

3 CIO Actions to Retain Top Talent During the 'Great Reflection'

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The pandemic spurred a “great reflection” by employees on their life and work priorities, which is heightening instability in an already hypercompetitive talent market. CIOs should take three actions to meet employees where they are and help alleviate critical talent challenges.

Overview

Key Findings

- CIOs are struggling to find the people they need to accomplish their objectives, especially those with key digital skills such as cybersecurity, software engineering and data science.
- IT employees are leaving for greater flexibility, improved work-life balance, better career opportunities, and in general, more respect.
- Manager quality has risen to become the No. 3 driver of attrition among IT employees, according to Gartner’s 1Q22 data. Other drivers rising in importance are human-centric, such as whether employees feel respected and recognized.
- A hybrid model that’s implemented using a human-centric design reduces employee fatigue by 45% and increases intent to stay and overall performance by 44% and 28%, respectively.

Recommendations

CIOs looking to evolve their talent strategy should:

- Implement a human-centric work design by offering the flexibility and autonomy tech employees value and driving the business outcomes CIOs need.

- Upskill managers by providing them the time and training that addresses employees' holistic well-being concerns to reduce talent attrition and enable sustainable performance.
- Adopt an agile learning culture by offering the skills development, mobility and career growth employees seek while closing CIOs' most critical skills gaps.

Introduction





The board of directors and the CEO want to power out of the pandemic with technology-driven growth. To fulfill this mandate, CIOs are looking for more talent to deliver postpandemic digital transformation, which has created a hiring surge. Three-quarters of newly hired IT employees had at least two other offers in addition to the one they accepted.¹ Consequently, CIOs struggle to find the people they need to accomplish their objectives, particularly those with key digital skills such as cybersecurity, software engineering and data science.

At the same time, the pandemic has driven people around the world to engage in a “great reflection” and recalibrate their personal values and purpose. Sixty-five percent of employees say that they’re rethinking the relationship between work and life. Work-life balance now rivals compensation as a top attraction driver.² If people don’t find it, many will switch jobs.

It’s a tough challenge, but some leaders make it an impossible one by trying to return to the way the organization worked before the pandemic. CIOs can find and retain the digital talent they need only by taking a human-centric approach to the workforce (see Offer a ‘Human Deal’ to Attract and Retain IT Talent Amid the Great Resignation). They must understand how the great reflection changes workers’ attitudes and creates three new retention drivers (see Figure 1). Ultimately, CIOs must update their employee value proposition for the era of the great reflection. In particular, CIOs should take three actions to address the new drivers – we offer three corresponding implementation tactics for each CIO action (see Table 1).

Figure 1. Three Actions for CIOs to Solve Talent Challenges

Three Actions for CIOs to Solve Talent Challenges

	Employees postpandemic ...  ... great reflection		
Employee "Great Reflection"	Changed the desirability of my workplace location (58%) ^a	Changed my expectations toward my employer (50%) ^a	Made me question the purpose of my day-to-day job (52%) ^a
Employee Retention Drivers	66% of IT employees say whether they can work flexibly will impact their decision to stay	IT employees rank "respect" and "manager quality" as No. 2 and No. 3 attrition drivers (1Q22)	Growth opportunities increase employees' intent to stay by 6%
CIO Actions	 1. Implement a human-centric work design	 2. Upskill managers to enable sustainable performance	 3. Adopt an agile learning culture

a = What employees say about how the pandemic has changed their perspective about work and life (% that either agree or significantly agree)
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Table 1: Tactics to Implement the Three Talent Actions

CIO Talent Actions	1. Implement a Human-Centric Work Design	2. Upskill Managers to Enable Sustainable Performance	3. Adopt an Agile Learning Culture
Implementation Tactic	Implement human-centric work via adaptive learning loops	Make space for well-being, don't just add resources	Link learning and earning curves
Implementation Tactic	Implement human-centric work together with employees	Equip managers to facilitate aspirational career conversations	Double down on your employees with internal mobility options
Implementation Tactic	Focus office time on moments that matter	Upskill in Connector manager practices	Create reskilling pathways leveraging adjacent skills

Source: Gartner (June 2022)

Analysis

Implement a Human-Centric Work Design

Most organizations plan a hybrid work model, but not all hybrid models meet employees' current expectations and drive talent outcomes. A hybrid model that's implemented using a human-centric design reduces employee fatigue by 45% and increases intent to stay and overall performance by 44% and 28%, respectively (see Future of Work Reinvented: Seizing This Golden Opportunity Requires 3 Actions). Hybrid that's implemented poorly is one size fits all and location-centric. For example, organizations establish a fixed series of days, such as Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, for all employees to work in the office.

