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Executive Essentials: Track and Assess Disruptive Trends

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Initiatives: CIO Technology and Innovation Leadership

Some enterprises emerge stronger after disruptive events, while others are left behind. CIOs can lead the discovery of disruptive trends and technologies, bring understanding of the opportunities and threats they present, and help their enterprises prioritize the strategic and operational responses.

Analysis

Every enterprise experiences disruption, but they experience it differently – some enterprises emerge stronger after disruptive events, while others are left behind. Given their vantage point in the organization, CIOs can help their enterprises discover disruptive trends and technologies early, and thus get a head start in understanding the opportunities and threats they present. Exploiting the opportunities requires disciplined methods to analyze trends, articulate their impact to internal stakeholders, and prioritize the strategic and operational responses.

Organizations cannot afford to reactively treat disruptions as one-off exceptions. They must establish formal processes to plan for and respond to future disruptions by adopting what Gartner calls the continuous foresight approach. This approach includes Gartner's Trendspotting Framework – a structured approach to identifying, analyzing, contextualizing and communicating recommendations about trends.

To help their organizations prepare for a future of continuous disruptions, CIOs must:

- Organize a trendspotting capability to turn foresighting from an ad hoc to an intentional capability
- Use continuous foresight to anticipate trends and prepare your enterprise's responses
- Nurture futurist thinking

Organize a Trendspotting Capability to Turn Foresighting From an Ad Hoc to an Intentional Capability

Establishing a deliberate trendspotting capability helps mitigate blind spots and troublesome biases that arise from ad hoc approaches. This enables CIOs to filter signals from noise, so they can focus on the key trends in their strategy and innovation initiatives.

Many CIOs already have capabilities in their organizations to scan and prepare for the use of emerging technologies. This can be leveraged as a starting point, but a more structured and proactive approach is needed to track, analyze and act on trends. In addition, trendspotting must expand to cover a wider range of technological, political, economic, social and cultural, trust and ethics, regulatory and legal, and environmental (TPESTRE) aspects – what Gartner refers to as a “tapestry” of trends.

CIOs typically will not have time to gather diverse insights across multiple trend categories, but they can partner with other executives in the organization to build the capability. Then, they can act as executive sponsors for activities where technology trends are involved. More specifically, CIOs should address:

- **Objectives and goals:** Establish the business drivers behind a trendspotting effort – for example, strategic risk mitigation or desire to exploit new market opportunities.
- **Scope:** Define what the trendspotting approach will do. Identify the types of trends to be explored.
- **Team:** Set up the team that will drive the trendspotting approach. Often, this will include part-time “trend scouts” across the organization who will be responsible for monitoring trends within their respective domain areas. Also, consider including external stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers and academic staff as virtual team members.
- **Governance:** Agree to whom the group will report, who is responsible for tracking various trend categories and how the trend work will be communicated to other business groups.
- **Resources:** Empower the team with the right resources, including access to trend sources and the necessary funding to deliver the defined scope.
- **Metrics and reporting:** Explain how the success of the continuous foresight approach will be measured. Identify the business impact metrics for how it will influence strategy, operations and innovation efforts.

Additional resources:

- [The Gartner Trendspotting Framework: Driving Operations, Innovation and Strategy](#)
- [Leverage Innovation Resources to Manage High-Risk Business Disruptions](#)
- [Reimagine Innovation With an Adaptive Innovation Ecosystem Framework](#)

Use Continuous Foresight to Anticipate Trends and Prepare Your Enterprise's Responses

