Barriers to Safety-by-Design Adoption and the Enablers That Address Them

Digital tools, products, and services shape how people learn, work, organize, and connect. As these tools become more powerful and more widely used, questions of safety are central to whether technology can be used productively, sustainably, and at scale.

Digital developers globally face similar pressures to move quickly, innovate, and scale, often with limited resources. Safety can feel abstract, costly, or disconnected from immediate business priorities. Often, it is addressed through reactive fixes, compliance requirements, or crisis response.

Safety-by-Design is a practical approach that helps technology teams anticipate risk and reduce unintended harm as part of everyday product development. Rather than treating safety as a separate or burdensome obligation, Safety-by-Design integrates risk awareness into decisions teams are already making about features, user experience, data, and scale. Unfortunately, adoption of Safety-by-Design practices is frequently slowed by structural, practical, or cultural barriers that inform how teams handle risk, responsibility, and feasibility. They are shaped by incentives, norms, visibility into user experience, and access to practical support. Effective enablers that can help overcome them include listening, trust, clarity, and practical tools.

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Low visibility into user experiences and risks

Lack of visibility into how products are experienced by users most exposed to risk, particularly women and girls and people with disabilities. Developers often underestimate unintended safety challenges or exclusion, especially in shared device environments or contexts with limited reporting options.

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Better user engagement and perspectives data

Structured engagement with organizations that support those experiencing digital violence can help address this gap. Mechanisms such as accessible customer surveys and feedback loops where users can safely share their experiences can give clearer insights into how features are used, misused, or avoided and help identify risks that are not apparent from analytics alone and inform more inclusive and responsive design decisions.

Perception that safety is costly or slows innovation

Small and medium technology companies are frequently concerned that integrating safety would require significant time, technical expertise, or financial investment.

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Analysis of user engagement and retention data and return on investment combined with incremental design changes

Many safety improvements involve modest adjustments rather than major redesigns. Awareness that safety features can be implemented incrementally helps integrate safety with innovation, not at its expense.

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A Reactive Compliance Mindset

Many tech companies approach safety when triggered by external pressures - regulation, public complaints, or reputational risk. Safety is often framed as a response to harm rather than a design consideration.

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Pivot to safety as a proactive strategy to better serve and retain customers

Framing safety as a part of product quality and user trust that positively affects real users' willingness to increase and continue engagement with the product/service and recommend it to others makes Safety-by-Design feel relevant rather than imposed.

Limited Awareness of Safety-by-Design as a Framework

Developers frequently do not have a shared industry level framework or vocabulary to discuss safety. As a result, these efforts are often fragmented or informal.

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Industry-led, peer to peer learning, shared language and definitions

Industry events and conversations that spotlight safety build common language that tech sector can use internally and across organizations. They help recognize where Safety-by-Design already exists, and where it could be strengthened.

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Organizational Silos and Limited Decision-Making Authority

Safety advocates in companies often lack authority to implement changes. Safety recommendations fail when not supported by leadership.

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Organizational leadership engagement and mentorship programs

Internal mentorship and leadership briefing programs help elevate the benefits of safety for products and brands and reduce organizational constraints. Leadership-focused discussions, can encourage senior decision-makers to view Safety-by-Design as a strategic issue.

Lack of Practical Design Tools

Tech companies motivated to address safety often lack tools to translate broad principles into concrete design decisions.

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Multilingual SbD curricula, prototyping workshops, and other professional education tools

Easily available Safety-by Design training programs, prototyping workshops, and coaching programs create structured ways to identify risks, map user journeys, and test design responses. Tools that provide an audit of product prototypes and pre-launches help systematically assess risk and identify safety gaps.

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Unclear Incentives for Sustained Adoption

Without clear internal and external incentives, Safety-by-Design implementation stalls.

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Recognition, visibility, and ecosystem momentum

Industry leadership and making progress visible, creates positive peer pressure, reinforces Safety-by-Design as a marker of credibility, attracts positive attention from the public and investors. Compliance with regulators and voluntary guidelines also provides a push to sustain safety culture.

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