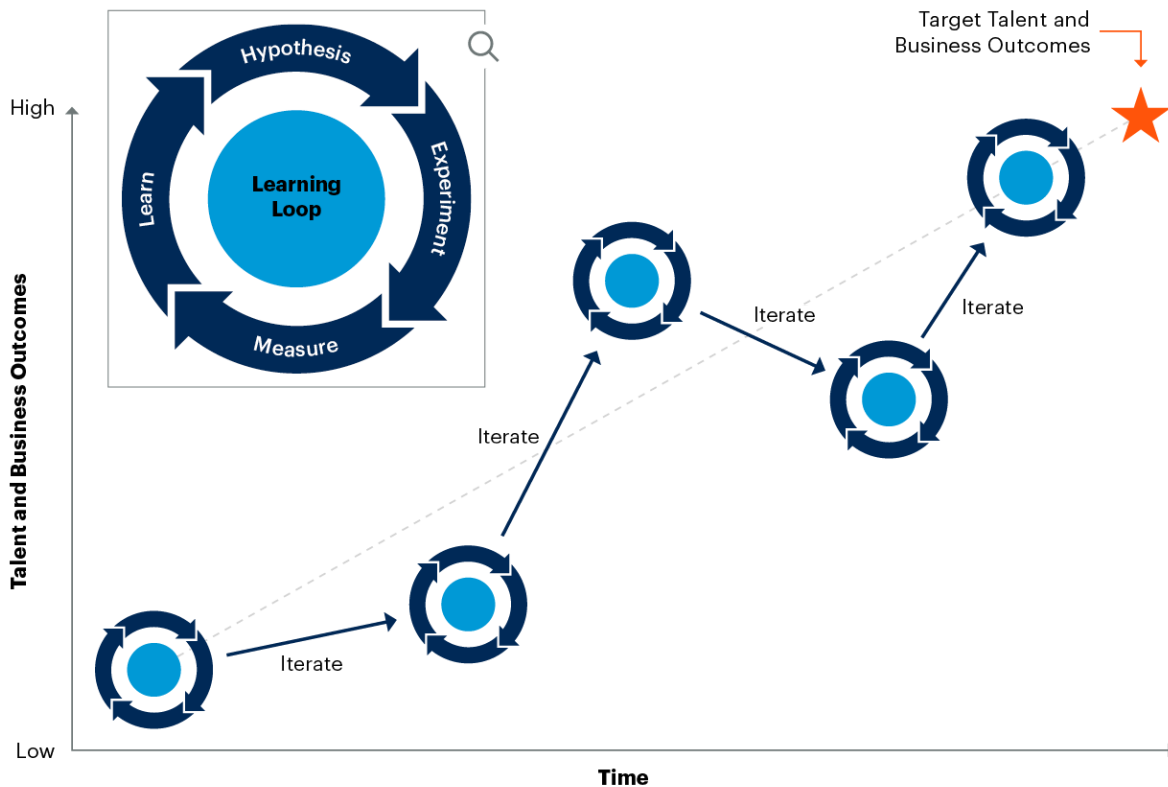
Human-centric work design is a model for work that recognizes human beings are at the center of work, not secondary components of the work environment. This shift in thinking means we design workflows, business processes and office space utilization around human needs – physical, cognitive, emotional – rather than expecting human abilities and behavior to conform to legacy processes or locations.

Tactic No. 1: Implement Human-Centric Work via Adaptive Learning Loops

Human-centric work will require continuous adjustment and reinforcement over time. CIOs should use adaptive learning loops to scale these changes (see Figure 2 and *The Future of Work Reinvented: Compete for Talent and Drive Performance*). Construction of learning loops begins with defining the organization's most critical talent and business outcomes, such as reducing burnout while increasing productivity. CIOs should then draft a hypothesis of how they could achieve those outcomes and take baseline measurements, such as pulse surveys and focus groups. CIOs will then experiment against the hypothesis. At the end of an experimental loop (say, 30 days), CIOs should measure the impact of the action against the baseline and draw lessons from the experiment (see *Case Study: Mechanisms to Co-create New Ways of Working for Digital Transformation (Nationwide Building Society)*). Perhaps it failed, and something new needs to be tried. Maybe it showed promise, and the experiment should be adjusted and run again.