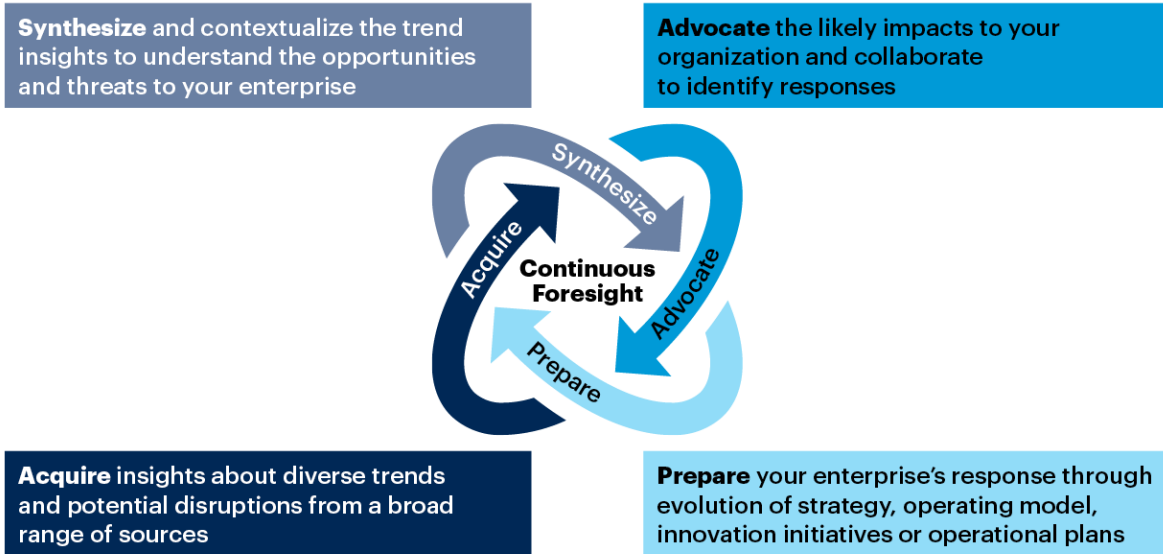
Gartner's continuous foresight is a deliberate approach to identify and assess probable disruptions proactively by recognizing trends early on and preparing the organizational responses. It can be used as a defensive approach to blunt the impact of a disruption or an offensive approach to take advantage of disruptions by identifying new business opportunities and turning them into new solutions.

Continuous foresight extends the trendspotting model with trend responses and is composed of four action sets to identify and respond to disruptions and trends (see Figure 1):

- Acquire
- Synthesize
- Advocate
- Prepare

Figure 1: Continuous Foresight as It Combines Four Action Sets

Continuous Foresight as It Combines Four Action Sets



Source: Gartner
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The action sets should not be executed in a linear fashion. CIOs should perform these continuously, while applying a range of tools and techniques — from trend detection and disruption to enterprise response preparation.

Acquire

The acquire action set starts with a broad scan of the business environment to identify current and future trends that have potential enterprise impact. CIOs must ensure that the technology trend scanning expands across the multiple TPESTRE trend categories and uses diverse sources to counter biases. Sources can be internal (such as executives, internal research or marketing functions, and subject matter experts) and external (market research, consultants, media, academia and industry consortia). Collecting opposing viewpoints and occasionally throwing in a wild card on the same trend creates a more diverse view and helps eliminate blind spots.

Synthesize

The synthesize action set explores trends and potential disruptions by analyzing them in the context of the enterprise, industry and market. This includes testing your current strategies and plans against emerging trends. The aim is to filter multiple trends and disruptions down to a smaller set that will likely have the largest impact on the organization. It is key to consider the combinatorial impact of multiple trends, since disruptions are often caused by multiple factors converging. For example, the shift toward more hybrid and remote work was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift happened much faster because of pandemic-related lockdowns (regulatory and legal trend) and was made possible only by advances in network connectivity and virtual collaboration tools (technology trend).

Advocate

The advocate action set shares insights about trends and explores potential impacts and responses with the wider organization. This set also includes creating communications tools, such as trend cards, radars and other visualizations.

CIOs will often play a more active and personal role here to bring technology expertise to the executive team and to get buy-in and input from the rest of the executive team on possible plans that involve technology initiatives.

Advocate is not a one-way communication, but rather a methodical, joint exploration of trends and possible disruptions. This exploration must uncover possible responses to trends and disruptions, the risk of possible responses or nonresponses, and ideas for plans to move forward.

Prepare

The prepare action set turns insights and possible responses into actions and decisions about where and when to exploit trends and take action. In this phase of continuous foresight, it is critical to involve a wide array of leaders outside of IT and link the trendspotting work to current business operations as well as current and future business strategies. Here are some potential outcomes of this exercise:

- Business strategy updates, based on the possible future as envisioned from analyzing the trends.
- A strategic action plan to exploit disruption through innovation. The impact of the plan should be monitored and measured.
- A tactical action plan to make changes, modernize or extend current operational systems and processes.

