected short-term wins and long-term benefits.
- ◆ **Regular Updates / Communication:** Regularly update management on progress, challenges, and successes to keep them engaged and supportive. Make sure to communicate early wins / successes and be consistent in communication using the impact story supported by aligned metrics.

3

Lack of Budget & Resources

Digital initiatives tend to create new capabilities or streamline/optimize existing processes. In the first case, it can be difficult to earn budget for ideas that have not yet been tested. In the second case, if a team has been performing with current systems, it can be challenging to demonstrate the need for costly upgrades. Securing investment in digital strategies can be especially difficult in Medical Affairs, where budget is generally not tied to ROI and even subjective returns may be far in the future.

Example

Company C proposed a digital solution to support the review and certification of promotional and non-promotional materials at a global, regional, and country level. However, the company had difficulty identifying their expectations for such a solution. Without a clear understanding of what the solution would deliver and how it will address regional regulatory requirements and ensure compliance, the business benefit vs risk was difficult to assess, budget was hard to calculate, and the ROI of the investment was unclear. Therefore, when the leadership team selected the minimal investment option in the hopes of meeting vague ideas of success, the strategy ultimately failed because it did not acquire enough budget from the outset to meet the true expectations of leadership.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Pilot Programs:** Start with small-scale pilots to prove the concept and potential impact, including fixing weaknesses/gaps in the pilot which can be useful for securing a larger budget. (Scaling a promising pilot provides additional challenges.)
- ◆ **Cross-Functional Budgeting:** Collaborate with other functions to co-fund initiatives that have cross-functional benefits within your company's compliance framework.
- ◆ **Innovative / Flexible Contracts:** Work with vendors that offer scalable solutions, allowing you to start small and scale up and share risk (e.g., payment based on performance, risk sharing)

4

Lack of Understanding Across Internal Teams

In addition to aligning digital initiatives with overall strategy, digital initiatives must be aligned across teams. The decision to develop and launch a digital solution requires a consistent understanding of the unmet need or problem that is going to be solved with this solution and a clear articulation of the value drivers from the commencement of the project. Unfortunately, teams often design digital initiatives from the perspective of their individual needs without adequately addressing the potential impact across other teams or other functions. Teams need to come together across the organization to do this important foundational work together, to agree on the initial problem and to align on the expected impact of the initiative.

Example

Company D identified a challenge within the patient journey in relation to their multi-disciplinary care and a digital solution was developed to improve patient care. The solution was developed for a broad set of patients, both on Company D's treatment as well as on other treatments/no treatments. Under a cost-driven, reprioritization effort, the digital solution was found to be not close enough to the product brand strategy as it did not increase revenue, and the program was stopped.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Education and Training:** Regular connection to educate internal teams about the importance and value of digital solutions.
- ◆ **Clear Documentation:** Develop comprehensive guides that clarify the project's objectives, desired outcomes, and metrics. This should be consistent with the broader communication of the program internally and externally.
- ◆ **Build a community and listen:** Regularly solicit and act upon feedback from internal teams involved in the initiative. Ensure that there is constant communication across the community of practitioners.
- ◆ **Articulate ROI:** clearly articulate return on investment and value drivers in connection to the brand strategy from very early phase in the project.

5

Data, Data, Everywhere, and not a Drop to Drink!

In the analogy referenced in this heading, the Ancient Mariner is surrounded by water but because it is not the correct kind of water, he cannot make any use of it. Similar may be true of the data created by digital initiatives: surrounded by data housed in disparate locations across the organization, in different formats, both structured and unstructured, it's easy to look out across a boundless ocean of data and be completely incapable of making any sense of it.

Example

Company E had a new leader looking after Customer Excellence. Their first goal: implement an omnichannel engagement strategy. However, upon reviewing the data infrastructure of the new company, the leader realized that the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system had different versions across functions and countries, was not used consistently by the various customer-facing teams and that terms and definitions were different. Because the data were not in the correct form, the strategy to focus on omnichannel engagement ultimately had to pivot to data management.

