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4 Tactics to Mitigate Change Fatigue

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Initiatives: CIO Leadership of Culture and People; CIO Executive Leadership Development

Employees have dealt recently with changing business and operating models, staff departures, digital acceleration, hybrid work and many other disruptions. They're exhausted, and it is impacting the success of technological initiatives. Here are four steps CIOs can take to mitigate employee fatigue.

Overview

Key Findings

- Many organizations develop effective project plans and address change management properly, but still don't achieve their objectives due to change fatigue.
- The 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey highlighted dealing with change fatigue as key to the success of digital initiatives.
- Eight out of 10 CIOs don't make fatigue a regular part of their conversations about business technology initiatives.

Recommendations

CIOs who want to create a culture that gets the most out of technology talent should:

- Treat change fatigue as a business issue by adding a discussion round for evaluating the impact of fatigue when prioritizing initiatives.
- Distribute change leadership by involving business leaders and experts in decision making at all levels.
- Co-create execution and involve stakeholders by creating multidisciplinary teams and setting clear guidance for how they will engage.
- Care about the emotions of change by creating positive experiences throughout the initiative and not just at the end when success is achieved.

Introduction

*Gartner defines **change fatigue** as the negative employee response to change (including apathy, burnout and frustration) that harms organizational outcomes. Change fatigue is largely driven by the amount of disruption from change and the volume of change experienced.*

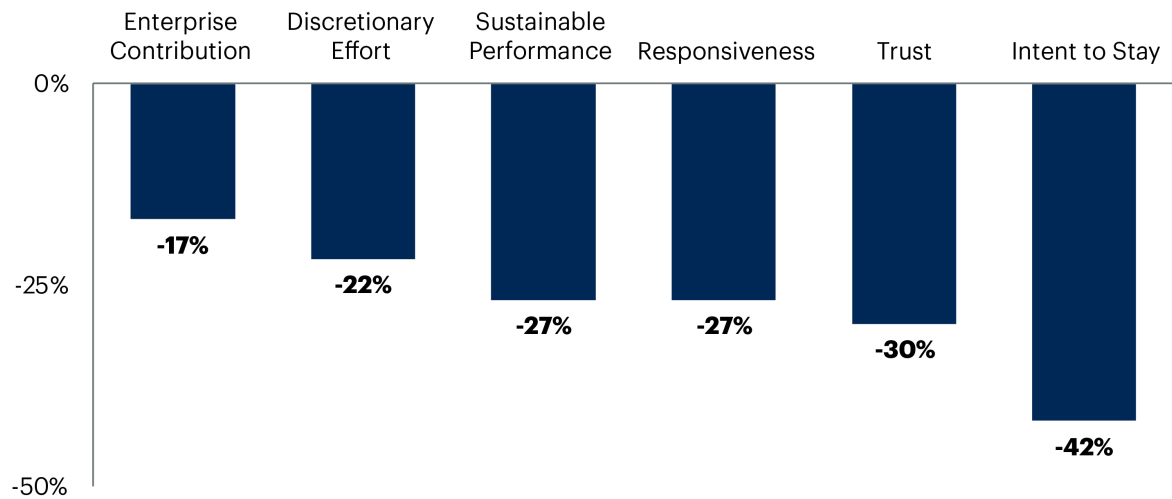
Employees are exhausted. Recently, they have dealt with changing business and operating models, staff departures, digital acceleration, hybrid work and many other disruptions. They are undergoing an unprecedented amount of change. The good news is that many organizations are doing the right things to deal with such a whirlwind of technological change: They devise good change management plans, and they implement culture change where needed. However, many CIOs do not get the results they want. Why? Because they overlook a critical factor: change fatigue. Fatigue hurts their performance in many ways, including apathy, burnout and frustration (see Figure 1). Fatigue decreases workers' ability to:

