How to digitally transform your board

Most boards have not transformed. They have had a digital make-over. This paper is about the difference, and what it takes to cross the line.

Knowa

A white paper for boards and their secretariats

SECTION 01

Your board went digital. It did not transform.

Consider a trustee preparing for a quarterly meeting. The board pack arrived on Friday - two hundred and forty pages of investment review, covenant update, actuarial note, regulatory developments, and ESG reporting. The trustee has the weekend to read it, a full-time job that is not this one, and a growing suspicion that the pack has grown longer every quarter. It has.

Now consider the scheme secretary who assembled that pack. They spent two days reconciling document versions, chasing a late paper from the consultant, reformatting the actuary's note for the portal, and cross-referencing last quarter's action tracker. They know the board's preparation model is broken. The portal adopted three years ago has not fixed it. A digital make-over moves the same problems onto a screen. Transformation removes them. The difference is structural.

> *A make-over moves the same problems onto a screen. Transformation removes the problems. The distinction is structural.*

Decisions get made, but the reasoning dissolves within months. When the chair leaves, institutional memory walks out with them. Questions that should take seconds require emails, searches, and guesswork. The scheme secretary fields these constantly. They are the board's memory - and they know how fragile that makes the institution.

What this paper is for

This is a practical guide, not a sales document. It sets out what real digital transformation looks like, the five shifts that define it, and a diagnostic you can run in ten minutes. It is written for trustees, chairs, and governance professionals - particularly scheme secretaries, who carry the operational weight of the current model.

SECTION 02

One question that separates the two

Before the five shifts, here is a single test. Ask it of any tool, process, or platform your board uses:

> *If the board had to revisit a decision from two years ago, how much of the thinking behind it could you reconstruct from the record, without relying on anyone's memory?*

If the honest answer is "most of it," you have had a make-over. The documents are digital, but the understanding still lives in people's heads. The minutes record that the board "considered the recommendation and agreed to proceed." They do not record what was discussed, which trustee raised the concern about fees, or whether the follow-up was completed.

Ask the scheme secretary and you will get a more precise answer. They can probably reconstruct the context - but only because they were in the room and kept their own notes. The institution's memory is, in practice, their memory. That is not a system. It is a single point of failure disguised as competence.

This is not a failure of diligence. It is a failure of architecture. The tools most boards use were designed to store documents, not to capture the reasoning that connects them. Context - the why behind decisions - evaporates because no part of the system retains it as a by-product of normal work.

Everything that follows is a way of making that answer change.

SECTION 03

Five shifts that define real transformation

Transformation is not a product you buy. It is five changes in how the board works. A make-over delivers none of them. Real transformation delivers all five, and they reinforce each other.

1. From storing documents to connecting decisions

A make-over gives you somewhere to put the papers. Transformation links every decision to its evidence, its people, its discussion, and its actions. A transformed board can stand on any decision and see its full context - not because someone filed it correctly, but because the architecture makes the connections automatic.

Without this, a new trustee who asks why the board changed manager eighteen months ago triggers a three-day search through archived packs, different folders, and superseded spreadsheets. With it, the answer takes seconds: the recommendation, the discussion, the vote, the actions, and whether those actions were completed.

What to look for. Can you stand on a decision from two years ago and pull up, in seconds, what was recommended, who decided, what was discussed, and whether the actions were completed?

2. From individual recall to institutional memory

The single biggest risk to most boards is not in the risk register. It is the departure of the person who remembers why things were done. A long-serving chair carries in their head the rationale for the investment strategy, the history with the administrator, the reason the board chose not to consolidate three years ago. When they leave, that context leaves with them.

A make-over stores documents. Transformation captures reasoning as a by-product of normal work, so institutional knowledge belongs to the board rather than to whoever happened to attend. The scheme secretary should not be the institution's memory. They should be its architect.

3. From endless reading to genuine understanding

Board service has quietly become an endurance test. The volume of material grows every year. The expectation is that members will read everything. Most cannot. The honest ones admit it. The rest skim and hope.

The consequence is that trustees are unevenly informed, in ways invisible to everyone else in the room. One trustee read the actuarial section carefully; another skimmed it. Neither knows what the other absorbed. The quality of the board's collective judgement depends on the accident of who read what.

What to look for. Can a member with fifteen minutes before a meeting get to the heart of a 200-page pack and arrive informed enough to ask the question nobody else thought to ask?

4. From the board alone to the board and its advisers

Most boards work with investment consultants, scheme actuaries, legal advisers, and auditors. The legal architecture assumes the board exercises independent judgement on qualified advice. The reality is that this relationship is managed through email - advice arrives outside the governed record and sits in inboxes that belong to individuals, not the institution.

The scheme secretary mediates this constantly: forwarding papers, tracking adviser access in a spreadsheet, ensuring privileged legal advice reaches only the right people. This is not governance. It is damage control.

What to look for. Can you include an adviser in a specific matter without giving them the keys to everything?

