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The digital adoption buyer's guide

Evaluating and selecting the right digital adoption platform (DAP) just got a whole lot easier.

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Digital adoption efforts not paying off? Here's why.

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It's a familiar tale: You've poured vast amounts of money into new software and digital tools—extensive training, dedicated support, documentation galore. And yet for all this, you're still not getting the return on investment (ROI) you expected. Not even close.

According to Gartner, nearly two-thirds of employees resist organizational change.

[According to Gartner,](#) nearly two-thirds of employees resist organizational change. Not because they're unwilling or refusing to get onboard. But because they're held back by fear and confusion, stemming from a lack of support.

Digital adoption projects that fail usually share a common strategic flaw: emphasizing guidance for guidance's sake over support based on genuine insight and verifiable data. The result is reactive training solutions that lack a clear understanding of where friction occurs and what's most important to prioritize, why key workflows are abandoned, or how staff truly engage with new AI tools.

Without a foundation built on real behavioral insights, even the best onboarding and support experiences will come up short. You end up with a fragmented assortment of isolated tooltips and generalized walkthroughs. You're not delivering the positive, measurable business impact you need.

CHAPTER 3

Digital adoption efforts not paying off? Here's why.

Friction burns

The failure to link digital adoption initiatives to tangible behavior and business results isn't just an operational hiccup, it's a considerable, measurable cost. Friction points and subpar user experience severely drain efficiency. Employees losing more than a month of work each year navigating digital workflow frustration is too high a price to pay.

Mind the AI experience gap

The rush to integrate AI into enterprise workflows only compounds the challenge. Yes, plenty of organizations have rapidly deployed gen AI tools, like copilots and bespoke LLMs. But they can't measure whether users are getting value from them. Are they helping? Or hindering? And how do they compare to the previous, SaaS-only way of doing things?

 A digital adoption strategy that doesn't track these complex, emerging behaviors, particularly through dedicated analytics measuring agent performance, will be obsolete before you can say AI ROI.

United we solve

The good news is, all is fixable—if your digital adoption strategy is evidence-based and starts with comprehensive data and immediate feedback.

Quantitative analytics provide signals about user behavior, revealing precisely where friction exists. Combine it with qualitative signals gathered from comprehensive feedback mechanisms, and you can quickly gain a deep understanding of the "why" behind the struggle.

The most effective digital adoption solution will bring analytics (for humans and agents), guidance, and feedback together in one single, intelligent platform. Together, these unified signals form the critical foundation for adaptive, evidence-based guidance that actually changes behavior and drives measurable business outcomes.

What digital adoption really means

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Digital adoption goes far, far beyond user onboarding. It's now a comprehensive practice aimed at managing and optimizing the entire software experience.

Digital adoption means helping every person, from internal employees leveraging core systems to external customers engaging with SaaS and AI products, to confidently utilize all available technology to deliver maximum business value.

