

How to Transform Your Information Technology Department with Strategic Roadmaps

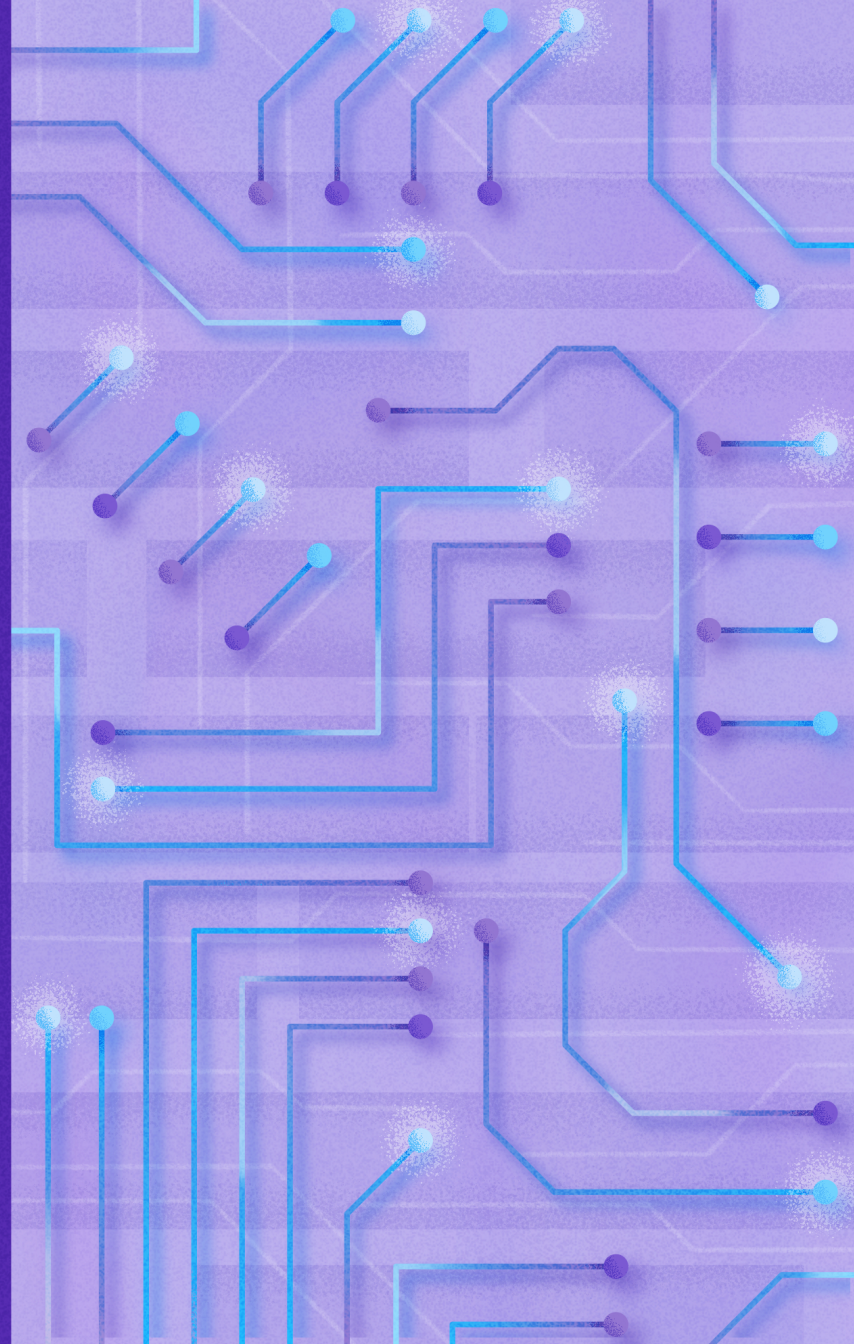


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Introduction

IT Departments as Service Providers

For most of their history, organizations viewed the Information Technology (IT) department as a service provider. Have a new employee starting that needs a computer? Call IT. Forget your password? Call IT. Did your laptop stop working? Call IT. The help desk and networking responsibilities have encouraged that view, and the IT industry has cemented that perception through pushing ideas such as IT Service Management (ITSM)

IT departments support the **technology infrastructure** that organizations need to operate.

IT departments have an extensive set of responsibilities. They support the technology infrastructure that an organization needs to operate. In the past, that could mean on-premise servers, server farms, or data centers. Increasingly these days, it means cloud services.