Example

Dark data are data that exist in unique locations (e.g., an individual's hard drive). At Company F, an individual had territory specific information for Field Medical that only lived on their computer. Three separate use cases required this data, but each one required this individual to provide the data, which became a significant bottleneck and delayed all three projects.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Data Governance Framework:** Establish a clear data governance model that standardizes data across the organization. This is a must-have step to ensure speed and success in scaling.
- ◆ **Data Audits:** Regular audits to ensure data quality and consistency based on the set-framework and requirements. Remember "rubbish in" equals "rubbish out".
- ◆ **Analytics as a solution:** Leverage robust and fit-for-purpose analytic solutions that can integrate disparate data into actionable insights.

6

One Digital Solution May Not Work Across All Geographies

We work in a globally connected world; however, territories within this global world continue to have unique needs, which must be addressed amid unique regulatory concerns. With this in mind, a digital strategy implemented at the global level may not have relevance or be approved at some local levels. In short, with a broad disparity between various market regulations and how healthcare is managed and administered, it is difficult to standardize or globalize medical digital tactics. Companies with a more centralized structure may be further from individual market needs; meanwhile, companies with decentralized structures may suffer from lack of alignment and/or inefficiencies due to duplication of digital efforts.

Example

Company G instituted a global social listening strategy in order to integrate digital opinion leader insights into their overall insights strategy. However, because local privacy and data retention laws differed across countries (and even across states in the U.S.), the social listening strategy was difficult to implement at scale.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Global-Local Balance:** Maintain a central strategy but allow flexibility for local customization.
- ◆ **Localized Strategies:** Consider local market needs, regulations and professional codes when developing global digital tactics.
- ◆ **Involve Countries Early and Decentralize innovation:** Involve local teams early in the planning stages to avoid costly adjustments later. If not all, make sure to include priority markets which can generate and drive momentum. Diversity matters in innovation so decentralize it, nurture it and use the power.

7

Change Management

While the word "disruption" may be overused when describing the impact of digital technologies, it is also often accurate. Digital initiatives may disrupt current systems, forcing teams and individuals to change the ways they plan and work. Early adopters may drive digital initiatives, but if change management does not extend to more hesitant (or entrenched) team members, the initiative may fail or be less successful. Implementing digital strategies is as much about supporting people to understand and engage with a new way of working as it is about the technology, infrastructure and operating model that underpins the initiative.

Example

Company H was poised to roll out their omnichannel engagement strategy for Medical. They had invested heavily in the technology systems that would design and execute personalized email campaigns. Thinking that the Medical teams would follow the same process as the Commercial omnichannel teams, leadership was surprised when the Medical teams quickly dismissed the new tools when they felt they were merely performing a Commercial activity. Although there had been many resources dedicated to training Medical colleagues on the tools themselves, very little was dedicated to the actual process of implementation.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Change investment and planning isn't an option:** As part of the leadership buy-in and budget consideration, secure the investment and resources needed to drive change.
- ◆ **Change Agents:** Identify and train early adopters who can act as change agents within the organization
- ◆ **Change is a journey:** Offer continuous learning and support resources to ease the transition.

8

Internal Readiness

Successful execution of digital solutions requires a long-term vision and a culture that embraces failure and iteration. If this culture is driven only by the passion and expertise of early adopters, momentum can stall if these change champions move on. To ensure a culture of digital readiness, Medical Affairs must develop skills beyond traditional scientific and clinical knowledge, to understand the regulations, requirements and technology associated with digital strategies. In addition to training the existing Medical Affairs work force in digital competence, companies will need to invest in digital natives such as data analysts, data scientists, and programmers who can enable a new way of working.

