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# **Employee Fatigue Has Broken Change Management — What Can CIOs Do?**

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Employees in midsize enterprises are exposed to significant technology changes within the context of organizational and personal change, which together increase employee burnout and disengagement. Learn how progressive CIOs plan and prioritize technology changes to minimize change fatigue.

## Overview

### Key Findings

- Midsize enterprise CIOs suggest that talking about change fatigue with business leaders is difficult. Change management conversations often overlook or underestimate the impact of technology change on employee fatigue and its adverse effects on technology deployment and success.
- Traditional project prioritization parameters (business value, ROI, alignment to strategic priorities, etc.) tend to take precedence over change fatigue in decision making. Fatigued employees are unable to optimally adopt and use solutions, which results in diminishing returns from many changes.
- IT teams release changes based on business urgency and value. Most IT teams struggle to consistently consider employee fatigue when releasing and scheduling changes, resulting in overburdened employees.

## Recommendations

To minimize change fatigue, CIOs in midsize enterprises should:

- Make change fatigue a key part of regular conversations with business leaders by asking questions that prompt business leaders to actively think about the degree of change fatigue their teams are likely to experience.
- Build fatigue into organizationwide prioritization decisions by encouraging business leaders to reassess how initiatives are prioritized through the lens of fatigue.
- Use fatigue as a key factor to reassess IT's release plans by partnering with business leaders to identify opportunities to rescope and release changes when employees have the capacity to absorb them.

## Introduction

The volume and pace of change, including technology-related changes, is overwhelming end users (Figure 1). Data reveals that 70% of end users report being frustrated with new software and applications, indicating that changes often add to employee burden and burnout.<sup>1</sup> CIOs recognize that traditional IT change management approaches, which rely on postchange support through training and communication, are no longer sufficient in the current context. Communication often adds to information overload and training is considered an additional task employees have to do, all of which adds to employee fatigue. In fact, one CIO told us, "My bag of tricks to manage change is not working, as the volume and frequency of change is on the rise. I worry that IT might deliver many technology changes, but employees won't absorb the change because of burnout and fatigue."

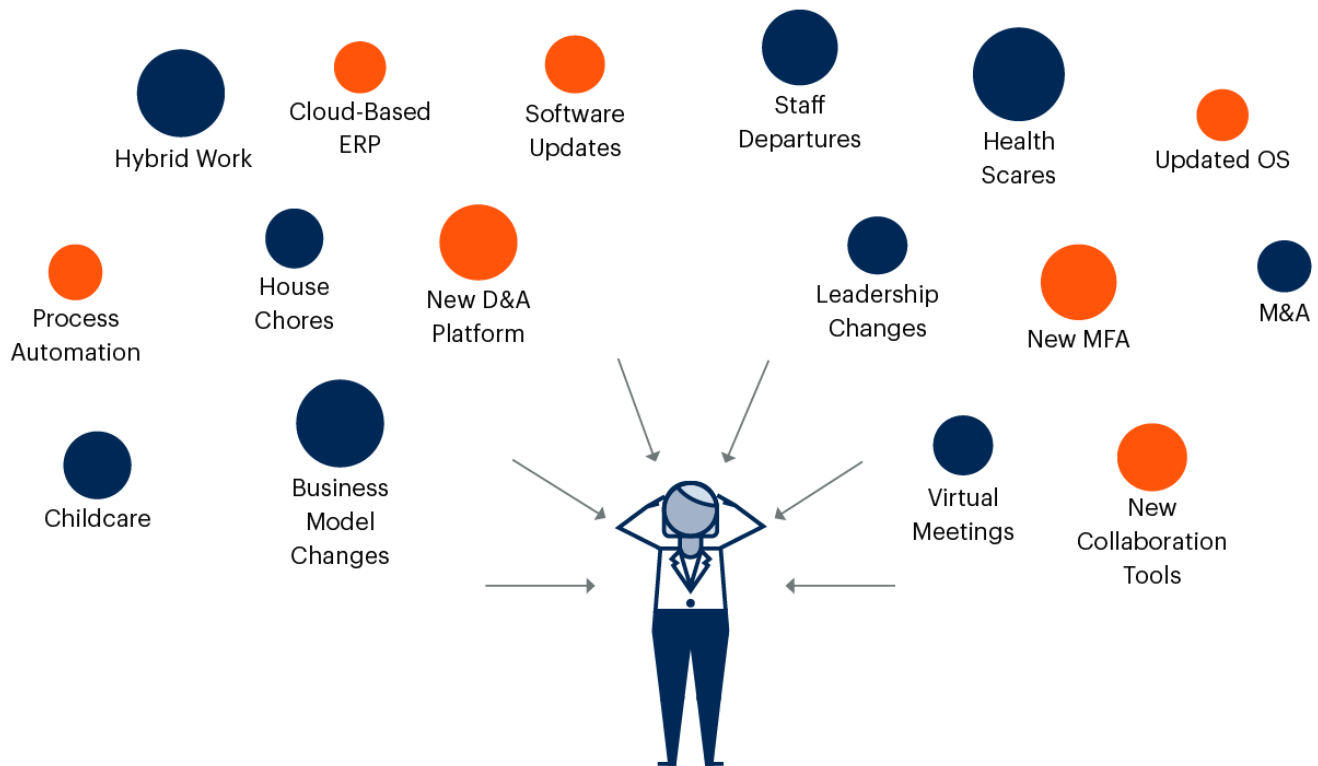
This research outlines ways midsize enterprises can make change fatigue a key part of regular conversations with business leaders and build fatigue into portfolio prioritization and release-planning decisions.

