

Gartner Research

Develop Effective High-Performing People Managers to Reduce Attrition

By Mbula Schoen, Lily Mok, Jose Ramirez, Anish Roy

7 March 2022

Develop Effective High-Performing People Managers to Reduce Attrition

Published 7 March 2022 - ID G00764101 - 14 min read

By Analyst(s): Mbula Schoen, Lily Mok, Jose Ramirez, Anish Roy

Initiatives: CIO Leadership of Technology Talent, Culture and DEI

IT employees are increasingly leaving not their jobs, but their managers. CIOs must reverse the trend by cultivating quality people managers who can effectively motivate, engage, coach and develop staff. Failure to do so risks widening the IT talent gap that impedes fulfillment of business goals.

Overview

Key Findings

- Not everyone wants to be or should be a people manager. However, promotions to a people management role are often considered the only way successful individual contributors can progress their career.
- “Manager quality” leapt five ranks in 2021 as an attrition driver to second place for IT employees, surpassing “work-life balance,” which held the second rank throughout 2020.
- Managers typically don’t have explicitly defined metrics in their performance reviews to gauge how well they motivate, engage, coach and develop their teams and, hence, are not held accountable. This has become all the more important due to hybrid work.
- People managers with operational responsibilities often have difficulty striking a balance between “doing the work” and “managing people to do the work.” They often resort to the comfort zone of their individual work.

Recommendations

CIO leaders of technology talent, culture and DEI should:

- Start by defining the key competencies required of a high-performing and effective people manager. This must be accompanied by developing a formal leadership training program to help managers address today's challenges.
- Develop high-performing people managers in your organization by focusing on two key functions of their role: The coaching and development of people on their teams, and ensuring team psychological safety.
- Set clear promotion expectations for the people manager role by assessing aspiring and existing people managers against the desired profile. This helps to close gaps and address people managers who are not a fit for the role.
- Address role misalignments by creating individual development plans. Ensure that managers are trained and measured to have frequent "stay interviews or conversations" with their staff to really understand changing preferences, needs and interests.

Strategic Planning Assumption

By the late 2020s, "traditional" leadership competencies will become less relevant as organizations become less hierarchical, more collaborative and more agile, and instead be replaced by more relational, coaching and facilitation-based skills.

Introduction

Not everyone wants to be, or should be, a people manager. However, promotions to a people manager role are often considered the only way employees can progress their career. Many managers are promoted to their role having been good and successful individual contributors. However, they may not have the requisite people skills and competencies to foster high-performing teams. This results in these individuals not succeeding in the people management role, as they shouldn't have been in this role in the first place.

The success and ability of an organization to achieve its digital ambitions is dependent on high-performing people managers attuned to employee needs. The high-performing people manager is the connector, the linchpin, throughout the organization. They touch each individual contributor and sometimes other, lower-level managers.

Organizations around the world are struggling to retain critical talent. CIOs have an even bigger challenge, with IT employees more likely to leave than non-IT employees. In the fourth quarter of 2021, we found that only 29.1% of IT employees indicate a high intent to stay with their current employers. ¹ Intent to stay measures the employee's desire to stay with the organization, based on if they:

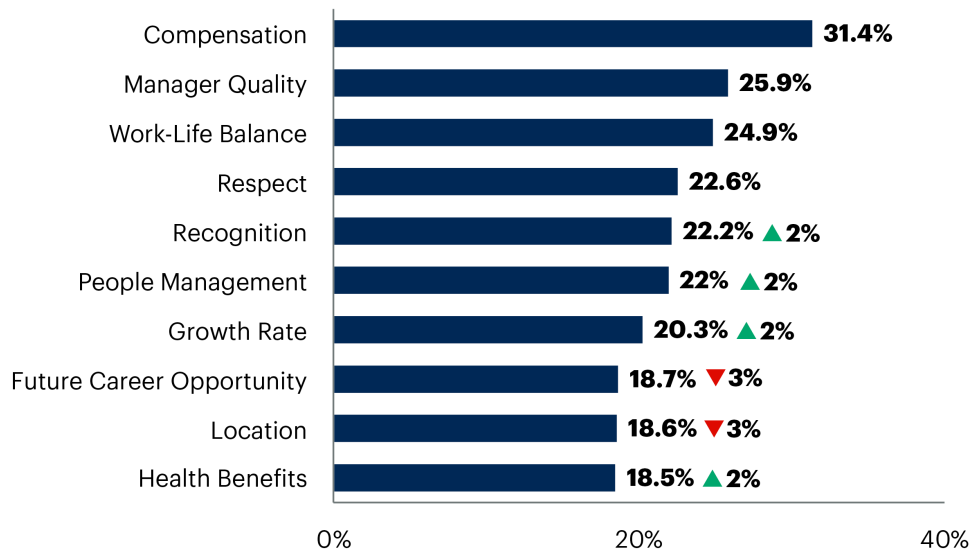
- Intend to look for a new job within a year
- Think frequently of quitting
- Are actively looking for a job
- Have begun to take tangible steps, such as placing phone calls or sending out résumés

In the 4Q21 Gartner IT Workforce Report, a closer look at attrition drivers indicates that employees are leaving their managers rather than their jobs (see Figure 1). Manager quality leapt five ranks in 2021 as an attrition driver to second place, surpassing “work-life balance,” which held the second rank throughout 2020.