Figure 2. Use Learning Loops to Implement Change

Use Learning Loops to Implement Future-of-Work Change



Source: Gartner
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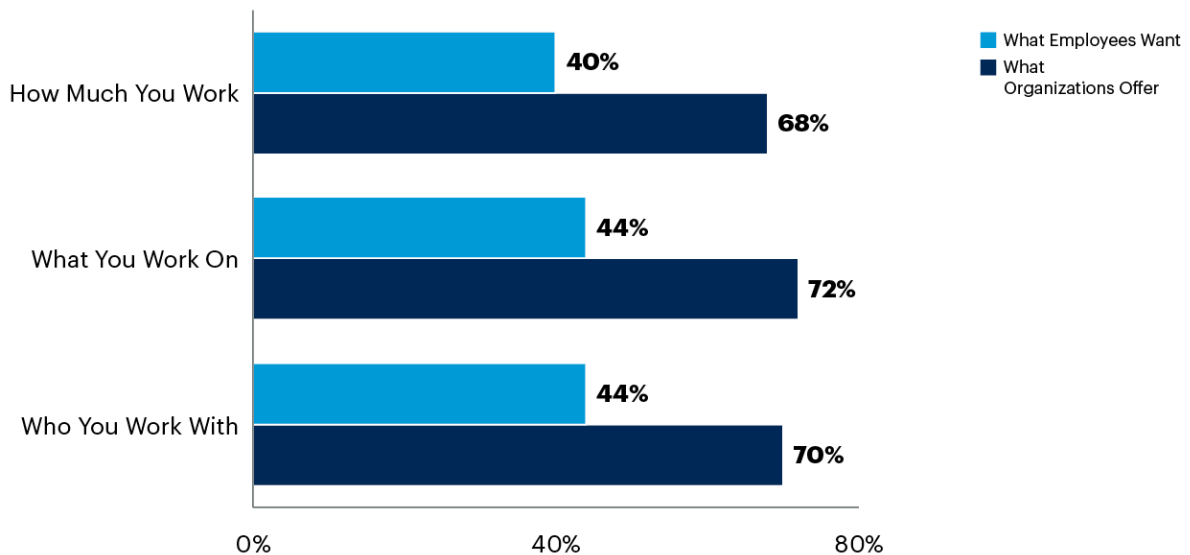
For example, if an organization wants to reduce burnout and increase productivity, then a hypothesis could be that giving teams autonomy to manage their own synchronous and asynchronous work could meet these outcomes. The organization can experiment by setting synchronous collaboration blocks, during which employees make themselves available for meetings. These would be periods in the day when all employees on a team could commit to working together. Concurrently, with remaining calendar availability, the organization gives employees asynchronous, heads-down time to avoid the always-on digital distraction that causes fatigue and burnout (see Case Study: Reset Hybrid Collaboration Habits (Dropbox)). After the experiment has run for 30 or 60 days, the organization could track progress, derive lessons and reconfigure the approach as needed.

Tactic No. 2: Implement Human-Centric Work Together With Employees

CIOs should implement human-centric work with employees as it’s pivotal for people to be heard, understood and respected (see Case Study: Personalized Community Building to Drive Connection in a Distributed Workforce). Employees want more flexibility. There’s a huge opportunity to close the gap between employee expectations and what employers actually offer (see Figure 3).³ Here, organizations can get creative with their employee value proposition (e.g., experimenting with the amount of days in a work week) to attract and retain talent.

Figure 3. Discrepancies Between What IT Employees Value and What Employers Offer

Discrepancies Between What IT Employees Value and What Employers Offer



n = 1,020

What Organizations Offer: Q. Please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: My organization offers me the flexibility to ...

What Employees Want: Q. How important is it to you to be able to decide for yourself ...

Source: 2021 Gartner EVP Employee Survey

Note: What Organizations Offer: Percentage of IT employees who selected “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” on a 7-point scale; What Employees Want: Percentage of IT employees who selected “Important” or “Very Important” on a five-point scale.

