



ANATOMY OF A FAILED TRANSFORMATION: ULTRANET (VICTORIA EDUCATION)

The Collapse

Ultraset was meant to transform Victoria's education system. A single digital platform for students, teachers and parents to collaborate, manage learning and communicate across 1,500 schools. It cost more than \$240 million over six years. When it launched in 2010, it barely worked. Schools couldn't access it reliably. When they could, performance was so slow it disrupted teaching.

Core functionality promised in the contract was missing or broken. Teachers found it harder to use than the systems they already had. Parents couldn't navigate it. Students were confused by the interface.

The platform was supposed to support lesson planning, student assessment, parent communication and administrative workflows. Instead, it created more work, introduced new points of failure, and frustrated everyone forced to use it.

Within months, adoption collapsed. Teachers reverted to their existing systems. Schools that had been mandated to use Ultraset found workarounds or simply stopped logging in. By 2012, usage had flatlined. The government tried to salvage it through rework and vendor renegotiation, but the platform's fundamental problems couldn't be fixed.

In 2013, Ultraset was formally abandoned. \$240 million spent. Years of disruption across the education system. Nothing delivered that improved teaching or learning.

The Victorian Auditor-General's review was scathing: poor governance, compromised procurement, weak vendor oversight and a design process so disconnected from classroom reality that the platform was built for a version of teaching that didn't exist.

This wasn't a technology failure. It was a leadership failure that allowed vendor capture, procurement shortcuts and governance drift to overtake sound decision making.

The Fatal Flaw: Procurement Without Accountability

1. Vendor selection lacked rigour - The procurement process was compromised. Conflicts of interest weren't managed properly. Assessment criteria were unclear. A vendor was selected despite evidence they couldn't meet the technical requirements.

2. Governance endorsed rather than challenged - Steering committees relied on optimistic reporting and didn't demand independent assurance. Concerns raised by schools and technical teams were acknowledged but not acted on.

3. A platform was built that classrooms didn't need - Ultraset was designed around an abstract future vision, not the daily realities of teaching. It didn't reflect how teachers plan, instruct or communicate. As a result, adoption never occurred.



Structural and Cultural Breakdowns

Governance:

Conflict of interest controls were weak. Oversight bodies were presented with selective information. Decision making was influenced by politics rather than evidence.

Process:

Requirements were vague. User validation was superficial. Testing was inadequate. Deadlines replaced quality as the primary driver.

People and Culture:

Teachers reported usability issues early, but their feedback was sidelined. Engagement became a compliance activity rather than meaningful input.

Technology and Testing:

Performance issues, access failures and missing functionality made the platform effectively unusable. Schools reverted to their old systems immediately.

The Leader's Mandate: Evidence Over Optimism

- ➤ **Treat procurement as a risk, not a formality** - Vendor selection must be transparent, disciplined and defensible. Poor procurement decisions lock in failure before delivery even begins.
- ➤ **Use governance to test assumptions, not protect them** - Steering committees must interrogate progress, not simply endorse what's presented, independent assurance is essential in large public programs.
- ➤ **Build only what the end users will adopt** - Digital transformation succeeds when solutions reflect real work, real constraints and real needs. Adoption is never created through technology alone.

Strategic Conclusion

Ultraset failed because leaders allowed governance and procurement weaknesses to outweigh the needs of the classroom. Vendor relationships replaced rigorous oversight. Optimism replaced evidence. And by the time the problems were visible, \$240 million had been spent on a platform teachers refused to use.

When a program separates itself from its users, it can't succeed. When governance protects vendors instead of outcomes, failure is inevitable.

At Telos Program Partners, I help leaders design transformation programs where procurement, governance and user reality align. If you need your next major program to succeed where others have failed, let's talk.

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