Figure 1: CIO Focus Areas for Retaining Current Talent

CIO Focus Areas for Retaining Current Talent

Percentage of Employees Selecting the Following as a Top-Five Attrition Driver



IT employees increasingly cited **manager quality, respect and recognition** as drivers for attrition

n = 8,153 employees, including 758 IT employees

Source: 4Q21 Gartner Global Labor Market Survey

Note: Change depicts increase or decrease in percentage of respondents

764101_C

Gartner

As such, any efforts or investments poured into your employee retention strategies will not be successful if they are void of developing people management skills in your people managers. ²

“It takes more than a 20% pay raise to lure most employees away from a manager who engages them, and next to nothing to poach most disengaged workers.”

— Gallup survey

With the market for scarce IT talent being extremely competitive, CIOs should ask themselves the following questions to understand if they are taking the best approach to retaining the key IT talent they need:

- Am I providing team managers with the support and training they need to lead employees — particularly during this time of crisis and rapid change?
- Does my performance review plan include 360 feedback for managers?
- Have I built career plans that include a people manager track that ensures only those well-suited to the role of manager choose that path?
- Do my employees feel recognized by their managers for the effort and work they do?

In other words, CIOs must include developing high-performing and effective people managers to be successful in maximizing workforce effectiveness and retaining the IT talent needed to drive digital business.

Analysis

Define the Competencies for Identifying High-Performing People Managers

The job description for people managers in enterprises can differ. In some organizations, a people manager will solely and strictly only focus on leading and managing people, while in other organizations, the people manager is also an individual contributor. For example, one may lead a team of application developers, while others may be a combination of player-coach who, besides leading a team of developers, will occasionally perform development work like other individual contributors on their team.

Regardless, the profiles for any individual with people management responsibility should be based on a set of clearly defined competencies (see Note 1 for a table of definitions).

Competencies are a broad set of observable, measurable attributes that are predictive of effective performance in a job or role.

Identifying the right competencies and level of proficiency for your people managers is essential (see Note 2). Research has shown that the most effective competency models focus on select competencies (typically numbering five to no more than 12). The 10 competencies listed in Table 1 are commonly identified as ones that drive quality in the people manager role to support the achievement of digital business goals. You may need to refine the list to reflect the competencies important in your particular environment, which requires that you also identify behavior descriptors at each proficiency level.

Table 1: Identification of Competencies for People Managers

General People Management Competencies	Desired Proficiency Level	Current Proficiency Level	Degree of Importance
Building Relationships			
Change Leadership			
Communications for Results			
Continuous Learning			
Emotional Intelligence			
Empathetic			
Empowering Others			
Outcome Driven			
Self-Confidence			
Strategic Thinking			

Source: Gartner

This table can be used as a starting point and the final list will be a new or modified list that is specific to your organization’s needs. The criteria for inclusion on this final list should be a combination of:

- What is most lacking in bench strength (proficiency)
- What is most important

Critically, identifying and defining the competencies must be:

- Done in collaboration with a diverse representation of IT leaders and high-performing managers
- Led by and facilitated by a party who understands how to properly define role profiles within the enterprise, such as HR

Prioritize Two Critical Leadership Development Needs

Throughout the pandemic, employees have generally worked harder, put in longer hours and become even more productive. But while performance has increased, psychological safety, inclusion and intent to stay have all declined. And managers themselves are facing a confidence crisis, unsure how best to be effective. Often people managers are skilled at organizing people as resources to accomplish tasks but can be less attune with meeting team member needs. In a recent survey 85% of prospective employees indicated that the No. 1 attribute for a new job is “to be seen as a person not just an employee.”³

As such, CIOs must prioritize investments in leadership development to groom two key abilities if their people managers are to master effective leadership in the dynamic hybrid work environment: (1) coaching and developing their teams, and (2) fostering psychological safety in teams.