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Case in Point: Balancing Flexibility With Mission Accountability (San Diego Sheriff’s Department)

Ashish Kakkad, the CIO of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, runs an IT organization that supports a 24/7 operating environment. Kakkad instituted as much flexibility as possible to meet his employees' needs (e.g., some teams have more remote work days than others depending on their role). At the same time, he needed to strike a balance between accountability for the mission and employees' desire for flexibility. So he implemented a rule that people must be able to travel to the office within two hours for crisis situations. Kakkad continuously learns and adjusts based on experimentation and real-world feedback, including mistakes such as dropping all department meetings, which he has now reinstated.

Kakkad understands that a lot of people are drawn to the purpose of law enforcement and community safety, and created an employee value proposition that combines purpose with work-life balance to the greatest extent possible. Piloting this approach has reduced the organization's attrition rates to prepandemic levels.

Tactic No. 3: Focus Office Time on Moments That Matter

Many leaders force a return to the office because they fear losing watercooler moments — instances when people serendipitously run into one another and start exchanging ideas. This never captured the full source of innovation because most people get their best ideas when they're showering, walking the dog, exercising or doing activities that promote "think time," not after back-to-back meetings and hours of focus work. Instead, CIOs should be more intentional about collaboration.

More generally, CIOs must discuss with teams how to focus office time on the moments that matter, where being in the office is critical to the activity. Events with the highest colocation value include:

- **Work process events** — for example, agile retrospective, SAFe program increments, innovation jams
- **Employee change events** — for example, onboarding, new team formation, new initiatives requiring cross-team partnerships
- **Ongoing activities** — for example, mentoring, skills development, social learning, team building, social capital and network development

Many moments that matter will be for agile teams, cyber teams, field security teams, call centers and so on. These teams should verify the necessity of being in the office for these activities, which should be adapted to the team's needs.

Case in Point: Shaping the Future of Work With Employees (Evonik)



Evonik CIO, Dr. Bettina Uhlich, along with her HR partners and others, created pulse surveys to gain employees' feedback to optimize their current organization and to plan future work models. Furthermore, collected insights could be used to identify unnoticed focus areas, such as managers who may be struggling and hot spots that need to be adjusted. These surveys cover a range of areas, including:

- Running better hybrid and remote meetings
- Thinking about managing commute times
- Architecting an environment conducive to emotional and physical well-being

Cases like Evonik show that CIOs have all of the information they need to design human-centric work – it's a matter of accessing it directly from employees.

To learn more, see [Case Study – Pulse Survey to Shape Hybrid Work Policies \(Evonik\)](#), originally published 30 April 2021.

For more on human-centric work design, see:

- [Future of Work Reinvented: Human-Centric Work Design](#)
- [Strengthen Connection to Culture to Alleviate CEO Concerns About Hybrid Work](#)
- [Reimagine Your Reward Strategy to Attract and Retain a Borderless Workforce](#)
- [Make Your Meetings in a Hybrid Workplace More Effective](#)
- [The Future of Work Will Be Outcome-Driven and Team-Centric](#)
- [The Future of Work for Agile Teams](#)
- [How to Keep Remote Employees Connected in the Hybrid Organization](#)
- [Predicts 2022: 3 Must-Do's for CIOs in Fostering a Human-Centric Environment](#)
- [Case Study: Attract and Retain Talent With Value-Driven Data Science \(Asurion\)](#)

Upskill Managers to Enable Sustainable Performance

Manager quality has risen to become the No. 3 IT attrition driver in 1Q22, illustrating the old adage that employees leave their managers, not their jobs (see Table 2). Other attrition drivers rising in importance to employees are human-centric, including “respect,” which is now No. 2. People want to be treated more like a person, rather than just another resource. Hence, having a good manager becomes even more important to employees in challenging times. Yet managers during the pandemic have been left to address a myriad of employee concerns they weren’t trained for, ranging from burnout to new work models and social issues. To retain their most valuable employees, CIOs must create a new more human deal for talent starting by supporting and upskilling managers (see Develop Effective High-Performing People Managers to Reduce Attrition).²

Table 2: IT Employee Attrition Drivers (1Q22)

Rank	1Q22 IT Attrition Drivers
1	Compensation
2	Respect
3	Manager quality
4	Location
5	People management
6	Future career opportunity
7	Development opportunity

Source: Gartner (June 2022)