### Figure 1. Everyone Has Undergone a Lot of Change

## Everyone Has Undergone a Lot of Change

Employees Are Overwhelmed By Changes Inside and Outside the Workplace

■ Technology-Mediated Changes ■ Non-Technology Changes



Note: The size of the circle varies based on the amount of impact it creates.

Source: Gartner  
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## Analysis

### Make Change Fatigue a Key Part of Conversations With Business Leaders

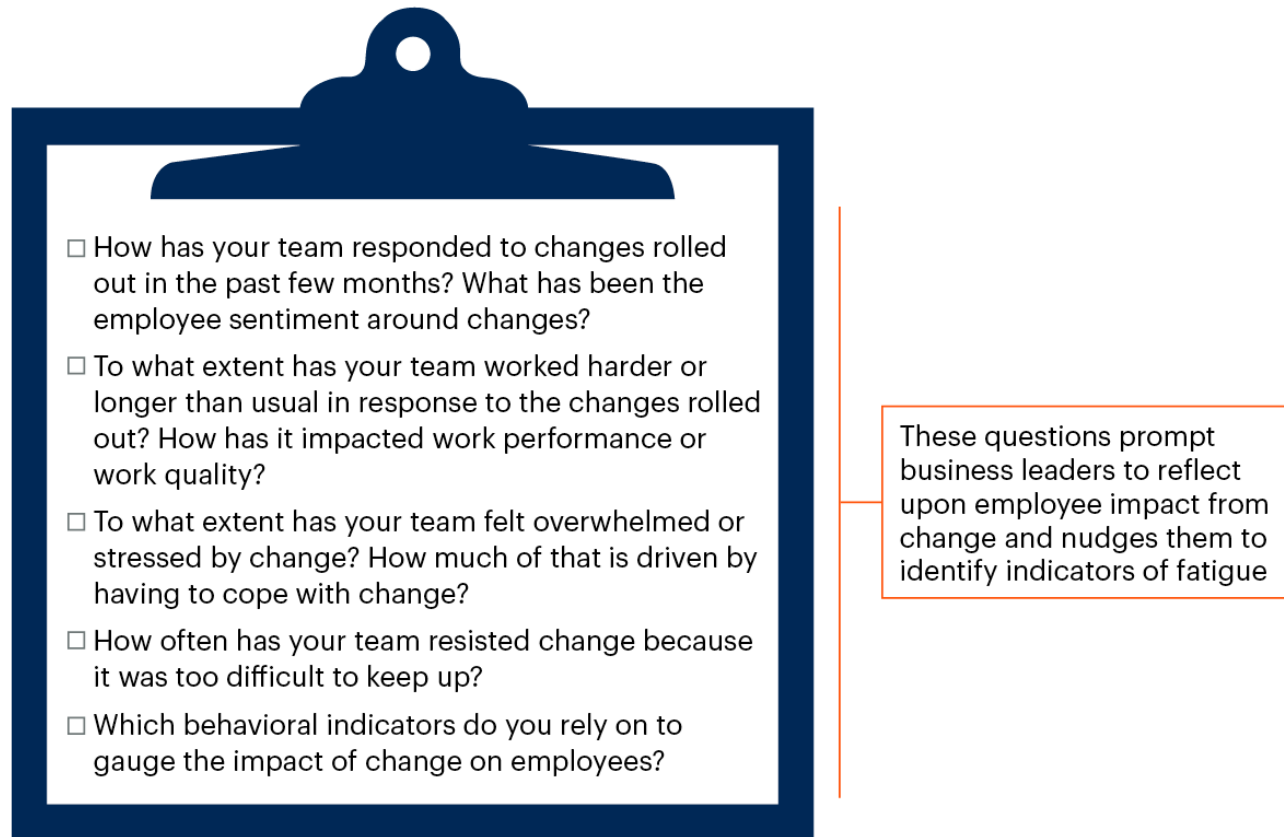
Business leaders are often caught off guard by the real impact of change on their teams' morale, productivity, and engagement. Many midsize enterprise (MSE) CIOs admitted business leaders often struggle to think about reduced change fatigue as a desired outcome, the same way they would think about adoption rates, timelines and revenue. Translating change fatigue from an abstract concept to a more concrete factor is difficult. A CIO at a medical insurance company told us, "I spend most of my time talking to business partners about technology adoption and training. Employee fatigue is an abstract concept we don't even consider."