- Ideas for innovations triggered by emerging trends.

Depending on the potential impact, timing and uncertainty of a trend or disruption, actions can have different levels of decision complexity. Some established trends with a short time to impact can lead directly to operational decisions and actions. For example, the shift toward hybrid work where, for CIOs, the decision to support with tools, platforms and connectivity was a relatively simple decision (though actual implementation and wider organizational impact was somewhat more complex). In other cases, trends are fundamentally uncertain. Organizations are unsure of their timing, their impact and even their appearance. In such cases, organizations cannot come up with definitive forecasts or action plans, but can – and should – imagine various potential futures and prepare options accordingly. Scenario planning and technology experiments are important tools to explore these trends, even though accelerators and inhibitors may not be clear.

Additional resources:

- [Inventing the Future With Continuous Foresight](#)
- [Brave New Worlds: Tapestry of Trends 2022](#) by Gartner Futures Lab
- [Tool: How to Build an Emerging Technology Radar](#)
- [Backcast the Enterprise's Next Future State Vision](#)
- [Gartner Global Scenarios: Scenario Planning Resource Center](#)

Nurture Futurist Thinking

Thinking about the future can be a bit of a wild goose chase. And no one wants to put constraints on it – they think it'll limit their experimentation. Still, at any given moment, we've found that executives flex between five different mindsets for thinking about the future, based on organizational needs. Each mindset has a few core activities that it engages in.

Futurist thinking is defined by five mindsets: observers, responders, explorers, architects and luminaries. Organizations simultaneously encompass all five mindsets. In fact, all five are needed to ensure your organization meets present and future needs.

Observers are “always on,” and have a natural curiosity to make sense of everything they see around them as inspiration of how the future might unfold. They're passive about the future.

Responders are reactive. In this mindset, leaders tend to be caught by surprise as they focus only on the latest problem that needs their attention. Responders react quickly to change and disruption but do not look beyond the present.

Explorers are tinkerers. They see the future as an imaginative activity. They consider what might be likely to happen and the implications of those scenarios. This futurist mindset says, “We know what we know, let’s figure out what is going to happen as a result.”

Architects are goal-oriented. The architect creates futures and prepares for them with a clear sense of structure and purpose. They take a wider, longer-term view of the future because they want to design a system that meets business needs now while remaining versatile for as-yet-unknown developments.

Luminaries are visionaries; they’re the “influencers” within an organization. A fun archetype for this mindset is a “mad scientist.” They imagine alternate futures, and sometimes imagine the improbable. Luminaries tell us what will happen at the macro level (society, industry), and then look backward to fill in the blanks with steps to make that happen, including disruptions and trends to watch for.

Additional resources:

- Tool: How to Use Science Fiction Storytelling to Communicate Your Vision of the Future
- Gartner Future Directions 2023: The Age of Disruptions

Next Steps

To help their organizations prepare for a future of continuous disruptions, CIOs must:

1. Organize a trendspotting capability to turn foresighting from an ad hoc to an intentional capability using Gartner’s Trendspotting Framework (see The Gartner Trendspotting Framework: Driving Operations, Innovation and Strategy).
2. Use the four actions set in Gartner’s continuous foresight approach to anticipate trends and prepare your enterprise’s responses (see Inventing the Future With Continuous Foresight).

3. Nurture futurist thinking by cultivating five mindsets for thinking about the future (see Tool: How to Use Science Fiction Storytelling to Communicate Your Vision of the Future).

Recommended by the Authors

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

The Gartner Trendspotting Framework: Driving Operations, Innovation and Strategy

Inventing the Future With Continuous Foresight

Brave New Worlds: Tapestry of Trends 2022 by Gartner Futures Lab

Gartner Global Scenarios: Scenario Planning Resource Center

Gartner Futures Lab Podcast: Thriving in the Age of Disruption

Video: How the Gartner Futures Lab Helps IT Leaders Prepare for Tomorrow

Gartner Futures Lab Podcast: Using Science Fiction Storytelling to Share Visions of the Future

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