Before the pandemic, many managers focused on maximizing employees' current performance. During the pandemic, employees leaned into their jobs, working harder, putting in longer hours and being even more productive. Unfortunately, this has come at the expense of fatigue and intent to stay. To reduce burnout and attrition, CIOs must equip IT managers to focus on employee well-being in order to sustain high performance levels over time (see Figure 4). Compared to other employees, sustainable performers are 17% more productive and 1.7 times more likely to stay at their organizations.⁴

Figure 4. Model of Sustainable Performance

Model of Sustainable Performance



Source: Gartner
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Tactic No. 1: Make Space for Well-Being, Don't Just Add Resources

CIOs should help managers make space for well-being within work processes versus simply passing along links to resources as the primary guide. Pointing employees to resources doesn't help managers balance existing priorities with employees' needs, so CIOs must take a more complete approach starting by equipping managers with the needed time to address this human issue.

Recognizing that it's team managers who face cognitive overload due to the demands of working in a distributed environment, Atlassian piloted an extreme approach to prioritization that gave managers permission to focus on well-being. Teams were told to review and deprioritize existing projects unless it was determined that the projects were near completion, urgent or broadly impactful. When managers have a workload they can handle, they're able to dedicate time to fostering deeper connections and responding with empathy (see Atlassian case study in downloadable presentation slides within Redesigning Work for the Hybrid World: Opportunities for Knowledge Workers).

Tactic No. 2: Equip Managers to Facilitate Aspirational Career Conversations

CIOs should equip managers to facilitate aspiration-based career conversations instead of focusing just on individuals' current roles and interdomain trajectories (see Ignition Guide to Improving Managers' Coaching Effectiveness). These discussions inspire employees and make them feel valued, particularly during this great reflection when many are reevaluating whether their current role and career path fits their renewed ambitions, priorities and values.

S&P Global took this people-first perspective to coaching by providing managers with a guide to focus conversations that uncover employees' desired experiences, such as interests, passions and motivations (see Figure 5 and Case Study: People-First Career Coaching (S&P Global)). These areas don't just pertain to the company or the individual as an employee, but to the full person as a human being. The discussion concludes with exploring how the employee's current role helps them pursue that interest and what opportunities could better align with their aspirations and support business needs.

Figure 5. Interest-Focused Discovery Guide

Interest-Focused Discovery Guide

Illustrative

S&P Global's People-First Approach	
<p>Part I: Background and Goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about your career trajectory so far. • What made you seek coaching? 	
<p>Part II: Desired Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you passionate about? If obstacles did not exist, what would you be doing? • What activities do you love that make you lose track of time? • What kind of experiences are going to drive and energize you every day? • What does success look like to you? 	<div style="border: 1px solid orange; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <p>Focus on the person, not the employee.</p> </div>
<p>Part III: Next Steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sort of solution would be most fulfilling? Are you looking to add to your current position? Find new opportunities? Shift your trajectory entirely? 	

Source: Adapted From S&P Global
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Tactic No. 3: Upskill in Connector Manager Practices

CIOs should upskill their leaders to use Connector manager practices. Connector managers aren't fixated on doing everything for their teams, but rather aim to understand employees and connect them to the right opportunities. Table 3 contains sample questions and answers that connectors leverage in employee conversations. Tracks like these that focus on employee well-being are essential for cultivating sustainable performance (see How Connector Managers Drive Sustainable Performance in the NewWork Environment for additional Connector practices).

Table 3: Powerful Connector Questions and Responses

Powerful Connector Questions	Sample Actionable Manager Responses
Understanding the employee context: What do you need right now to work at your best?	"Let's discuss how we can remove the distractions that are holding you back."
Developing solutions: What could we have done better?	"Let's create an action plan from what changes we want to make."
Personal growth: What kind of experiences drive and energize you every day?	"I will commit to identifying more opportunities for you to get those experiences."