Moving decisively away from static, transactional training events, this modern, outcome-focused approach relies on a continuous loop of learning and action. Let's look at that loop:
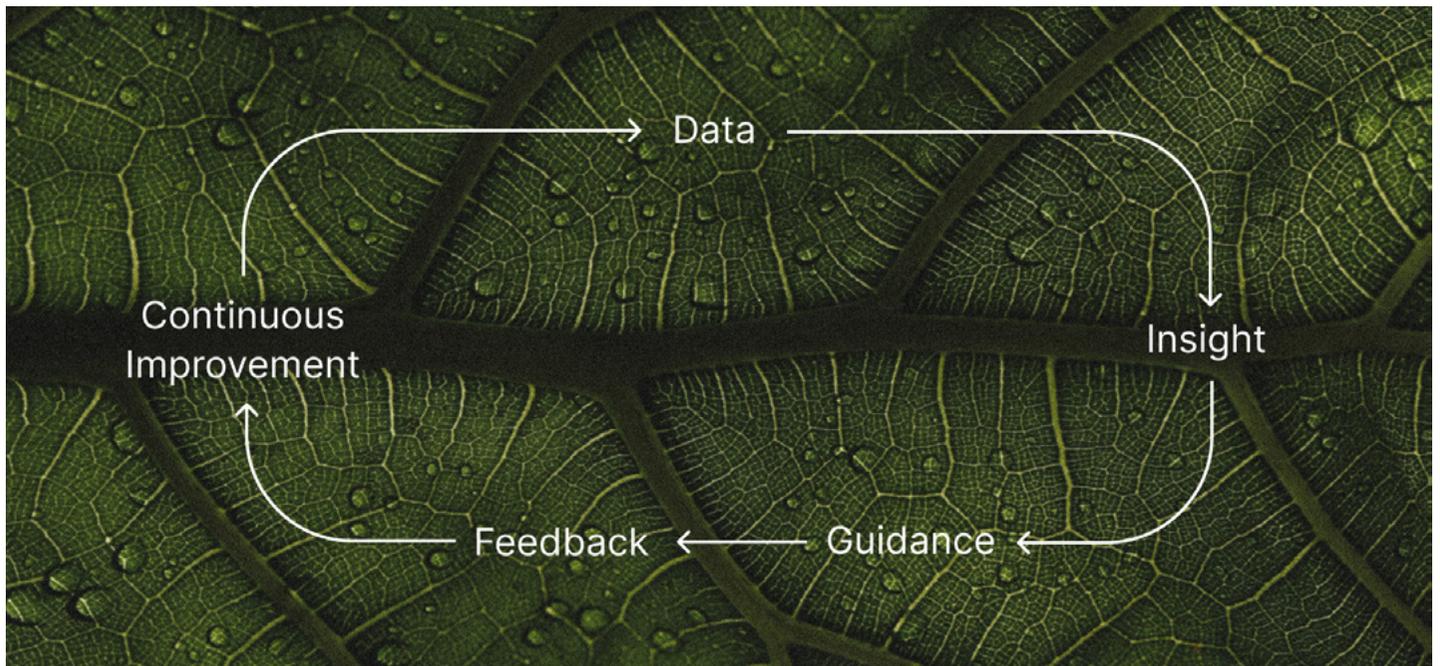
The dynamics of change

Generic, one-size-fits-all "walkthroughs" have had their day. Change has caught up with them. The most effective organizations have evolved from static content delivery to a dynamic, continuous process driven by insight loops.

Successful digital adoption is now—and must be—a continuous process where the guidance deployed is constantly informed and improved by real-time user behavior.

Put another way: To achieve meaningful, lasting change, you must systematically combine two critical signal types: behavioral data (what people do) and sentiment data (what people feel).

When these two data streams harmonize, when quantitative usage analysis meets qualitative feedback, you can effectively optimize the user experience and move beyond simple usage tracking.

The best digital adoption solutions connect these signals natively, all in one platform. They provide guidance that's inherently smarter and more targeted than relying on complex, costly, and inconsistent third-party integrations to close the loop.

On a scale of 1–5, how mature is your digital adoption strategy?

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Successful digital adoption isn't a one-and-done thing. It's a continuous process. And it demands that organizations shift from a reactive state, troubleshooting issues as they arise, to proactively and strategically managing the complete digital experience.

The maturity journey provides a framework for organizations to benchmark their current state. It can help you define the necessary platform requirements to achieve your strategic ambitions.

The dynamics of change

The maturity matrix below describes how capabilities evolve across critical dimensions. It spells out transformation from basic, reactive use cases to predictive, impact-driven operations.

(It's worth noting that the most successful organizations advance one stage at a time, building sustainable capabilities that stick.)

1. Fragmented & reactive	You're operating in firefighting mode. In-app guidance exists but isn't informed by analytics or feedback. Usage data is inconsistent or unavailable, and adoption efforts rely on anecdotal complaints. Improvements are manual and isolated, often driven by intuition rather than evidence.
2. Consolidated & proving	You've begun linking some usage data to guidance efforts. Teams deploy basic in-app help for common workflows and capture limited feedback, showing early wins in specific areas. ROI is still unproven, and guidance decisions remain mostly reactive without deeper behavioral insight.
3. Scaling & systematic	Behavioral analytics now inform where to focus adoption efforts. User feedback is incorporated into planning. You're seeing measurable impact in certain tools or teams, but scaling consistent, insight-based adoption across the organization remains a challenge.
4. Integrated & governed	Digital adoption is embedded company-wide. Product analytics and agent analytics provide unified visibility into how users engage with every app—including AI tools—while feedback loops drive continuous improvement. Governance aligns adoption strategies across departments, ensuring consistent experiences and outcomes.
5. Predictive & impact-driven	Adoption data now shapes business strategy. Analytics surface friction, comprehensive feedback tools capture real-time sentiment, and AI-powered guidance adapts dynamically to each user. Digital adoption is directly tied to productivity, efficiency, and revenue growth—your competitive advantage.