The move to the cloud likely reduced the number of physical servers that an organization had to care about but replaced that maintenance with the responsibility of properly managing cloud services.

A big part of managing that infrastructure is keeping those systems secure and protecting customer and organizational data, and, in the case of a hack, acting as damage control when protections fail.

IT departments also have to worry about all the software that an organization uses. They need to figure out what's the right mix of Commercial Off The Shelf Software (COTS), cloud services, and custom-developed software for the organization. No single mix works best since every organization is different.

The Changing Technology Landscape

In the first part of the 21st century, when [software began eating the world](#), as Marc Andreessen put it, the work of your IT department became more and more critical to your business, whether you were in financial services, insurance, retail, manufacturing, or healthcare.

In order for an organization to survive and thrive, businesses needed to incorporate technology into all aspects of the business. People in sales, finance, and accounting didn't know how to do that. They needed help from people who understood technology to figure out the best way to use it to grow the business.

IT was more frequently invited into the [room where it happens](#).

Yet, business needs and technologies were transforming. Organizations needed to respond quickly to changes in their environment and exploit new business opportunities when they arose. Previous experiences with IT led them to believe that asking for help from IT would be a lengthy process, so they started looking for alternatives outside the organization.

At the same time, technology was advancing such that it was possible to find new tools that helped organizations accomplish cheaply and quickly with a much better user experience than what IT departments had typically provided.

Need to collaborate with a distributed team? Slack worked great for that. Need to share documents with people at other companies? You could choose from Google Drive, Dropbox, or a variety of other choices.

IT needs to go from being a service provider to a strategic partner. That means being easier to work with and positioning themselves to drive solutions so that business units look outside the company to make things happen.

The IT department needs to consider the needs of users and external customers. Even if the thing they're working on doesn't directly interact with the organization's customers.

How IT Departments Have Adapted

IT departments have attempted to evolve how they work to address the changes in their environments. The common starting point for these changes is an agile transformation. This is where the IT department tries to adopt an agile framework, usually Scrum, Kanban, or [Scaled Agile Framework \(SAFe\)](#).

These transformations most often stayed inside the IT department with limited effects on how the IT department interacted with other business units in the organization. Because of its foundation in software development, agile transformations typically had a bigger impact on organizations that built custom software inside its walls. Those organizations found that their software development teams became more effective, and perhaps more predictable. But they didn't see a corresponding increase in business results.

These organizations realized that to get the outcomes they sought, they needed to expand the transformation outside the IT department and include the other areas of the organization. Not only did they need to change how they developed technology, but they also needed to change what technology they developed and why.

Enter the [digital transformation](#) - an organization's migration to digital solutions to improve its products or operations. Digital transformations were driven by organizations wanting to make more of their business processes available directly to their customers, which inherently required closer communication and collaboration between IT departments and their counterparts in the rest of the organization.

Then a global pandemic happened, which drove most teams to work remotely and many people to do more and more of their activities online. This sped up digital transformation efforts, and this increased exposure led some organizations to realize that they still weren't getting the results they were looking for.

IT departments can use **roadmaps** to address several challenges that they face.

The teams carrying out digital transformations realized they could learn some things from the world of product management. They needed to incorporate continuous discovery into their practices and build a better understanding of their customers' needs and use that feedback to guide their decisions about what they should and should not build.

It can be tempting for IT departments to think that they should approach all of their work as products rather than projects. That may make sense for their custom development work, but there is some work where it makes sense to handle in a project fashion.

At the same time, that doesn't mean that they can't apply helpful techniques from the world of product management to their work, even if it isn't being treated as a product.

One technique that has a lot of applications is the roadmap. Long used by product managers as a tool to think through and communicate priorities, IT departments can use roadmaps to address several challenges that they face, as long as they apply roadmaps in the right way for the job at hand.

Current Challenges Facing IT Professionals

Your IT department faces a variety of challenges because of the current environment. These challenges show up as a series of balancing acts that you face daily.

Here are the five key challenges that IT professionals face and some thoughts on how you can address those challenges.

- 01 Balancing High Demand with Limited People and Resources
- 02 Balancing the Needs of Internal Users with the Needs of External Customers
- 03 Balancing Communication with Different Audiences
- 04 Balancing Innovation with Keeping the Lights On
- 05 Balancing Self Service with Security and Data Protection

CHALLENGE 01

Balancing High Demand with Limited People and Resources

The Challenge

Technology is an integral part of almost every organization. Yet it's a safe bet that your IT department doesn't have a sufficient budget to accomplish everything on your stakeholder's wish list. Even when your IT department has enough funds, you often struggle to find all the talent you need to complete all those projects.

