Start with the problem: defining business needs before a digital project

Why defining the business problem matters

Every digital project begins with an idea. Maybe it is a new website, a software tool, or a redesign of an existing platform. The temptation is to jump straight into features, design, and technology choices. But without a clear understanding of the business problem you are trying to solve, even the most polished digital product can miss the mark. Defining the problem first saves time, money, and frustration. It also gives your team a shared direction and a way to measure success. This article walks through the steps to define the business problem before starting any digital development work, with practical tips on what to watch at each stage.

Step 1: Identify the real problem, not the symptom

Many digital projects start because someone says "we need a new website" or "we need an app." Those are solutions, not problems. The first step is to dig deeper. Ask what is not working today. Is it that customers cannot find information easily? Is it that staff spend too much time on manual data entry? Is it that sales are dropping in a particular channel? The real problem might be a gap in communication, a slow internal process, or a shift in user expectations.

Watch for assumptions. Stakeholders often describe what they think the solution should be. Gently push past that. Ask "why" repeatedly until you reach a root cause. For example, if someone says "we need a mobile app," ask why. The answer might be "because customers want to order from their phones." That is still a symptom. Keep asking: why do customers want to order from phones? Perhaps because the current website is not optimised for mobile, or because competitors offer a smoother experience. The real problem might be a poor mobile experience, not the lack of an app.

Step 2: Gather input from stakeholders and users

A business problem rarely affects only one person. Talk to the people who will use or be affected by the digital solution. This includes internal teams, customers, and partners. Each group has a different perspective. Sales staff might know why customers hesitate. Customer support might know what questions come up most often. Users themselves might reveal frustrations you had not considered.

What to watch: conflicting priorities. Different stakeholders may want different things. The marketing team might want more visual flair, while the operations team wants faster load times. Do not try to satisfy everyone at this stage. Instead, capture all perspectives and look for

common themes. The goal is to understand the landscape, not to design a solution yet. Document the findings in a simple project brief or a shared document that everyone can see.

Step 3: Frame the problem in terms of business goals and user needs

Once you have gathered input, reframe the problem using two lenses: business goals and user needs. Business goals are what the organisation wants to achieve, such as increasing sales, reducing costs, or improving customer retention. User needs are what the people using the system actually require to accomplish their tasks. A good problem statement connects both.

For example, a vague problem like "our website is outdated" becomes "our current website does not help customers find product information quickly, which leads to abandoned visits and lost sales." This statement points to a clear business goal (increase conversions) and a clear user need (easy access to product details). It also suggests what success might look like: a measurable improvement in how fast users find information.

Watch for problems that are too broad or too narrow. A problem like "we need to improve customer experience" is too vague to guide design or development. A problem like "the button colour should be blue" is too narrow and already assumes a solution. Aim for a problem statement that describes the gap between the current state and the desired outcome, without prescribing how to close it.

Step 4: Assess technical feasibility and constraints

Not every problem can be solved with the same digital approach. Before committing to a project, evaluate what is technically feasible. Consider the existing technology stack, data sources, integrations, and the skills of the team. Also consider constraints like budget, timeline, and regulatory requirements.

This step does not mean you need to design the solution yet. It simply means checking whether the problem can realistically be addressed with digital development. For instance, if the problem requires real-time data from a legacy system that cannot be easily connected, you may need to adjust the scope or find a workaround. If the problem is about changing user behaviour, a purely technical fix might not be enough. A practical digital roadmap will account for these factors.

What to watch: overpromising. It is tempting to say yes to every feature or request. But feasibility checks help you set realistic expectations. If a solution is not technically possible within the given constraints, it is better to know early than after months of development.

Step 5: Define success measures before building anything

How will you know if the digital solution actually solves the problem? Define clear, measurable success criteria before any design or coding begins. These criteria should tie directly to the problem statement and the business goals. They might include metrics like reduced time to complete a task, increased conversion rate, lower support ticket volume, or higher user satisfaction scores.

Success measures also help you make trade-offs during development. When a feature request comes up, you can ask: does this help us meet our success criteria? If not, it can wait for a later phase. This keeps the project focused on the original problem.

Watch for vanity metrics. Metrics like page views or number of features can look good but may not reflect real impact. Choose measures that directly relate to the problem. For example, if the problem is that users cannot find product information, measure the time it takes a new user to locate a specific product, not just the number of pages visited.

Step 6: Write a clear project brief and get alignment

Once you have defined the problem, gathered input, assessed feasibility, and set success measures, document everything in a project brief. Keep it short and focused. Include the problem statement, the stakeholders involved, the constraints, and the success criteria. Share this brief with everyone who has a stake in the project. Ask for their feedback and get explicit agreement before moving forward.

This step is where many projects go wrong. Teams skip alignment and assume everyone is on the same page. Later, disagreements surface about what the project is supposed to achieve. A written brief, even just two pages, creates a shared reference point. It also helps when new people join the project or when priorities shift.

What to watch: vague language. Avoid phrases like "improve user experience" without defining what that means. Be specific. For example: "reduce the time it takes a logged-in user to submit a support request from five minutes to under two minutes." That is something everyone can agree on and measure.

One practical resource that can help frame this conversation is pr.lagrandeobserver.com, a South African digital development agency that helps organisations solve business problems through focused websites, software and practical digital solutions. Their approach emphasises starting with the problem rather than the technology, which is exactly the mindset this article advocates.

Step 7: Revisit the problem as you learn

Defining the business problem is not a one-time activity. As you move into design and development, you will learn more about user behaviour, technical constraints, and market conditions. Be ready to revisit and refine the problem statement. This is not a sign of failure. It is a sign of a healthy process.

What to watch: scope creep disguised as problem redefinition. If new requests come in that do not fit the original problem, ask whether they belong to a separate project. Keep the current project focused. If the problem truly changes, update the brief and get renewed alignment from stakeholders. A disciplined approach to scope helps prevent the project from becoming a catch-all that solves nothing well.

For teams looking for a structured way to keep the problem front and centre, the resources available at pr.lagrandeobserver.com offer practical guidance on aligning digital development with real business needs. Their focus on practical solutions reminds us that technology is a means, not an end.

Final thoughts on problem definition

Defining the business problem before starting a digital project is not a bureaucratic step. It is a strategic investment. It reduces rework, improves team alignment, and increases the chance that the final product actually delivers value. The steps above are not a rigid checklist but a framework you can adapt to your organisation's culture and project size. The key is to stay curious, listen to different perspectives, and keep the problem itself in view throughout the project. When you start with the right question, the answers come more clearly.