- Make decisions
- Solve complex problems
- Communicate

Figure 1: Impact of Change Fatigue on Key Employee Outcomes

Impact of Change Fatigue on Key Employee Outcomes

Maximum Impact of Employee Change Fatigue



n = 3,548 employees

Source: 2022 Gartner Workforce Change Fatigue Survey
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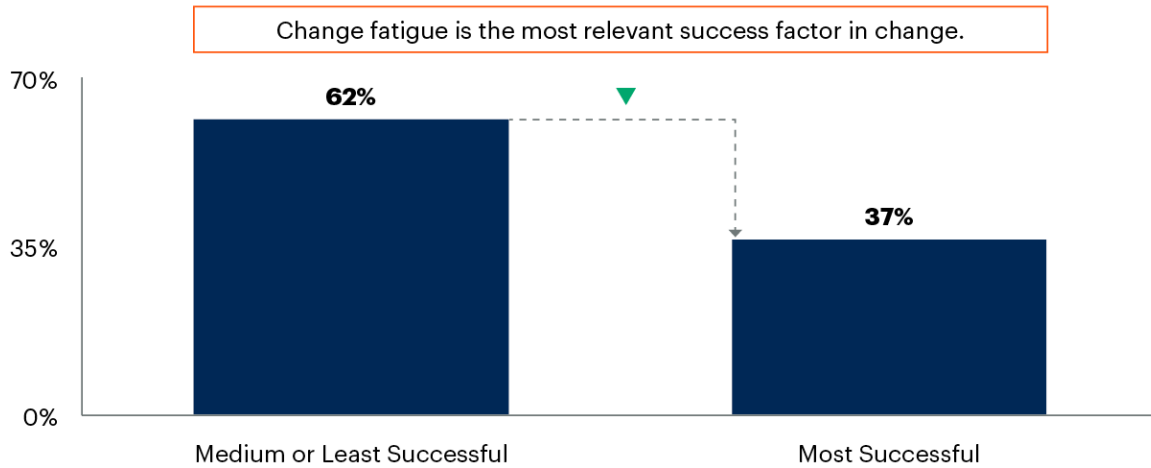


CIOs can increase the chances that their change initiatives succeed by dealing with change fatigue in their IT organizations and the whole enterprise. In fact, the 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey tested a number of factors in relation to the success of initiatives. The only factor that makes a significant difference to success is dealing with change fatigue (see Figure 2). The most successful organizations have far lower instances of fatigue.

Figure 2: Most Successful Companies Are Significantly Less Fatigued

Current IT-Related Change Environment — Level of Fatigue

Percentage of Respondents Based on the Success in IT/Technology-Related Changes



n = 103 total (n = 73 medium or least successful, n = 30 most successful) IT and business executives, excluding “not sure”

Q: For each of the opposing pair of statements, please select the statement which best describes the current IT-related change environment in your company.

Source: 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey; Gartner’s Research Circle members
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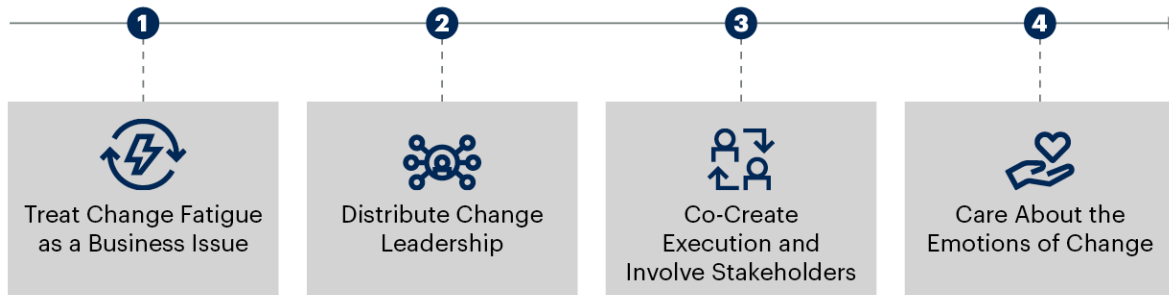


As illustrated in Figure 3, CIOs can reduce change fatigue by taking four steps:

- Treat change fatigue as a business issue.
- Distribute change leadership.
- Co-create execution and involve stakeholders.
- Care about the emotions of change.