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Dimension	1. Fragmented & reactive	2. Consolidated & proving	3. Scaling & systematic	4. Integrated & governed	5. Predictive & impact-driven
Visibility & analytics	Disjointed tracking across apps; usage data lives in silos or isn't trusted. No consistent view of how employees or customers engage with software.	Teams begin connecting basic usage metrics to specific workflows. Limited dashboards exist, but insights are backward-looking.	Behavioral analytics inform priorities for in-app guidance. Visibility expands to more products; early trend analysis emerges.	Unified analytics across applications— including AI tools— provide reliable, real-time insight. Governance ensures data consistency.	Analytics across product + agent data reveal friction that can be addressed immediately; adoption and productivity forecasts guide strategy.
Guidance strategy	Static, one-size-fits-all walkthroughs deployed reactively when users complain.	Basic segmentation begins; guides tied to specific processes show early wins but lack scale or measurement.	In-app guidance is data-informed and measurable. Teams A/B-test flows and use feedback to iterate content.	Cross-functional governance aligns guidance strategy company-wide. Personalization adapts by role, behavior, and tool.	AI-driven, adaptive guidance optimizes itself based on real-time analytics and feedback— continuously improving adoption outcomes.
Feedback & listening	Feedback captured inconsistently through support tickets or one-off surveys; no closed-loop process.	Structured surveys and manual NPS programs appear in pockets; feedback rarely tied to usage data.	Feedback loops expand and begin informing prioritization. Teams combine sentiment with usage metrics to identify friction.	Always-on feedback (e.g., Pendo Listen) captures contextual sentiment in-app and feeds governance dashboards.	Sentiment analysis surfaces emerging friction; feedback, analytics, and guidance operate as one intelligent system.
Outcome measurement	ROI anecdotal at best. Adoption tracked manually and inconsistently, if at all.	Some evidence of efficiency gains or satisfaction improvements in specific products; still limited visibility.	Standard KPIs (e.g., time-to-competency, AI-tool usage) defined. Success is measured but not fully automated.	Company-wide reporting connects adoption metrics to productivity, retention, and revenue outcomes.	Business decisions are driven by adoption data; ROI and productivity impact are quantified and forecastable.
AI enablement	Little to no AI adoption; employees rely entirely on manual workflows.	Early AI pilots exist but lack adoption tracking or performance data.	AI tools are being incorporated into workflows with basic measurement of usage and benefit.	Enterprise-wide AI enablement program links AI usage analytics with guidance and feedback data for optimization.	Comprehensive AI adoption management: real-time analytics track usage, efficiency, and continuous performance gains.

Free Resource → Download the stand-alone version of the digital adoption maturity matrix here.

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Preparing your organization for a DAP investment

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Successful DAP investment hinges on detailed organizational readiness. The solution must align your technical needs to your business outcome goals.

Five steps to readiness

Follow our five structured steps to justify the budget and secure the critical cross-functional buy-in required for enterprise deployment.

Step 1: Audit your tech and AI stack

Start with an objective inventory of the current software landscape. Map all current applications, AI assistants, and critical user workflows, including third-party and custom-built internal systems. Deploy existing usage analytics to identify underused tools and pinpoint specific friction points within key processes.

And critically, analyze the breadth and depth of how users interact with new AI/copilot tools versus traditional SaaS. This will determine if AI capabilities are integrated into business workflows or if they remain siloed experiments. When you know this, you can set clear requirements for agent analytics capability in the eventual platform selection.