When your IT department is viewed as a service provider, it can seem like the only choice is to agree to all of your stakeholder's requests. Otherwise, those business units will just go somewhere else, hence the rise of [Shadow IT](#).

It's tempting to think that the answer is to ask for bigger budgets, but that's not a **realistic** nor **sustainable** approach.

The answer is not to agree to do everything in hope of keeping a good relationship with your stakeholders. If you fail to deliver on those promises, you'll end up souring the relationships you were trying to improve.

How To Address It

It's tempting to think that the answer is to ask for bigger budgets, but that's not a realistic nor sustainable approach. When you can shift your IT department to being a strategic partner, you can seek to understand the reason for business unit requests and develop a broader picture of what all those requests mean for the organization.

You can use your knowledge of it to advise your business unit counterparts on how to best use technology to solve their identified problems. The solution may not even be a technological change.

By acting as the central gathering point for these requests, you can work with your stakeholders to build a holistic picture of what the organization needs from a technology standpoint. Once everyone understands the entire technology picture, you can make prioritization decisions amongst the options and develop a plan that addresses the key issues within your people, money, and time constraints.

An [IT Strategy Roadmap](#) is a valuable tool in visualizing that technology picture and aids your discussions about what things you can and can't accomplish within those constraints.

CHALLENGE 02

Balancing the Needs of Internal Users with the Needs of External Customers

The Challenge

Sometimes the requests business units submit are to make the work lives easier in their business units. Those requests, if taken at face value, can result in suboptimal changes. They may make work easier for that department, but can often have a negative impact on your organization's customers.

Take, for example, the health insurer that automates rules to automatically deny claims when they meet certain criteria. While this reduces the workload for the claims administration department, it doesn't result in an enjoyable experience for their insured, who arguably are their customers.

The people working on your organization's systems need to consider both the impact on external customers and the people using those systems. With work driven by digital transformation, the balancing act is fairly straightforward as the users are often external customers.

The [impact on external customers](#) can be more difficult to determine when looking at systems that are solely used inside your organization. Often the impact on external customers is indirect. All the same, you should consider those impacts when deciding whether to move forward with specific projects and how to approach those projects.

How To Address It

Your team can use discovery techniques such as interviews, observation, process mapping, and [journey maps](#) to understand how the process you're working on might affect customers. You can use the information gathered from these techniques as input into prioritization decisions about whether to undertake the project at all.

Your IT departments may want to visualize all your initiatives that could affect customers on a [Multiple Product Roadmap](#). That way, you can get the full picture of all the work going on that could impact customers and determine if there may be some conflicts.

CHALLENGE 03

Balancing Communication with Different Audiences

The Challenge

Responsible IT departments do not intentionally set out to keep their business counterparts in the dark about what's going on. What usually ends up happening is the means by which an IT department tracks its work – project plans, [gantt charts](#), [backlogs](#), and [Kanban Boards](#) – doesn't convey information in a way that's meaningful to many of your stakeholders.

Creating a separate artifact to communicate to stakeholders can be time-consuming and frustrating.

This may sound familiar: your stakeholders complain they don't know what's going on with an IT project, so your team starts distributing status reports. Then you get hit with questions that your status reports answered – a clear sign the stakeholders ignored the status reports. Next, you start scheduling regular project review meetings, which start out quite contentious as stakeholders ask a lot of pointed questions and then check out and stop attending.

How To Address It

You need a quick, concise format to communicate plans and status that provide information at the necessary level of detail for a quick glance and allow readers to dive into detail when they have questions.

Your IT department can use an [IT Project Roadmap](#) to communicate the goals, significant milestones, and dependencies of the project to a wide range of audiences—without getting lost in the weeds of implementation details. And, when you use ProductPlan to build those roadmaps, you can build the roadmap once and filter the information for each different audience.

While building an IT project roadmap might feel like “one more thing to worry about,” it's a time saver. It keeps your stakeholders informed and updated without the overhead of having to sanitize project plan details.

CHALLENGE 04

Balancing Innovation with Keeping the Lights On

The Challenge

IT departments have a wide variety of responsibilities. They need to maintain your technical and communications infrastructure. They also need to maintain long-lived systems, such as claims processing systems for insurance companies, core banking systems for banks, and flight booking systems for airlines.

