

You Can't Mandate Momentum:

Leading Change with the Adoption Curve in Mind

Innovators
Assemble



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Founder of Yellow Cat Innovation and a member of our Innovators Assemble panel, explains more about how to bring people along by understanding how they will adopt change at different times.

Leading Change with the Adoption Curve in Mind

Change in organisations doesn't happen the way you expect it to. Successful, long-lived and embedded change diffuses. It diffuses person to person in ways that can look sporadic. It's not. Here's how you can predict who will make the change first, and how you can bring everyone else along afterwards.

The technology adoption lifecycle describes how this happens

I used to think I could affect change by designing the perfect solution to the organisation's problems, then telling everyone about it. Then I progressed into leadership roles and learned about the magic of accountability! Now I believe that neither of these can do the job alone.

You might well have the perfect solution, and great accountability mechanisms in place, and change still falls flat. Today, the first theory of change I reach for as a leader, is one that's not widely associated with change leadership at all - the technology adoption lifecycle.

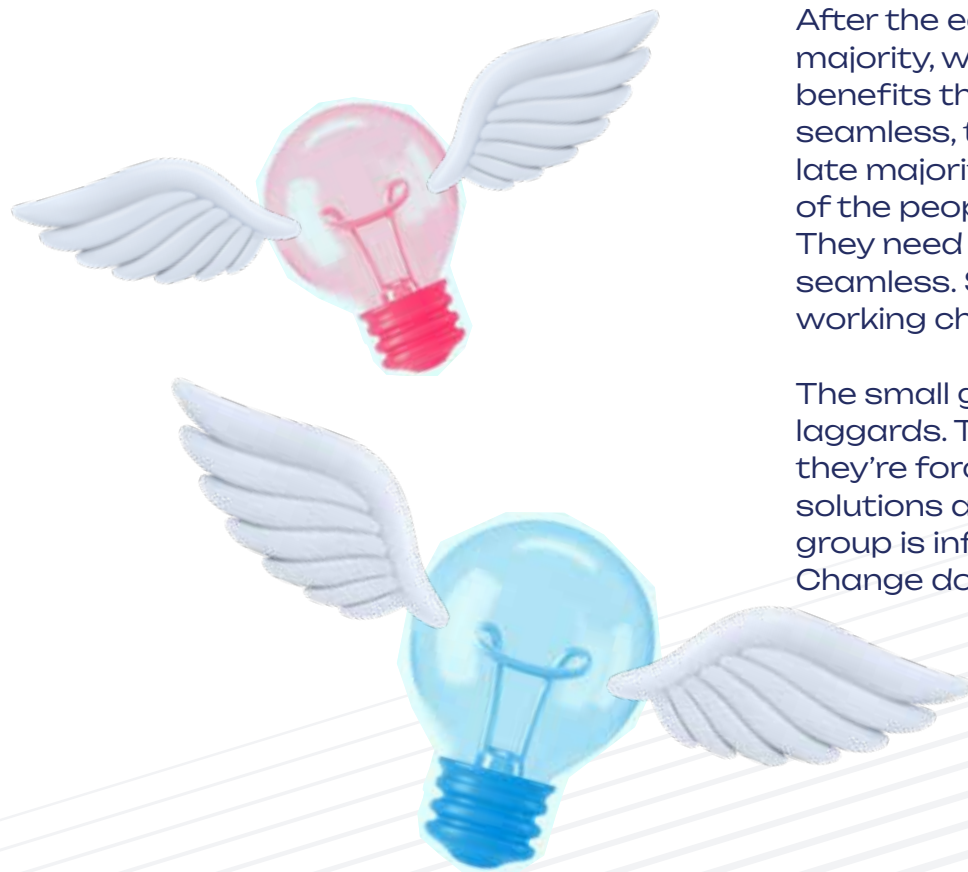
People will adopt technology at different times, only when certain conditions are met

The theory describes how the adoption of a new technology or innovation spreads through a population. At first, the small group of innovators spot something and jump on board because they like being first; they are interested in new for the sake of new. You snag the innovators with a vision and a dream.

Then the early adopters catch wind. They like being there before it is cool, they actually LIKE stuff that doesn't work properly and scrappy half-baked ideas, because they want to have a hand in developing it.

After the early adopters it's the early majority, who need a solution that benefits them to adopt, that's easy and seamless, that slots into their life. The late majority will only adopt when most of the people around them already have. They need solutions to be even more seamless. Small, incremental, perfectly working change is best for this group.