Step 2: Define your adoption outcomes
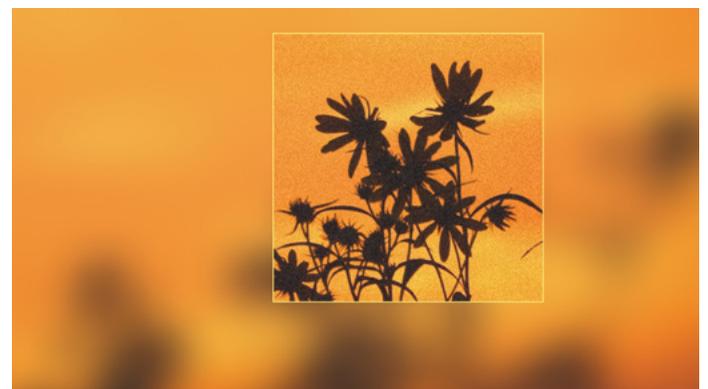
What does success look like? Frame success around measurable business impact, not simple metrics like guide completion rates. Articulate your goals around specific outcomes like productivity lift, compliance adherence, or customer retention improvement. And explicitly call out AI adoption as a core metric.

Every organization needs to know if employees are utilizing generative AI to improve work quality or if the AI investment is made, launched, and subsequently ignored. You need to know, one way or the other.

By linking the DAP investment directly to quantifiable strategic outcomes—including (but not limited to) increased revenue, cost savings, and risk mitigation—you can create a powerful, robust business case that resonates with executive leadership.

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Step 3: Build your buying committee

Because driving digital adoption is an organization-wide challenge, not departmental one, you're going to need a diverse and cross-functional buying committee.

Include stakeholders from key areas such as Product, IT, HR (for internal employee adoption), Operations, and Revenue/Finance. By doing so, you implicitly raise the requirements ceiling for the platform, demanding enterprise-grade features like security certifications (SOC 2, GDPR), governance, and robust cost-saving projections.

And remember to consider both customer-facing and employee-facing use cases. Don't limit yourself to product analytics and in-app guidance for one or the other.

Step 4: Shortlist vendors

Establish and lock-in must-have features based on your audit and goals. And do notbudge on what you need for analytics and feedback. Things like cross-app analytics, built-in feedback tools, and AI readiness? Treat a lack of them as deal-breakers when you're checking out potential vendors.

Step 5: Pilot with real data and feedback loops before full rollout

Before you go all in on enterprise-wide deployment, pilot your shortlisted solution using real user data and incorporating closed feedback loops. This vital testing phase verifies the vendor's claims regarding time-to-value, implementation complexity, and the platform's ability to generate actionable insights that result in measurable improvements.

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Evaluating digital adoption vendors

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Digital adoption solutions vary widely, even wildly.

Many specialize in process guidance. Others focus on robust analytics. But the best solutions bring analytics, guidance, and feedback together so that organizations can see behavior, understand the context behind it, and improve the experience proactively.

Your five-point evaluation checklist:

1. Analytics depth

Look for robust analytics that track complex user journeys across the entire software ecosystem. This includes: Cross-app visibility, Behavioral paths, Retention analysis, and AI agent performance and usage tracking.

2. Feedback integration

Effective guidance relies on immediate, contextual feedback. Make sure the platform offers native, in-app tools for capturing sentiment rather than relying on disparate support tickets or external experience management (XM) platforms.

This ensures qualitative insights (the why) are immediately connected to quantitative behavior (the what), allowing for proactive intervention and accurate prioritization.

3. Segmentation & personalization

Effective targeting is fundamental to success. Segmentation must advance beyond simple role-based groups. It needs to include targeting based on real-time user behavior (e.g., users who have repeatedly struggled with a specific workflow) and desired business outcomes (e.g., users who have not yet reached activation).

With this level of granularity, you can be sure that the right guidance is delivered precisely when it's needed.

4. AI-readiness

The platform you choose must be future-proofed against the shift toward autonomous digital experiences. This capability requires:

→ **Autonomous insights:** Using AI to analyze usage patterns and surface friction points and opportunities, enabling proactive software and agent optimization.
→ **Agent analytics:** Providing dedicated analytics to quantify the adoption and efficiency of internal Copilots or LLM-based assistants.

5. Security & compliance

For enterprise adoption solutions, robust security and compliance are paramount, requiring validation from IT and Legal stakeholders.

