

From SLA to XLA

Why every service metric can be green while your users are miserable — and how to measure experience instead. For CIOs and service leaders.

Michael Kennedy · Former Group CIO, Robert Walters · Singapore / Global · July 2026

THE WATERMELON PROBLEM

Green on the outside. Red on the inside.

Every service leader has seen the watermelon report: every SLA green, every target met — and the business quietly furious. The tickets closed on time; the person who raised them lost half a day, asked twice, and gave up on the third request entirely. Nothing in the report captured any of that.

This is not an argument against SLAs. Contractual floors matter, especially with vendors. It is an argument that SLAs measure the **process** while your reputation is built on the **experience** — and that the gap between the two is where IT departments lose the confidence of their business. Experience-level agreements (XLAs) close that gap.

THE DIAGNOSIS

Why green dashboards mislead

Four structural reasons — none of them anyone's fault, all of them fixable.

- They measure activity, not outcome.** “Ticket resolved in 4 hours” says nothing about whether the person could work again, or whether the same issue returns every Tuesday.
- Averages hide misery.** A 95% target met means the same 5% of people — often the same office, system or role — can be failed repeatedly while the dashboard stays green.
- Targets shape behaviour (Goodhart's law).** Reward closure speed and you get premature closure, ticket bouncing and “resolved — please reopen if needed”.
- Nobody experiences an average.** Your CFO doesn't experience 99.5% availability; they experience the board pack failing to open at 7am on results day. Moments matter more than means.

THE INSTRUMENT

What an XLA actually is

An experience-level agreement is a commitment to a measured human outcome — built from three data sources, anchored to the moments that matter.

- Sentiment** — short, well-timed measures of how the service felt: moment-of-truth pulses, not quarterly survey spam.
- Telemetry** — what the experience objectively was: device performance, application response, login times, failure rates seen from the user's side.
- Friction** — effort signals: repeat contacts, reassignments, reopened tickets, time-to-productive rather than time-to-closed.

An XLA sounds like this: “A new joiner is fully productive — equipment, access, applications — by day one, measured by time-to-productive and a day-five pulse, target 90%, reviewed monthly with HR.”
Compare: “New starter tickets resolved within 5 days.” Same process; entirely different promise.

THE BUILD PATH

Getting started without boiling the ocean

XLAs fail when launched as a measurement programme. They succeed as three well-chosen journeys done properly.

First 90 days

- Baseline the experience you already deliver: mine friction signals from existing ticket data (repeat contacts, reopens, bounces) — no new tooling required.
- Pick three journeys that matter: day-one onboarding, incident recovery for a critical persona, and one high-volume request. Not more.
- Set one XLA per journey with a named owner, and put it on the same page as the SLAs — experience next to process, every month.

Anti-patterns to refuse

- Survey spam** — measuring experience so often you become the bad experience. Sample, don't saturate.
- CSAT theatre** — averaging happy-face clicks and calling it experience. Measure moments and friction, not applause.
- XLA as SLA replacement** — you still need contractual floors; XLAs sit above them, they don't substitute for them.

THE BIGGER PRIZE

From ITSM to ESM

The same discipline that fixed IT service works for every service the organisation runs — HR, finance, facilities, legal intake.

Enterprise service management is not an IT land-grab; it is the recognition that “a request, routed, owned, resolved and measured by experience” is a universal pattern. One front door, shared workflow, and experience metrics that follow the person rather than the department.

I have run this, not just read about it: XLAs operating alongside SLAs in a global service organisation. The operating model I built at Robert Walters — service management and experience measurement at its core — was subsequently adopted as the blueprint for the firm's Group Business Services programme, extending the same model well beyond technology. That is the trajectory: service excellence proven in IT becomes the operating pattern for the business.

Signs your organisation is ready for ESM:

- Other functions are already copying your ticketing tool informally — govern it before it sprawls.
- Employees can name five different “help” front doors and like none of them.
- The board asks why HR onboarding feels worse than IT onboarding. (It will.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Kennedy is the founder of Kennedy Advisory and former Group CIO of Robert Walters, where he led a 150+ person technology organisation across 14 countries, delivered £3M+ in annualised savings, achieved ISO/IEC 27001 across all jurisdictions and took AI safely into production. He is CISSP certified and based in Singapore with a global remit.

Working through this for real?

Independent judgement on technology, cyber risk and AI — as an interim or fractional CIO, or at the board table. Engagements start with a conversation, not a proposal.

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