Source: Gartner (June 2022)

For more on upskilling managers to retain talent, see:

- [Future of Work Reinvented: Managing in a Hybrid World](#)
- [Reignite Employee Engagement in the Remote Hybrid Organization](#)
- [Quick Answer: How Do Connector Managers Develop Exceptional Software Engineering Talent?](#)
- [Toolkit: How to Diagnose and Solve Talent Challenges](#)
- [CIOs Must Rethink Resilience for the Hybrid Future of Work](#)
- [Talent Diversity: Key Actions CIOs Should Take to Increase Inclusion for Neurodiverse Employees](#)

Adopt an Agile Learning Culture

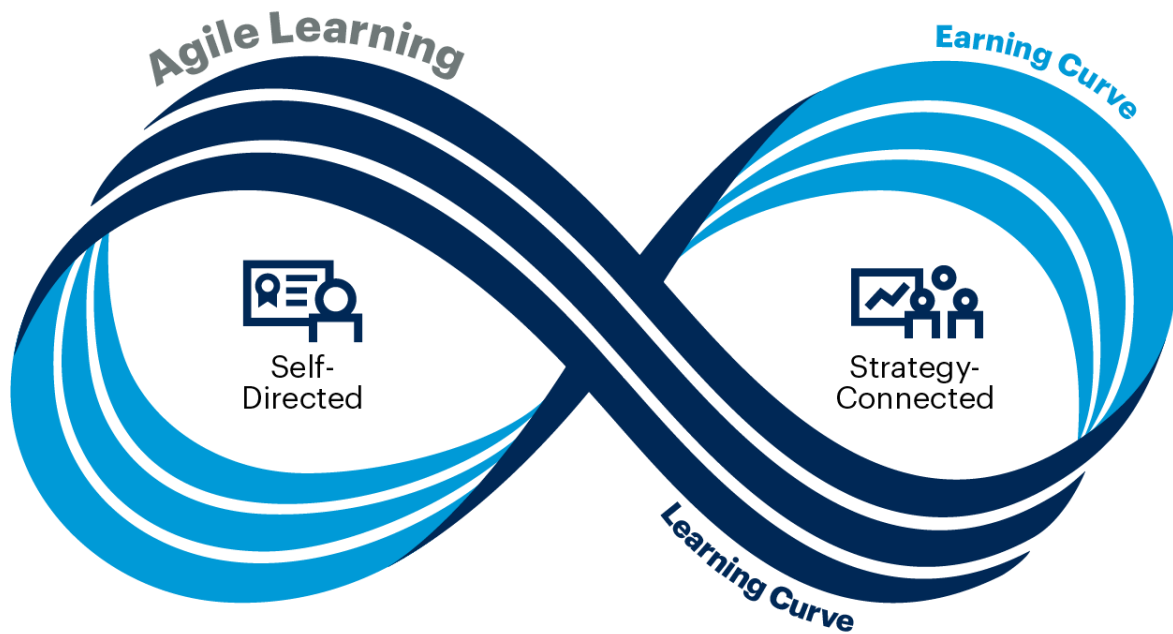
CIOs are struggling to fill critical skills gaps, while at the same time employees are leaving their organizations due to a lack of career opportunities. Now more than ever, CIOs should double down on their own people by addressing two IT attrition drivers – “future career opportunity” and “development opportunity” – that both rank in employees’ top seven out of 38 characteristics (see Table 2). To grow and retain talent, learning must be embedded into the IT organizational culture in ways that employees can self-direct their growth in line with their great reflection renewed priorities, while at the same time CIOs can guide skills development in line with their most pressing strategic needs.

Tactic No. 1: Link Learning and Earning Curves for Both Employees and the Enterprise

CIOs can close critical skills gaps by linking upskilling and learning efforts to results for both employees and the enterprise.⁵ For employees, learning advances their career, future-proofs them against change and increases their value. For the enterprise, learning fills the pipeline of skills critical to adapting to change and executing the mission. Agile learning connects motivated, self-directed learners to the enterprise’s strategic outcomes (see Figure 6 and Agile Learning Manifesto). The key is to make connections for people, since the talent progression of the future will look more like a climbing wall than a career ladder – employees can reskill by moving horizontally or upskill to move higher in their current organization. Regardless of direction, CIOs can provide different learning pathways for employees to achieve their goals.

Figure 6. Link Learning and Earning Curves

Agile Learning Connects Learning Curves With Earning Curves



Source: Gartner
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Gartner

Tactic No. 2: Double Down on Your Employees With Internal Mobility Options

CIOs can put a stopper to growing skills gaps and attrition by incentivizing employees’ lifelong learning via internal mobility options (see [Innovation Insight for Internal Talent Marketplaces](#)). Most employees look outside of their organizations for new career opportunities; however, their attention can be brought back inward if more options are made available.