The platform must meet enterprise standards (SOC 2 Type II, HIPAA, GDPR, etc.). It must demonstrate capability in securely managing Personally Identifiable Information (PII). And that must include robust Identity and Access Management (IAM) capabilities and data encryption at rest and in transit to meet regulatory obligations.

This must-have rigor ensures that the platform is seen as a serious, low-risk, enterprise-grade vendor.

Comparing your shortlist: Unified digital adoption wins out

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As soon as you start evaluating digital adoption platforms, the harsh reality of fragmentation rears its confused head. Because most solutions only solve one piece of the adoption puzzle: Guidance or analysis or feedback.

But one piece isn't enough. It results in disjointed insight, redundant tools, and adoption programs that can never scale consistently across the enterprise. What's more,the reliance on fragmented solutions imposes a steep, unnecessary integration tax by introducing significant challenges like data inconsistency, disparate APIs, and expensive, time-consuming custom integrations.

It's clear: The strategic necessity for the modern enterprise is to select a unified platform like Pendo. One single platform that connects analytics, guidance, and feedback natively to drive measurable, scaled change.

Category	Core capabilities	What's missing	Example vendors
Traditional digital adoption platforms (DAPs)	In-app guidance, process walkthroughs, employee training overlays	Shallow analytics, limited segmentation, heavy reliance on professional services, no unified feedback loop	WalkMe, Whatfix
Product analytics platforms (PX)	Behavioral tracking, funnel and cohort analysis	No in-app guidance or feedback; analytics limited to product teams	Amplitude, Heap, Mixpanel
Feedback & experience platforms (XM)	Surveys, NPS, CSAT, sentiment tracking	Data disconnected from behavioral context; insights reactive, not actionable	Qualtrics, Medallia
AI workflow & enablement tools	Embedded copilots, process automation, generative assistants	No measurement of adoption or user engagement; can't quantify AI ROI	Microsoft Copilot, Notion AI, UiPath
Pendo: the unified digital adoption solution	Combines behavioral analytics (Product + Agent), contextual in-app guidance, and real-time feedback (Pendo Listen) in one platform. Enables organizations to see, understand, and improve every user experience—whether employee, customer, or AI-assisted.	Nothing missing—Pendo delivers the full adoption loop from insight → action → outcome.	

Pendo brings analytics, guidance, and feedback together—so you can finally connect what users do, what they need, and how to help them do it better.

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90 days to adoption success

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90 days to adoption success

You should execute the implementation of a unified digital adoption platform as a structured, rapid 90-day sprint. So you can demonstrate rapid Time-to-Value (TTV) and establish a rhythm of data-led optimization.

Weeks 1-2: Establish metrics and connect analytics

Kick off by achieving stakeholder alignment and defining your goals around KPIs like feature adoption, AI usage rate, and time-to-value.

Weeks 3-4: Launch analytics tracking and pilot guides

Launch tracking across key applications. Leverage insights from Product Analytics and Agent Analytics to prioritize high-friction workflows.

Weeks 5-6: Collect feedback and measure impact

Focus on closing the feedback loop. Early ROI measurement begins here, specifically focused on the KPIs defined in Weeks 1-2, such as reduction in support ticket volume or observed improvement in workflow completion speed.

Weeks 7-8: Scale to broader teams, refine segmentation, automate guidance

Deploy validated campaigns to broader teams and departments. Shift to operationalizing the insight-action-iteration loop across the organization, refining audience segmentation based on granular behavioral data, and automating contextual guidance delivery.

Weeks 9-12: Formalize a Center of Excellence and operationalize AI adoption metrics

By the end of the 90 days, the strategy moves from tactical deployment to strategic governance. Establish a Center of Excellence (CoE) to ensure the consistent, scalable, and effective use of the platform across multiple products and teams. Successfully embed AI adoption metrics into business strategy, ensuring the investment drives continuous, measurable, enterprise-wide transformation.

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Bringing it all together

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Bringing it all together

The evidence is crystal clear: fragmented solutions cannot support the scale and intelligence required by the modern enterprise.

When analytics and feedback are unified and prioritized, every subsequent action—every guide, every

feature update, every strategic decision—becomes exponentially smarter. This intelligent approach ensures every user becomes more confident in their technology, and every AI investment yields more measurable value.

Adopt intelligently. Drive measurable impact.

See Pendo in action →

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Book a demo