5. From process for its own sake to clarity and calm

The honest measure of transformation is how the board feels to serve on. A make-over adds friction: new portals, new workflows, new logins. Transformation removes it. Shorter meetings, manageable preparation, a secretary who focuses on governance rather than administration.

SECTION 04

Make-over or transformation?

The same activity can be a make-over or a transformation depending on what sits underneath it. The visible output looks similar. The structural difference is whether the underlying problems have been solved or merely relocated.

The digital make-over	Real transformation
Papers are uploaded as PDFs before each meeting.	Papers are linked to the decisions, advice, and history they relate to.
Minutes record what was decided.	The record holds why it was decided, and what was considered but rejected.
Knowledge lives with long-serving members.	Knowledge lives in the board's record and survives turnover.
Members are expected to read everything.	Members can interrogate the record and arrive informed in minutes.
Advisers are looped in by email.	Advisers join specific matters with controlled access and a full audit trail.
New tools add portals and process.	Tools reduce load so the board focuses on judgement.

SECTION 05

The invisible workload

Before moving to AI, it is worth pausing on the role that absorbs most of the cost when a board has been made over but not transformed: the scheme secretary, company secretary, or whoever holds the governance function.

In a make-over board, this person reconciles document versions across disconnected systems, chases late papers, tracks actions in a spreadsheet, drafts minutes from memory, and fields questions from trustees who cannot find what they need.

They do this work well, which is precisely the problem. Because the work gets done, the board does not see the cost. It shows up as late evenings before meetings, as institutional knowledge that exists only in their notebook, as a bottleneck that becomes a crisis only when they are unavailable.

> *The scheme secretary should not be the institution's memory, its document manager, its access controller, and its action tracker. They should be its governance professional.*

Transformation changes this. When the record is connected, the secretary stops assembling it and starts shaping it. When compliance surfaces automatically, they stop maintaining a parallel tracking system. When access is governed by the platform, they stop managing permissions and start managing governance.

This is the shift most technology vendors do not talk about, because it is not a feature. It is the consequence of every other feature working properly.

SECTION 06

A ten-minute board diagnostic

Score your board honestly. One point for each statement that is true today, not aspirationally. Be strict: "we could in theory" scores zero. "We do, and I can show you" scores one.

1. We can trace any material decision from the last three years back to the advice and discussion behind it, in minutes.
2. If our longest-serving member left tomorrow, the board would retain its institutional knowledge.
3. A new member can reach genuine fluency from the record itself, without relying on informal briefings.
4. A member with limited preparation time can interrogate a board pack and arrive informed enough to challenge, not just follow.
5. We can include an adviser in a specific matter with controlled access, a clean audit trail, and no leakage of unrelated material.
6. The why behind decisions is captured as a by-product of normal work, not reconstructed from memory.
7. When AI touches our material, we know what it can see, where the data goes, and whether its answers are grounded in our record.
8. Six months after adopting any new tool, the board spends more time on judgement and less on chasing documents.

---

0 to 3. You have had a make-over. The papers are digital; the underlying problems are not solved.

4 to 6. Transformation has started in places. The gains are real but partial, and probably depend on one or two committed individuals.

7 to 8. Your board is genuinely transformed. Knowledge, evidence, and understanding belong to the institution, not to whoever happened to attend.

SECTION 07

Where AI fits, and where it goes wrong

AI is about to widen the gap between make-over boards and transformed ones. Used well, it is the fastest route to genuine understanding. Used badly, it is the fastest route to the appearance of understanding, which is more dangerous than ignorance because it is harder to detect.

The next eighteen months will determine whether AI becomes the tool that closes the gap between make-over and transformation, or the tool that makes the gap invisible.

The quiet risk already in your boardroom

We are already seeing this. A trustee pastes a consultant's recommendation into ChatGPT to ask whether it looks reasonable. An adviser runs a draft manager paper through Copilot to tighten the language. A scheme secretary asks a generic LLM to summarise a Pensions Regulator update before the meeting. None of it is governed. None of it was designed for the work.

This is not hypothetical. It is happening now, in boards that would never consciously send confidential fiduciary material to a consumer technology company. The choice is being made by default, one prompt at a time, because the tools the board uses do not answer the questions the board has.

The tool produces a confident summary. The trustee feels more informed. And the actual cognitive work the legal architecture assumes is happening - independent judgement applied to the substance of the recommendation - has been displaced by trust in a system that was never built for the purpose.

> *The choice being made is not "shall we use AI?" but "shall we use AI tools that were never designed for this work?"*

Two futures

Every capable tool placed inside a stressed decision system pulls in one of two directions. It either reduces the cost of doing the thing the system is meant to do, or it reduces the cost of appearing to do it.

In the first future - smooth ratification - AI makes it easier for the board to confirm. The platform synthesises the SIP, the fund's performance, the peer comparison, and produces a confident affirmation. The board approves. The audit trail looks better than ever. And yet the moment at which a trustee mind engages with a recommendation and tests it has been hollowed out.