These systems are deeply intertwined into most of your organization's business processes and are often built on dated technology.

These factors make these systems difficult to change and daunting to replace. As digital transformations progress, you have to change these systems in a manner consistent with more responsive cloud technologies. You also need to introduce modern technologies without bringing business to a standstill.

How To Address It

Revising an IT infrastructure to apply modern technologies in a way that does not disrupt ongoing business yet allows for quick modifications is an ongoing process that requires a lot of coordination and planning.

IT departments find the [IT Infrastructure Roadmap](#) and [IT Architecture Roadmaps](#) to be indispensable tools to help them plan and execute the move to more modern technology while supporting business as usual. Think of it as changing out the engines on a plane while it's in flight.

CHALLENGE 05

Balancing Self Service with Security and Data Protection

The Challenge

IT teams have the responsibility of keeping an organization's systems secure, yet digital transformation drives opening an organization's systems to people and other systems outside the organization's walls. The same challenge comes with meeting the requirements of data privacy legislation while improving data visibility.

How To Address It

The IT department can use the [Enterprise IT Roadmap](#) to plan and communicate the efforts that are currently underway to directly improve security and privacy. These roadmap views also provide a means of seeing what other efforts are underway that may affect security and may interfere with those efforts.

IT Roadmap Tips

Even though many people consider roadmaps to be a Product Management tool, there are several ways you can use roadmaps for your IT efforts, whether you're implementing other product management techniques or not.

In fact, many IT departments look longingly at their Product Manager friends and think, "Gee, that's a great tool. I wish I knew how to use it." If that was you, here are ten tips for making roadmaps work for you in your IT efforts.

- 01 Know Your Audience
- 02 Structure Your Roadmap to Fit the Job
- 03 Update Your Roadmap Frequently
- 04 Make Your Roadmap Executive-Friendly
- 05 Set Your Roadmap Timeframe Strategically

TIP 01

Know Your Audience

It's useful to have a different version of your roadmap ready for each audience who will see it. This may include executive stakeholders, engineers, and your peers in the various business units.

Product managers and IT teams build roadmaps with two primary objectives in mind: to communicate their IT strategy (usually to executives) and to help plan and prioritize IT initiatives with their cross-functional teams (development, marketing, etc.).

A roadmap for communicating strategy won't look the same as a roadmap developed to help execute the strategy.

So, a majority of teams who use roadmaps build different roadmaps for different audiences. If you'd like a walk-through of how ProductPlan helps you build different versions of your roadmap, read our page on [creating custom roadmap views](#).

Remember: One size does not fit all for roadmaps.

TIP 02

Structure Your Roadmap to Fit the Job

As you can see from the different roadmap styles shared in the challenges section, there are a lot of different formats that a roadmap can come in.

- If you want to experience all the benefits that roadmaps promise, [consider your audience and make sure you pick the right format for the job](#).
- If you want to lay out the direction of IT efforts that span across your organization, use an [IT Strategy Roadmap](#).
- If you want to keep track of improvements to technology platform components that are critical to other systems or products, use an [IT Architecture Roadmap](#).
- If you want to communicate the timing of initiatives for internal-facing systems, security, and data platforms, use an [Enterprise IT Roadmap](#).
- If you want to set expectations and update key stakeholders about your IT infrastructure transformation and improvement effort, use an [IT Infrastructure Roadmap](#).
- If you need to tell the story about your efforts to implement, manage and deliver IT services, use an [IT Service Management Roadmap](#).

TIP 03

Update Your Roadmap Frequently

Successful roadmaps serve several purposes. Primarily, they help you build a shared understanding of the strategic direction of your IT activities. They're also used as communication tools to let everyone else know what IT is doing. When your IT plans and strategy change, your roadmaps need to reflect this.

Take a page from those successful product managers who review and update their roadmaps often, somewhere between once a week to once a month.

When you keep your roadmap up to date, your stakeholders will come to rely on it as a key source of information, and you'll [earn their trust](#) because they know you're always providing the most up-to-date information.

TIP 04

Make Your Roadmap Executive-Friendly

You're going to share your roadmaps with different audiences. But one of the biggest consumers of roadmaps is the [executive](#).

That's why it's wise to keep your roadmap high-level and strategically focused. You also want to keep it visually clear and intuitive. Executives want to immediately grasp your big-picture plan.