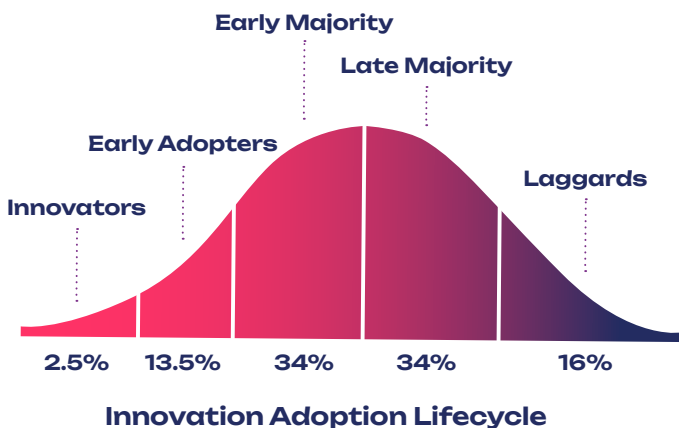
The small group that remains is the laggards. They won't adopt unless they're forced because their current solutions aren't available anymore. Each group is influenced by the one before. Change doesn't skip phases.



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Within a population the proportion of people in each group is predictable

There's a neat graph that shows the proportion of a population that falls into each group:



We can use these conditions to design the spread of corporate change

You're starting to see why a lot of corporate change feels like pushing a boulder up a hill now, right? Often organisations speak to the majority, when zero momentum has been built with early adopters. If the group before them didn't adopt it, they won't adopt.

For the purposes of change strategy, I tend to simplify the theory and think about three groups:

- Early adopters - people who are aware of a problem and have searched for solutions to it; they want to be involved early and co-create
- Majority - people who will adopt only when it's easy and when the benefit to them individually outweighs the cost of switching to a new behaviour
- Laggards - people who won't adopt until there's no other option. They want to be left to get on with things on their terms.

Plan A is natural diffusion at population level

The best approach is usually to plan your change by first co-creating with early adopters, then landing small incremental perfectly working improvements with the majority. Managing messaging from influential laggards is important if they're having an impact on majority opinion, but don't sink effort into changing their minds.

Case Study

A department-wide change initiative, Project X. This one was designed with the technology adoption lifecycle in mind from the start. We set traction targets for how many people we wanted to adopt in ambitious timeframes being open-minded about who those people specifically were. Then we went out to find them. Find them we did, and after co-creating early solutions for them we started to crack the mainstream. Tactics that helped:

- Making early adopters feel like they're part of a special exclusive club of early pioneers
- Not going too soon on targeting the mainstream. Using influencer endorsement sparingly at the right time, with carefully considered people
- Didn't expect our early solution to be the one that scales, instead we reinvented product and service offerings to suit the needs of the changing customer base.

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Plan B is applying the technology adoption lifecycle within top-down segmented adoption

Sometimes there are business reasons why you need certain people to be on board at a specific point in time. If this is the case you have to be aware there will be people who fall across all phases of the lifecycle in each of your roll-out phases. Even though your plan says they make the change at the same time, within each group, the people in it will need different things.

Case Study

Another department-wide change initiative, let's call it Project Y. The ship had sailed on how this new technology would be rolled out across the business. There was a multi-year plan that detailed who would be on-boarded and when and zero appetite for adjusting this to take account of the best ways to land change with people. Even at an early phase there were two vocal groups of complainants; some of those we'd asked to go early frustrated that things weren't perfect and some of those being asked to wait frustrated they weren't being invited to get involved. These tactics helped:

- Explaining the simplified technology adoption lifecycle to every group going early and asking them to reflect on their preferences vs the phase of roll-out we're asking them to participate in
- Establishing mechanisms for the majority folk stuck in early adopter shoes to raise their issues and be heard
- Finding ways to invite early adopters stuck in majority phases to contribute to shaping the solutions

Notice when your change approach is clashing with people's adoption approach

So next time you're leading a change and getting seemingly contradictory resistance, ask yourself could it be a symptom of early adopters being asked to wait until everything is sorted out and/or some of the majority being asked to behave like early adopters?

If this is what's happening, either scrap the mandate and replan to facilitate natural diffusion, or find ways to let early adopters get involved while things are still being worked out. Empathising with and supporting people who have been put in a segment that's uncomfortable for them will make things easier for everyone.

Lessons learned:

- Change spreads person-to-person, not top-down
- The technology adoption lifecycle is a powerful model for change
- Different groups adopt change at different times for different reasons
- From early adopters to laggards, each group needs distinct conditions to engage
- Resistance often comes from mismatch between adoption styles and rollout strategy
- If rollout must be segmented top down, adjust the approach for lifecycle segments within each group