Figure 3: CIOs Can Reduce Change Fatigue by Taking Four Steps

CIOs Can Reduce Change Fatigue by Taking Four Steps



Source: Gartner
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Analysis

Treat Change Fatigue as a Business Issue

Eight out of 10 CIOs don't make fatigue a regular part of their conversations about business technology initiatives. ¹ They work with business partners to set project timelines and communication plans, but they don't consider initiatives within employees' context. Consequently, worker fatigue goes unaddressed.

CIOs should factor change fatigue into planning initiatives by adding a second round of evaluation (see Figure 4). The first round would include the usual considerations, such as the business impact, risk, ROI and so on of the proposed initiatives. The second round should consider factors that contribute to change fatigue, including:

- The level of effort each initiative requires
- Other changes occurring at the same time
- The ability to minimize change
- Changes to roles

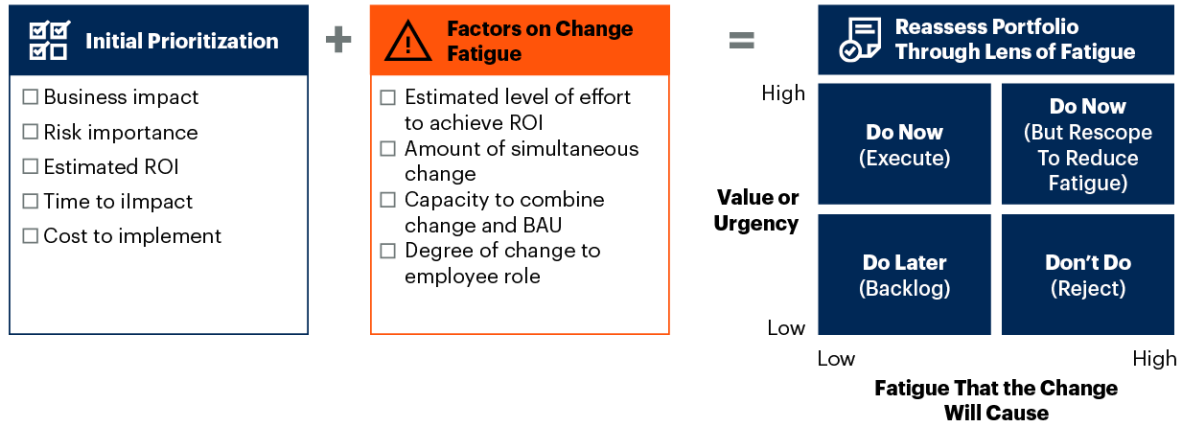
CIOs can then map the proposed initiatives on a 2 x 2 matrix. That is:

- Urgent initiatives causing low fatigue can be executed immediately.
- Urgent initiatives causing high fatigue can be revised or narrowed to reduce fatigue.

- Projects with low urgency and low fatigue can be added to the backlog.
- Those with low urgency and high fatigue should be scrapped.

Figure 4: Factor Change Fatigue Into Planning

Factor Change Fatigue Into Planning



Source: Gartner
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It takes courage to say, “We cannot do it” (lower right quadrant). But the alternative is worse: failing in other change initiatives due to the accumulated fatigue.