It's wise to keep your roadmap **high-level** and **strategically focused**.

Besides making your roadmap easy to understand quickly, you also want to be prepared to answer big-picture questions, especially, "Why aren't we getting more done?"

TIP 05

Set Your Roadmap Timeframe Strategically

Change is the only constant. We see new technologies, customer needs, and business demands daily.

You can no longer expect to plan your IT strategy very far into the future. Changes will inevitably derail long-term plans or force you to re-prioritize.

IT teams can't plan within too short of timeframes. You still need the guidance of an IT and organizational strategy.

Based on these realities, your [roadmap timeframe](#) will probably fall somewhere in the 6 - 12 month range. If your roadmap is more tactically focused, the time frame will be shorter. If your roadmap focuses more on strategy, the time frame will be longer.

TIP 06

Use the Right Roadmap Tools

One key to successful roadmaps is to build them with the right tool: a dedicated roadmap software app. As we pointed out earlier, you need to update your roadmap often. You'll also share your roadmap with different audiences, each of which may need slightly different versions.

If you're using [slide decks and spreadsheets](#) for your roadmaps, you may create extra work for yourself. You need something dynamic that allows you to edit on the fly and outputs more than a static file.

The product management community has used tools like these for decades. And habits are hard to break. Only recently did product managers shift to purpose-built roadmap software.

TIP 07

Adopt Agile Methodologies

In today's business environment, the pace of change is quick. Too quick for IT professionals to rely on traditional software development processes. Rigidity, resistance to change, and long-term strategies have no place in modern software development. And traditional methodologies often lead to systems that don't meet the organization's needs.

Therefore, most product managers we surveyed are adopting agile approaches.

Agile teams examine and tweak their roadmaps weekly or monthly. They make changes frequently to reflect the evolving world and market.

And they develop their roadmaps within a shorter time frame. Usually, they only focus on the next nine months. This is because they know planning too far out will create too rigid a strategy. And they want to leave the team as capable as possible of adjusting focus quickly when they have to.

TIP 08

Feed Your Backlog From Your Roadmap

A common mistake IT teams make when they adopt agile is they use their product backlog as a dumping ground. Every request, suggestion, bug, and tweak they encounter gets put on the backlog. As a result, the backlog becomes unmanageable, and truly valuable items get lost amongst backlog items that don't add a great deal of value.

To keep your backlog manageable, use your roadmap to feed your backlog. Keep the actions you want to take at a high level and only provide details about those actions when an initiative gets close to the current time period. At that point, you can take that initiative and break it down into the backlog items.

This approach means you have less overhead to deal with on your backlog in case priorities change.

Use roadmaps to communicate outside of the IT department. To be effective, those roadmaps need to interact with the more finely grained details of the IT Team's work - typically tracked using backlog management tools such as JIRA or Azure DevOps. ProductPlan's [native integrations](#) help keep those ties together.

TIP 09

Prioritize Your Roadmap Based on Strategic Goals

Most IT teams have too much to do and insufficient time, people, or resources to complete it. The natural reaction to that is to create a roadmap showing the things (they think) they have to do and "prioritize" that roadmap.

Prioritization is not just ordering the items on the roadmap but also deciding which items should be there. You need guidance on what items you work on and in what order. Your organization and IT strategy often provide that guidance.

Your organization's strategic goals help everyone understand the "why" behind your IT strategy. When your strategic goals are clear, it goes a long way toward helping everyone in the organization work toward the common goal of advancing the product in service of this vision. It provides guardrails and a basis from which you can say "no."

TIP 10

Include the Right Amount of Focus on Security and Data Protection

Security and data protection are key IT department responsibilities. But if you want your IT department to be a strategic partner, you need to keep your systems secure without stalling your organization's growth. It comes down to including [the right amount of security and data protection initiatives in your roadmap](#).

If you've made security a priority all along, there may only be some minor items requiring attention. They should jump to the front of the line, get knocked out quickly, and then you can get back to the business of enabling innovation in your organization.

If you've let your focus on security and data protection slide, you may have to spread things out. A big push to take care of the most significant holes or low-hanging fruit is a great start to your new commitment to security.

From there, it's about finding a balance between new functionality and continuing to shore things up. You can include incremental improvements in every release or sprinkled throughout the timeline. You can't stop delivering features that support growth during this security-focused backfill.

Of course, you're not done once you "catch up." Security is a continually evolving landscape with additional requirements appearing all the time. So you should expect to spend more time on those issues as they come up.