Case in Point: Talent Marketplace (NASA)



NASA has created an agencywide internal job listing and candidate selection platform called “The Talent Marketplace.” It connects employees looking to develop their skills to short-term project opportunities across the agency. Not only does the system encourage continuous learning, upskilling and reskilling, but it also supports the business in matching talent to tasks when needs arise.

To learn more, see [Case Study: Action-Oriented Future of Work Strategy \(NASA\)](#), originally published 26 October 2020.⁶

Tactic No. 3: Create Reskilling Pathways Leveraging Adjacent Skills

CIOs can close vital skills gaps and reinforce a continuous learning culture by creating pathways for employees to learn new high-demand skills while leveraging their current adjacent skills (see Toolkit: Frameworks and Templates for IT Job Architecture Design and Career Paths Development).

Case in Point: Skills Adjacency Data Science Team Development (Eastman)

EASTMAN

Eastman, a U.S. manufacturing company, looked inward at its own employee base to form a new data science team. It recruited employees that had adjacent skills, such as statistics and computer science, as well as those with data context and business knowledge. Eastman created reskilling pathways toward data science for those employees. Because they were tapping into their own internal knowledge, these individuals could deliver value while accelerating their career progression.

To learn more, see Case Study: Internal Data Science Team Development (Eastman), originally published 27 January 2020.

For more on agile learning culture, see:

- [An Executive Leader's Guide to Agile Learning](#)
- [Evolve Your EVP to a Human Deal by Ensuring Personal Growth](#)
- [Survey Analysis: Agile Learning Delivers Superior Outcomes](#)
- [Tool: Agile Learning Diagnostic](#)
- [Agile Learning: Use Progressive Layering of Skills to Upskill and Develop Employees](#)
- [Future of Work Trends: The Agile Learning Imperative](#)

Conclusion: Create a Compelling and Adaptable Employee Value Proposition

The three actions described above should feed into a comprehensive employee value proposition that will demonstrate to employees the value of remaining with the enterprise (see Ignition Guide to Creating and Communicating an Employment Value Proposition for Talent in IT). The three actions address the most urgent drivers of the great reflection, but CIOs should ensure that all five elements of the employee value proposition work together toward the same retention goals:

- Work design
- Rewards
- Opportunities
- The nature of the organization
- The talent and camaraderie of the people

Moreover, CIOs should make their employee value proposition adaptive (see CIOs Must Reinvent Their IT Employment Value Proposition to Compete for Top Talent). That is, CIOs should adjust the value proposition to address the different priorities of workers at different ages and to respond to changing conditions, such as a drop in retention, change in manager, new skills requirements and geopolitical disruptions.

Evidence

The organizations profiled in this research are provided for illustrative purposes only and do not constitute an exhaustive list of examples in this field nor an endorsement by Gartner of the organization or its offerings.

¹ The 1Q22 Gartner Global Labor Market Survey was based on responses from around 17,995 employees globally, including 1,995 employees in the IT function. Responses were collected monthly across 40 different countries in 15 languages and were then aggregated to generate quarterly findings. There are no statistically significant differences in the sample composition across the three months.

² 1Q22 Gartner Global Labor Market Survey, IT Attraction Drivers and IT Attrition Drivers

³ The 2021 Gartner EVP Employee Survey was conducted with 5,000 employees on their experiences and expectations of their organization's employment value proposition and employee experience. We also surveyed 77 HR leaders from across industries and geographies on the EVP and employee experience practices and challenges. In addition, we interviewed 85 HR leaders on EVP practices, challenges and solutions.

⁴ The 2020 Gartner Manager of the Future Survey was conducted online from 1 through 19 December 2020 and contains responses from 4,787 full-time employees across 14 countries and 24 industries. The survey design and development, administration, and data analysis were done by Gartner's HR Practice Research team.

⁵ Agile Learning Manifesto

⁶ A Marketplace for Talent, NASA.

Recommended by the Authors

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3 Ways to Redesign Knowledge Work for a Hybrid World With Human-Centric Design

Evolve Your EVP to a Human Deal by Ensuring Personal Growth

Case Study – Pulse Survey to Shape Hybrid Work Policies (Evonik)

The Future of Work Reinvented: Compete for Talent and Drive Performance

How Connector Managers Drive Sustainable Performance in the New Work Environment

Case Study: People-First Career Coaching (S&P Global)

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