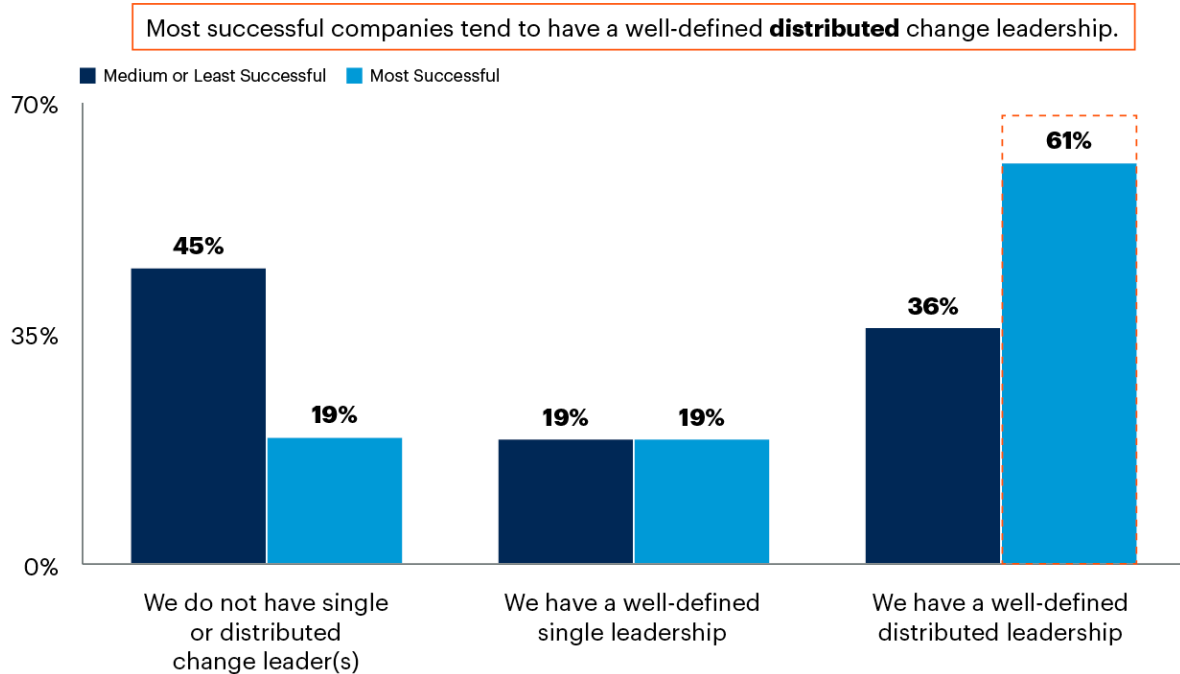
Distribute Change Leadership

Enterprises that are most successful at change have well-defined, distributed leadership for initiatives (see Figure 5). The other two options do not yield the best results. An initiative without clear change leadership invites greater friction among participants and, therefore, higher fatigue; a single leader will focus on getting the project done on time, with little visibility into the cost of worker fatigue. Distributed leadership has closer contact with workers and the power to change directions when fatigue rises. Distributed leadership also distributes the burden of decision making, a key cause of stress, too.

Figure 5: Benefit of Distributed Change Leadership

Benefit of Distributed Change Leadership

Percentage of Respondents Based on the Success in IT/Technology-Related Changes



n = 104 total (n = 73 medium or least successful, n = 31 most successful) IT and business executives, excluding “not sure”

Q: For each attribute, please select which one of the statements best reflects how IT-related changes are managed in your company.

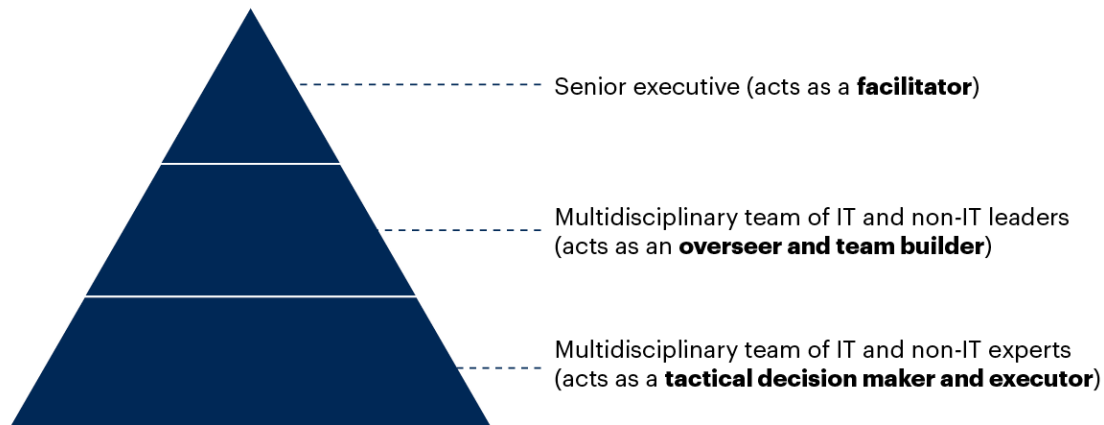
Source: 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey; Gartner’s Research Circle members