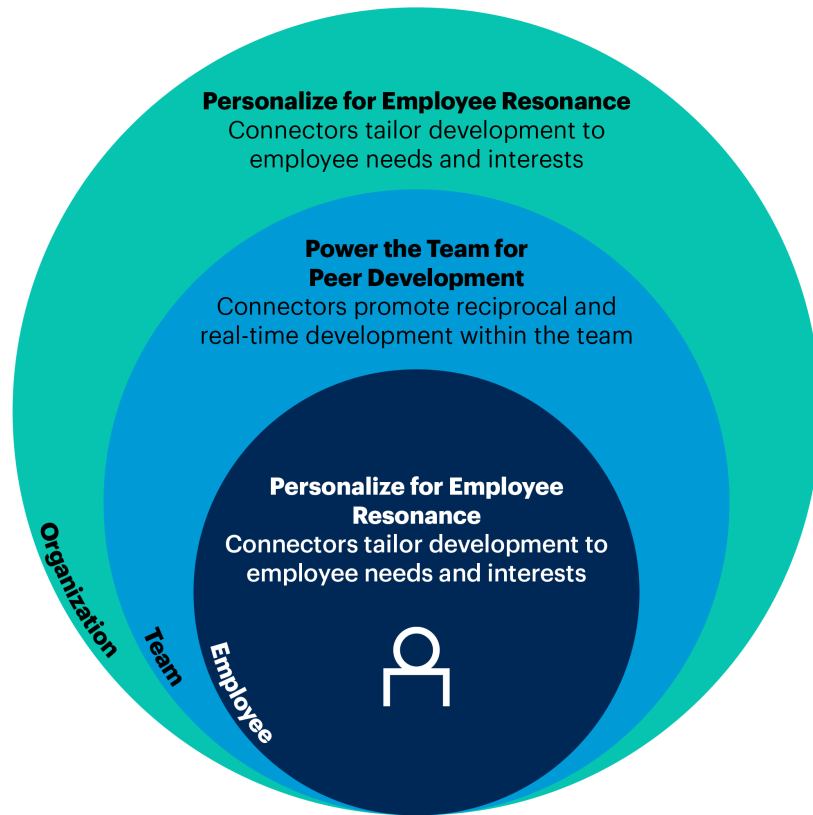
Coaching and Developing People on Their Teams

To improve retention of existing IT employees, CIOs can provide development opportunities for managers to grow their people management skills and flex their management styles. Typically, organizations rely on managers to coach and develop employees but their success has been limited. Our research shows only 33% of employees are confident in their managers’ ability to coach and develop them. Lack of time, stagnant manager quality and the absence of necessary skills make effective coaching difficult for managers; 45% of people feel they are unable to develop the skills employees need today. This growing disconnect is a barrier to unlocking employee performance to deliver business value.⁴

Of the four types of people managers identified by Gartner research — see Note 3 — the Connector manager is by far the most effective manager profile and the one that most improves employee performance and thereby retention (see Figure 2). The Connector manager is superior to other types of managers in that their role is to foster specific types of connections with the employee, team and organization. They take an employee-centric coaching approach and use their broader network to meet employees’ coaching needs.

Figure 2: The Connector Manager

The Connector Manager



Source: Gartner
764101_C

Gartner.

This type of manager may provide some of the coaching an employee needs but recognizes that they don't have all the knowledge or skills to perform all the coaching. A Connector manager can find the right resource for their employees' coaching and development needs. They understand their employees' individual needs and can:

- Identify coaching opportunities.
- Empower teams for peer development.
- Facilitate best-fit coaching connections.

In the development of your competency model for high-performing people managers, identify gaps and invest in developing your managers to become effective Connector managers. To help your managers become Connectors, set expectations and encourage them to assess what traits and behaviors they can adopt to become Connectors.

Developing Psychological Safety in Their Teams

Very simply defined, psychological safety is a shared belief that a team feels comfortable about taking interpersonal risks.⁵ Psychological safety is the most effective tool that can be used to foster empathy-based leadership – which will help to meet drivers such as respect, recognition, co-worker quality and risk taking. Those employees with high levels of psychological safety are two times more likely to find their work easier and to innovate more easily, as well as having much higher intent to stay (4.06/10 for low psychological safety versus 6.08/10 for high psychological safety) (see [The Impact of Connector Managers on Psychological Safety Through Disruption In a Hybrid Work](#)).

Psychologically safe teams share and learn from their mistakes more openly, course-correct faster and, therefore, drive much higher levels of innovation. They do this because they feel more comfortable taking interpersonal risks due to the trust, connections and shared team values (culture) that have been fostered by their leader. Psychological safety is related to many of the other interlinked attraction and attrition drivers, and is the most effective way to operationalize the empathy-based management required by the human deal (see [CIOs Must Reinvent Their IT Employment Value Proposition to Compete for Top Talent](#)).

In a hybrid work environment, psychological safety development is a critical competency that all managers need to prioritize – and it is severely lacking in most managers today, especially in IT. It is imperative that organizations develop a formal leadership training program to address today's challenges. Many organizations have started doing this to address attrition.

Assess Your Aspiring and Existing People Managers to Determine Gaps in Competencies

For the benefit of both organizations and employees, we need to redefine the desired outcome for managers, and today, that means eliciting performance that is sustainable. In other words, we need managers to support employees' performance.