You need to cement security's importance in your organization by dedicating some valuable IT Strategy roadmap real estate to it. When cybersecurity is on your roadmap, it communicates to stakeholders and the technical team that this is a business priority and not just an IT issue.

Key Takeaways



IT departments have to simultaneously support existing systems and drive organizational growth.



IT departments are moving from service providers to strategic partners.



IT professionals look to product management techniques to be more strategic.



IT departments use roadmaps to build and share their strategies and plans.



Consider your audience and what you're trying to accomplish when picking your roadmap format.

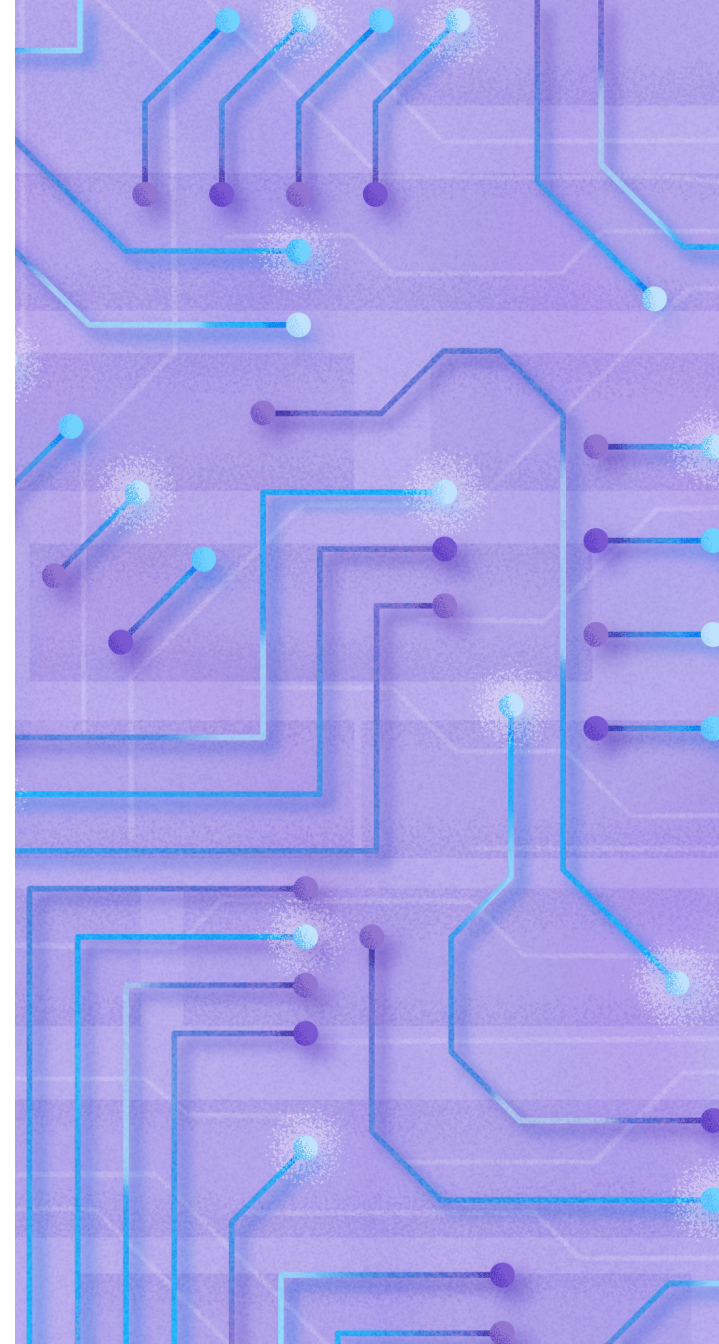


A roadmap tool such as ProductPlan helps you share the right information for your audience.

Conclusion

You've seen how you can use roadmaps to develop your IT strategy and keep your stakeholders informed about what you're up to.

To fully get the sense of how roadmaps created with a built-for-purpose tool can help your IT department, you need to try it out for yourself. [Sign up for a free 14 day trial](#) so that you build your IT strategy and communicate to your stakeholders.





About ProductPlan

ProductPlan makes it easy for teams of all sizes to build beautiful roadmaps. Thousands of product managers worldwide—including teams from Nike, Microsoft, and Spotify—trust ProductPlan to help them visualize and share their strategies across their entire organization. With our intuitive features, product managers spend less time building roadmaps and more time shipping products.

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