In the second future - architected judgement - AI makes it cheaper for the board to challenge. The platform surfaces where previous decisions are inconsistent with what is now proposed. It identifies the quiet drift the headline number disguises. It points to the question the board asked last September that was answered with a promise to follow up, and never was.

> *One reduces the cost of confirming. The other reduces the cost of challenging. They produce radically different products.*

What good looks like

- Grounded, not fluent. Every answer is tied to a source in the board's own record, with citations. The tool says when the record does not contain an answer.
- Contained. Confidential deliberation does not leave the board's environment or train someone else's model. The board can prove it.
- Auditable. The board can see who asked what and what the tool returned. AI use becomes part of the governance record.
- Built for the work. The tool understands governance - decisions, evidence, discussion, follow-up.
- Designed to challenge. The default behaviour surfaces inconsistencies, gaps, and unanswered questions.

SECTION 08

Transformation in practice

You do not need a five-year programme. Boards that cross the line tend to follow the same short path, and the gains compound quickly once the first shift takes hold.

Start with memory, not features

The highest-value shift is almost always institutional memory, because it addresses the risk no register captures: the departure of understanding. If you do nothing else, make sure the reasoning behind decisions is captured as work happens. This single change creates the connected record the other four shifts depend on.

Bring the secretariat in first

Start with the secretariat. They know where the current model breaks, which workarounds are holding the board together, and what "working" actually means. A tool that passes the secretariat's test will pass the board's. A tool that impresses the board but doubles the secretary's workload has failed.

Insist on evidence over claims

Hold any tool to the diagnostic. A demo on generic documents proves nothing. A pilot on your own material, with your own secretariat, proves everything. The five shifts either happen or they do not.

Measure how it feels

Six months in, ask two questions. Ask the board: are you spending more time on judgement and less on logistics? Ask the secretariat: has your workload shifted from administration to governance? If both answers are yes, the board is transforming. If only the first is yes, someone is absorbing the cost.

SECTION 09

Built for the board, from the ground up

Knowa is a governance platform used by more than a thousand UK boards, representing over 300 billion pounds in assets under governance. It serves lay trustee boards and professional trustee firms alike - a professional trustee carrying ten or twenty appointments needs transformation to work consistently across every one.

The platform delivers transformation in three parts that share one governance record:

A connected record

Every decision links to its evidence, people, discussion, and history. The work between meetings threads to the paper or policy it relates to. The work of the meeting itself is captured cohesively: trustees read and annotate in advance, discussion is captured live, minutes are drafted within the hour with actions already tracked.

Memory that survives turnover

Context is captured as a by-product of normal board work. When a trustee leaves, the board retains not just the documents but the reasoning that connects them. A new member inherits a navigable history of how the scheme thinks.

Knowa Q

A purpose-built intelligence layer for UK trustee boards. Knowa Q answers questions about the board's own record, with citations, and tells you when the record does not contain an answer. It does not advise. It does not recommend. It ensures that when the board forms a judgement, the record they form it against is fully accessible and fully cited.

An illustration. A trustee asks: "Have we considered this manager before?" A poorly designed AI might answer "the recommendation appears reasonable." Knowa Q answers differently: the board considered a similar replacement in September 2023; the stated concern was fee transparency; the follow-up action was not marked complete; here are the minutes, the SIP section, and the action item. The board still decides. It does so with the record in front of it, not behind it.

Advisers, included properly

Bring advisers into specific matters with controlled access and a full audit trail. The adviser's input becomes part of the record. The conversation between trustee and adviser - which is the actual mechanism by which judgement is exercised - becomes denser and more grounded.

Knowa is ISO 27001 certified, UK-hosted, and built around role-based access with detailed audit logs. Confidential deliberation stays inside the platform and is never used to train external models.

SECTION 10

The people who are not in the room

Trustee duty exists for the members. They are the people whose retirement security depends on whether the board made a real decision or a ceremonial one. They are not in the meeting. They will never read the minutes. They have no way of knowing which questions were asked and which were not.

This is why design choices in board technology are quietly ethical choices. A platform that optimises only for the convenience of the board is serving a constituency already well represented in the room. A platform that optimises for the integrity of the decision - for the quality of the conversation through which trustees and advisers reach it together - is serving the constituency that is not.

The scheme secretary understands this instinctively, because their work has always been in service of people they will never meet. Every pack they assemble, every action they track, every minute they draft is ultimately for the members whose retirements depend on the board getting it right.

> *Care is not a sentiment. It is a structural commitment to the people the system exists to protect, expressed in the architecture of the tools that govern on their behalf.*

That is the test we apply to ourselves. It is the test the next generation of governance technology will be measured against - in regulation, in litigation, and in the quieter verdict of which boards served their members well and which merely looked as though they did.

The line between make-over and transformation is, in the end, the line between those two outcomes. This paper has tried to make that line visible. Crossing it is the work.

Knowa · ISO 27001 certified · UK Pensions Awards Technology Innovation Winner 2020, 2022, 2024