MSE CIOs should begin by leading discussions on fatigue with business leaders to build enterprisewide awareness about change fatigue. During regular meetings and check-ins with business leaders, CIOs should ask questions that prompt business leaders to actively think about the degree of change fatigue their teams experience. Posing such questions prompts business leaders

to reflect on the actual impact of changes. The questions in Figure 2 can help frame such conversations.

**Figure 2. Questions for an Executive Discussion on Change Fatigue**

## Questions for an Executive Discussion on Change Fatigue



- How has your team responded to changes rolled out in the past few months? What has been the employee sentiment around changes?
- To what extent has your team worked harder or longer than usual in response to the changes rolled out? How has it impacted work performance or work quality?
- To what extent has your team felt overwhelmed or stressed by change? How much of that is driven by having to cope with change?
- How often has your team resisted change because it was too difficult to keep up?
- Which behavioral indicators do you rely on to gauge the impact of change on employees?

These questions prompt business leaders to reflect upon employee impact from change and nudges them to identify indicators of fatigue

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CIOs can also embed questions within employee engagement surveys to better understand employee fatigue (see Tool: Change Impact Questionnaire for Digital Initiatives at Midsize Enterprises) and frame prioritization discussions with business leaders.

### Build Fatigue Into Enterprisewide Prioritization Discussions

Often, portfolio level prioritization decisions don't account for fatigue, because parameters like business value and strategic alignment overshadow conversations on the cost of change fatigue to employees. Employee fatigue becomes an afterthought.

CIOs should encourage business partners to reflect on how initiatives can add to employee burnout and fatigue, and ensure that they take change fatigue into consideration during prioritization (see Table 1). There are many ways to reinforce the importance of change fatigue after the initial

prioritization discussion. This can come in the form of a simple question through an email or quick chat, a one-on-one discussion or a more formalized group meeting focused on change fatigue, depending on the organization's needs and context. Nudging business leaders to think about fatigue, beyond the context of traditional prioritization discussions, ensures that fatigue doesn't get overshadowed by cost, speed and value considerations.