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Distributed leadership takes the pyramid form in Figure 6. A senior executive acts as the initiative’s sponsor or facilitator, but has no day-to-day involvement. Then a team of IT and business leaders provides direct oversight and team building. Finally, a larger group of subject matter experts from both IT and the business make tactical decisions and execute them. Each initiative could have its own pyramid, or a senior executive could facilitate multiple related initiatives, each with its own sets of leaders and experts.

Figure 6: What Distributed Leadership Looks Like

What Distributed Leadership Looks Like



This structure can be different for different changes, or the same for all the changes — if the latter, the senior executive plays the role of “VP of transformation,” and experts are grouped into separate multidisciplinary teams.

Source: Gartner
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Important: There is a fundamental difference between this structure and your organization chart. These “change leaders” of the middle layer in Figure 6 are not necessarily the hierarchical leaders. Hierarchical leaders tend to be much more concerned about — and hence, dedicated to — the business outcomes, not the change. This can doom the change to failure. Create the parallel organizational structure for the change, with change leaders being a blend of early adopters, informal leaders or enthusiasts of change. Assign a group of people — as multidisciplinary as possible — to each of those change leaders.

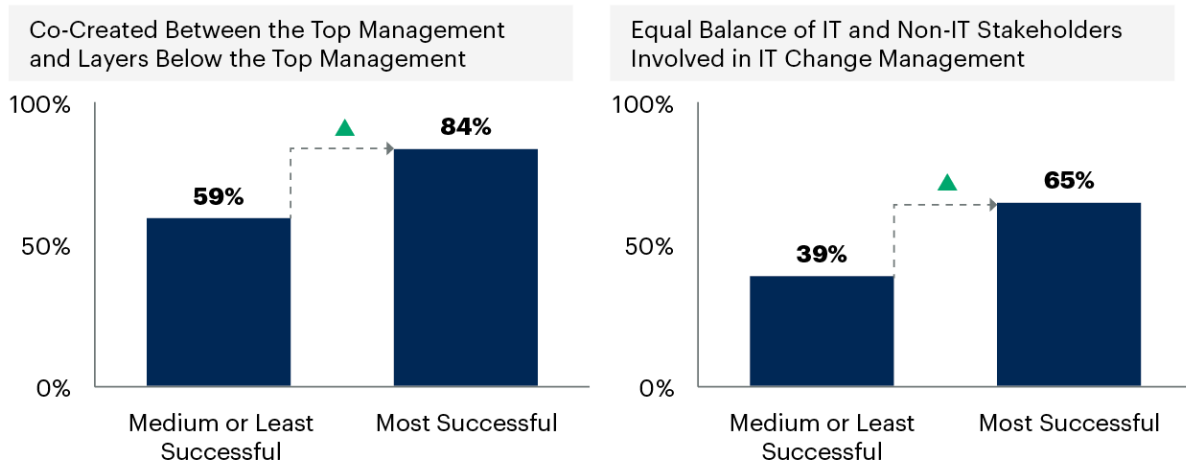
Co-Create Execution and Involve Stakeholders

The philosophy behind distributed leadership extends to the staff and other stakeholders of the initiative. The most successful enterprises make decisions about how to execute change with the cooperation of top executives and lower organizational layers, and they involve IT and business stakeholders in change management (see Figure 7). Employees experience less fatigue when they have a say in the terms of engagement.

Figure 7: Co-Creation Is a Key to Success

Decision Making on IT Change Execution and Stakeholders Involved in IT Change Management

Percentage of Respondents Based on the Success in IT/Technology-Related Changes



n = 105 total (n = 74 medium or least successful, n = 31 most successful) IT and business executives, excluding “not sure”

Q: For each attribute, please select which one of the statements best reflects how IT-related changes are managed in your company.