Example

Company I saw the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and created a new team to identify and create partnerships with companies possessing expertise in this space. One clear opportunity was in the space of medical imaging, and an exciting project commenced. As the project continued, the expert team presented the data at scientific congresses and was received with interest from the medical community. MSLs were identified as the right team to be the external face of this digital initiative and were excited by the idea. However, significant training was required to understand and communicate the complex data and processes, and that time was not spent on traditional disease and product education. Leadership eventually pulled their support from MSLs engaging on this topic, and they returned to a more traditional MSL engagement approach focused on disease and drug.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Skill Inventory:** Conduct an internal skill audit to identify gaps. And build a program, not a “one time” intervention. This is not a short distance sprint race; this is a marathon.
- ◆ **Ongoing Training:** Regularly update training programs to keep up with evolving digital needs. Digital moves faster than us. We need to keep up.
- ◆ **Leadership Alignment:** Ensure top-level management understands the importance of digital skills and supports ongoing upskilling.

9

Ethical, Legal, and Compliance Considerations

Implementation of digital strategies often requires an understanding of legal and regulatory processes. Due to the pace of change in digital technology, the compliance landscape is constantly shifting, and also varies widely between geographies. Additionally, the cross-functional representatives from legal, ethical and compliance teams may themselves be updating their skillset built around pharma compliance to include digital considerations. Discovering unforeseen legal/compliance concerns can doom digital initiatives.

Example

Company J identified an opportunity to improve medical procedures using Virtual Reality and wanted to partner with a third-party vendor to make this technology available within the healthcare system. As this was a new approach for the company, only affiliates that had strong partnerships with legal, compliance and regulatory colleagues were able to find a path forward to execute this activity.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Involve Early:** Include legal, medical ethics and compliance teams early in the project to preempt potential issues. Consult external experts for advice on specific matters in case of lack of in-house experience or expertise.
- ◆ **Regulatory Updates:** Keep abreast of legal, regulatory and professional code changes and ensure all digital initiatives are compliant. As the digital world moves quickly, we need to adopt quickly.
- ◆ **Keep Your Partners in Order:** Periodically review third-party vendors and partners for compliance.

You implemented a digital technology. Now it's obsolete. In addition to moving ahead with digital strategies, companies need dedicated resources to monitor the evolving technology landscape to be able to quickly adapt projects and change vendors as needed, if the technology underpinning a project evolves

Example

Company K identified that medical insights data was one of the most valuable deliverables from the Medical Affairs organization and started a 2-year project to improve the data interrogation to inform medical strategy. A global team was appointed and began working with a selected vendor to develop this capability. In January 2023, the team was shocked to read about the launch of ChatGPT and realized that the technology provided by their vendor may now be outdated! The company had not been closely monitoring the market of Artificial Intelligence vendors and their 2-year project was put on hold whilst the company began assessing whether generative AI vendors should be considered instead. The analysis revealed that the unstructured insights data could not adequately support the development of a gen AI large language model and so the project was recommenced, however with a 6-month delay.

Example

In company L, one country identified that there was a need to capture longitudinal outcome measures and started a multi-year project to create a tracking tool to be used by healthcare professionals. As the therapeutic area evolved, the healthcare system matured and the need to track this data became a regulatory and reimbursement requirement at a national level and a registry was created. Company X, now one of multiple companies with an approved therapy, had invested in a digital tracking solution that was now obsolete, as HCPs did not have time to enter data into multiple systems. At the time of development, the digital tracking solution fulfilled an unmet need. But the idea was not future proof and eventually was closed down. For their next drug launch, the company focused on bringing the governmental health agencies into the partnership earlier, building consortia with multiple companies in the area and reviewing their approach to data collection periodically to ensure that this will not happen again.

Tips for addressing this challenge:

- ◆ **Agile Methodology:** Use agile methodologies that allow for quick pivots in strategy in response to technological evolution.
- ◆ **Tech Scouting:** Dedicate resources to scout for emerging technologies that could disrupt or benefit your projects.
- ◆ **Iterative Strategic Review:** Periodic assessments to evaluate if the current tech stack meets the organizational objectives, and if not, have a plan to transition smoothly. Don't be afraid to try, learn, improve including stopping investments. Consider "PESTLE" analysis to interrogate your project from political, economic, societal, technology, legal and environmental point of view and revisit periodically.





ELEVATE

www.medicalaffairs.org/elevate