Embedding fatigue in decision making requires a deliberate mindset shift. Encouraging business leaders to carve out time to consider employee fatigue from initiatives is an effective way to ensure that they go one step ahead of merely acknowledging fatigue in passing, to actually incorporating it in how initiatives are prioritized and planned.

**Table 1: Build a Fatigue Mindset With Business Leaders**

<b>What</b>	Encourage business leaders to reflect on how initiatives can add to employee burnout and fatigue by asking them probing questions.
<b>When</b>	Embed change fatigue considerations into initial prioritization discussions. Consistently reinforce fatigue messaging with business leaders after prioritization and finally, consider fatigue during planning, execution and release of new change.
<b>How</b>	Leverage multiple channels of reinforcement with business leaders, including emails, one-on-one conversations or fatigue-focused meetings.

Source: Gartner (September 2022)

## Reassess How IT Releases Change to Minimize Fatigue

In most situations, IT teams release changes based on business urgency and value. Very few organizations consistently think about opportunities to flexibly release change based on employees' levels of change fatigue. Through conversations with business leaders, CIOs can identify teams that experience high fatigue. They can then set up dedicated discussions with the leaders and managers of those teams to identify opportunities to adapt IT release plans to avoid employee burnout.

### Case in Point: Flexible Change Release Based on Employee Capacity (Sky Cable)



The IT team at Sky Cable makes change planning and releasing decisions based on employee capacity, not just business urgency, reducing the fatigue experienced by employees. Any additional changes (anything that hasn't been vetted through

the traditional prioritization process) are rolled out only when employees have the capacity to absorb them. Employee capacity is estimated through qualitative discussions with business leaders during monthly meetings (see Case Study: Reduce Risk of Fatigue from Technology Changes). The CIO asks a series of questions to develop a sense of capacity and identify when it's the right time to release changes, so that employees are not overburdened:

- When do you think your team will be more stressed with change during the current month?
- Of the changes discussed, which one do you expect to cause the most stress and fatigue in your team?
- When is the right time to release changes that we've been holding off?
- Are there any changes that you think your team will be excited about?

The CIO then collaborates with business leaders and decides whether to rescope, release, delay or eliminate changes in IT's backlog:

- **Release:** When employees are experiencing low change periods.
- **Delay:** When change capacity is low due to employees being exposed to multiple changes.
- **Rescope:** Release technical back-end changes, and pause process improvements or front-end changes when capacity is low.
- **Eliminate:** Potential changes that are repeatedly delayed are strong candidates to be canceled altogether. If the proposal has been in the pipeline for six months but continues to be delayed, they simply eliminate it.

Scheduling change based on end-user capacity helps overcome the default instinct of IT and business teams to focus on technical and process improvements without really understanding the impact on end users.

## Conclusion: Embed Fatigue Into Decision Processes

Unaddressed change fatigue undermines returns from technology investments. Employees who feel frustrated with high volumes and complexity of changes are likely to resist further changes. This is true even when changes are well-designed and well-executed. Embedding fatigue into the organization's decision making is critical to ensure that technology changes meet the desired outcomes and further organizational goals.

## Evidence

<sup>1</sup> **2021 Gartner User Influence on Software Decisions Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand how users view technology, their comfort with it, how they might advocate for software or possibly subvert “corporate efforts,” and their role in the growth from trial to purchase to workgroup usage to department to enterprise. The research was conducted online from April through June 2021, among 4,953 respondents in organizations with at least 100 employees in the U.S. (35%), France (23%), Germany (22%) and Singapore (20%). Industries surveyed include manufacturing and natural resources, banking and securities, retail, government, insurance, healthcare, communications, media, services, education, utilities, technology and transportation. Respondents were required to be full-time users or staff (i.e., not managers) who use technology products and services for their day-to-day work. They were also required to not be in vendor management or procurement. Disclaimer: Results of this study do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but do reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

## Glossary

**Change Fatigue:** Gartner defines change fatigue as negative employee response to change (including apathy, burnout and frustration) that harms organizational outcomes.

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