Source: 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey; Gartner’s Research Circle members

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CIOs can involve everyone in change management by creating multidisciplinary teams (see Figure 8). Teams shouldn’t just include the technical experts required to execute the project. They should also include experts from all of the functions that the initiative will touch.

Ideally, find a blend of those experts among people for whom the change is not just another change. For example:

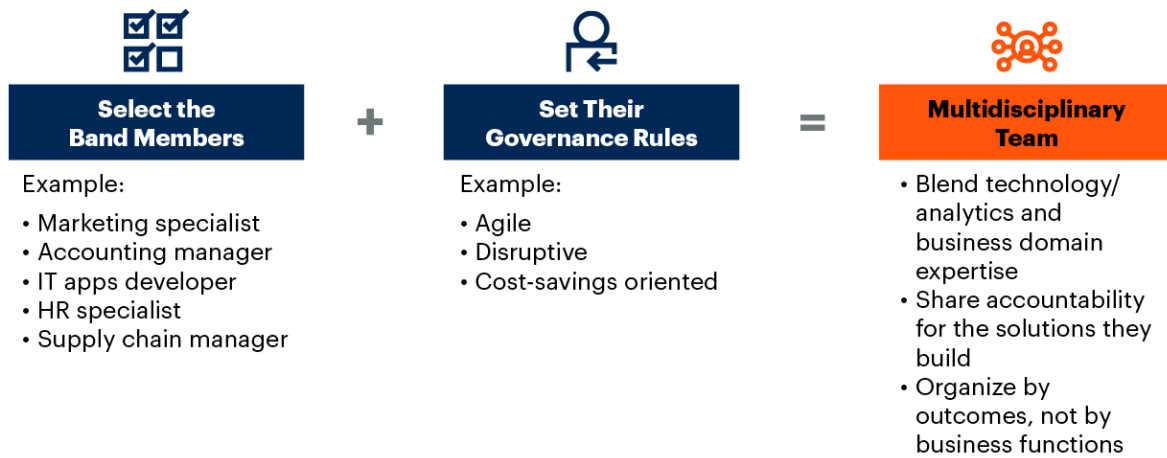
- People who are more affected by the change in their jobs
- People who are critics of the change
- People who are enthusiastic
- People who bring a different perspective or expertise
- People who have the expertise but are introverts who never speak out
- People who are early adopters

That blend of people with different perspectives will contribute to the cohesiveness of the people involved in the change.

In addition, CIOs should set guidance for how teams should do their work – for example, working in an agile manner and striving for disruptive innovation. The resulting multidisciplinary team will share accountability for results and will focus on delivering business outcomes, not merely completing a project plan.

Figure 8: Building a Multidisciplinary Team

Building a Multidisciplinary Team



Source: Gartner
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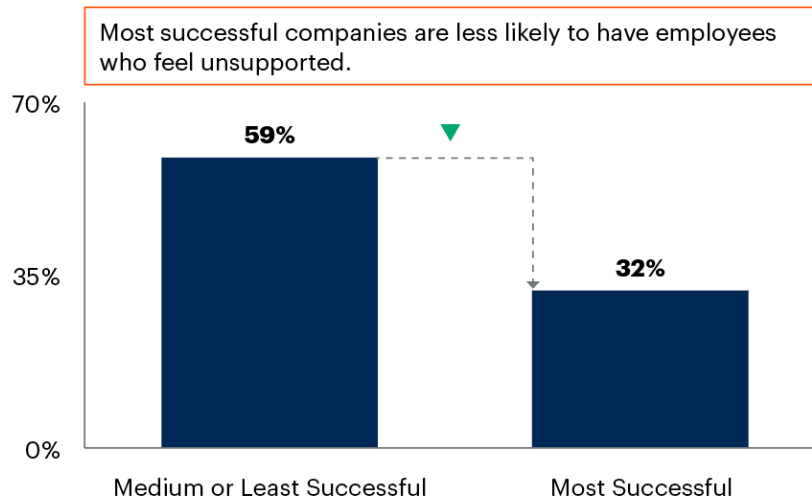
Care About the Emotions of Change

Positive reinforcement throughout the process reduces fatigue and boosts motivation and focus. People want to feel good about what they’re doing while the work is happening, not just at the end when success is achieved. The most successful organizations have the lowest portion of workers who don’t feel supported (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Successful Organizations Support Their Workers

Factors Driving IT-Related Change Fatigue — Employees Feel They Don't Have Support

Percentage of Respondents Based on the Success in IT/Technology-Related Changes



n = 105 total (n = 75 medium or least successful, n = 30 most successful) IT and business executives, excluding “not sure”

Q: How significant are each of the factors in driving IT-related change fatigue among the employees in your company?

Source: 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey; Gartner’s Research Circle members

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According to neuroscience, a positive emotional impact will build a positive, long-lasting memory in our brain, whereas a negative emotional impact will build a negative, long-lasting memory that will weigh us down in the future. ² Consequently, CIOs will reduce the risk of apathy toward transformation — that is, change fatigue — if their initiatives create a positive emotional charge overall. In other words, the CIOs’ objective is to create a mental track record of as many positives as possible. Figure 10 shows four ways to do that.

By celebrating progress, not only the final result, CIOs will send the message that whatever the outcome is, useful lessons learned along the way will improve present or future initiatives. Even if the team doesn’t achieve a positive outcome, celebrating progress along the way is a mighty way to transform the sense of failure into learning lessons and avoid an overall negative perception. A special mention for hybrid/remote settings: CIOs should be more intentional with recognitions and celebrations there due to the fear of an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality.

CIOs should share good experiences widely in their company – for example, the attainment of one of the business outcomes expected from the change. It will increase the motivation of the organization, making up for future low points that might occur. But CIOs shouldn't exaggerate or invent the positives. If those experiences are not honest, they will generate apathy and cynicism.

Include "listening to the drawbacks" sessions into the change plan. It is a session with the purpose to vent and complain about the things not working well in the change. By giving it a formal and safe space, CIOs will have the golden opportunity to tackle those issues. It contributes to converting negative into positive experiences.

Finally, balancing the workload and challenges across the team creates a sense of fairness.

Figure 10: Build Positive Experiences Throughout the Initiative

Build Positive Experiences Throughout the Initiative



Source: Gartner
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Evidence

The 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey was conducted online from 5 July through 18 July 2022 to identify the most prevalent types of IT- or technology-related change, and to understand how enterprises are approaching them successfully. The survey also focused on identifying the main symptoms and impacts of employee change fatigue and how enterprises are addressing them. The following Gartner-managed panel members participated: 56 CIO Research Circle members, 42 ITL and Business Leaders Research Circle members, and eight CFO and Senior Finance Leaders Research Circle members. Members from North America (n = 49), EMEA (n = 39), Asia/Pacific (n = 12) and Latin America (n = 6) responded to the survey.

The 2022 Gartner Workforce Change Fatigue Survey was conducted to understand the levels of change fatigue in employees and the manager's role in mitigating it. The research was conducted online from 28 February 2022 to 16 March 2022 among 3,548 respondents from various geographies, industries and functions. The survey was designed and developed by Gartner's HR Practice research team.

Disclaimer: The results of these surveys do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

The data included in this research report from the 2022 Gartner Workforce Change Fatigue Survey has been updated from earlier publication to reflect the latest data findings and analysis.

¹ Based on multiple interviews conducted with CIOs by Gartner's peer and practitioner research team.

² The Amygdala Modulates the Consolidation of Memories of Emotionally Arousing Experiences, Annual Review of Neuroscience.

Document Revision History

Four Tactics to Mitigate Change Fatigue - 5 January 2023

Recommended by the Authors

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The 12 Principles Every Organizational Change Needs to Succeed

Case Study: Reduce Risk of Fatigue From Technology Changes Human-Centric Work Models Proven to Drive Performance the Most Tool: Team Prioritization Matrix to Reduce Burnout

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