Your competency model should become the basis for the HR processes needed to hire and develop aspiring and existing people managers in your IT organization. To understand the current bench strength of the competencies defined for your people managers, a more formal competency assessment must be conducted using the behavioral event interviewing (BEI) process (see [Toolkit: Behavioral Event Interview Guide for Digital Workforce Competency Assessment](#)). The high-performing people manager competencies and their related BEI questions can be used for both new-hire situations and employee development opportunities.

Figure 3 provides an example of how this data can be used. It presents the results of a BEI assessment using red, yellow and green to indicate how each employee was assessed against the required proficiency levels.

The calculations at the bottom of the table provide an aggregated view of this information, according to competency, for the entire IT organization. This makes gaps easier to identify. You can use this information to make decisions on where development is needed (such as gaps in business acumen) and how it should be delivered (for example, if there are large gaps, it may be delivered for mass consumption rather than more pointed development needs for one or two staff members).

Figure 3: Competency Gap Analysis/Assessment

Competency Gap Analysis/Assessment

↑ Exceeds Required Proficiency Level
 ↔ Meets Required Proficiency Level
 ↓ Below Required Proficiency Level
 (-) Decreased
 (+) Improved
 (=) Stayed the Same

Name	Business Acumen	Change Leadership	Coaches/ Develops Others	Communications for Results	Digital Dexterity	Empathetic	Empowering Others	Growth Mindset	Inspires and Motivates	Team Leadership
Manager 1	↓ (-)	↔ (=)	↑ (+)	↑ (+)	↓ (=)	↓ (-)	↑ (+)	↑ (=)	↔ (+)	↑ (+)
Manager 2	↔ (=)	↑ (+)	↓ (-)	↓ (-)	↔ (-)	↔ (=)	↓ (-)	↓ (-)	↓ (-)	↓ (-)
Manager 3	↑ (+)	↔ (=)	↔ (=)	↔ (=)	↓ (+)	↑ (-)	↔ (=)	↔ (=)	↑ (-)	↑ (+)
Manager 4	↑ (+)	↑ (+)	↑ (+)	↑ (+)	↔ (=)	↔ (=)	↑ (+)	↑ (+)	↓ (-)	↔ (=)
Manager 5	↔ (=)	↑ (+)	↑ (+)	↑ (+)	↔ (-)	↔ (=)	↑ (+)	↑ (=)	↔ (=)	↑ (+)
Exceeds	2	3	3	3	0	1	3	3	1	3
Meets	2	2	1	1	3	3	1	1	2	1
Below	1	0	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1
Meets or Exceeds %	80%	100%	80%	80%	60%	80%	80%	80%	60%	80%
Below %	20%	0%	20%	20%	40%	20%	20%	20%	40%	20%
Goal	80%	80%	100%	80%	100%	100%	100%	80%	100%	80%
Difference	0%	▲20%	▼20%	0%	▼40%	▼20%	▼20%	0%	▼40%	0%

Source: Gartner
764101_C

Create Individual Development Plans to Close Gaps and Address Managers Who Are Not a Fit

What do you do when it becomes evident that professional development, no matter how well done, is not going to make someone a high-performing people manager? Or, what do you do in cases where the manager may be performing effectively but has decided that this isn't a role for them? In these situations, it is believed that the employee could still provide value or have higher job satisfaction elsewhere within the company.

This is where the people manager's direct supervisor must use their coaching and development skills. If, through performance management and the professional development process, it is clear they are not a fit for their current role, then work with the individual to identify what other career opportunities or career paths would make sense for them, based on their skills, competencies and passion.

Adjust the individual development plan (IDP) to plan transition into another job with a better fit. The longer they are in the role of a people manager that, for whatever reason, isn't a fit, the longer it impacts the confidence and satisfaction of the individual manager and, likely, the productivity and morale of staff on their team.

To drive the right outcomes across the IT organization, HR-related metrics should be included into every manager's performance goals. For example:

- How much has the bench strength changed for the team they manage?
- What is the percentage of lateral or upward promotion that has occurred in their teams?
- What is the trend for voluntary employee turnover for the team they manage?
- What is the percentage improvement in employee engagement score and satisfaction with the manager?

Ensure managers are coached, trained and measured to have frequent stay conversations with their staff to really understand staff changing preferences, needs and interests. By doing so, you will drive the right behaviors to ensure your people managers are maximizing the engagement and contributions of everyone on their teams.

Evidence

¹ The Global Labor Market Survey. The 4Q21 survey was based on responses from around 18,000 employees globally, including 1,755 employees in 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 The 'Great Resignation' Is Really the 'Great Discontent,' Gallup.

³ Quick Answer: How to Attract and Retain Talent for Your Data and Analytics Team – 2021 Gartner Candidate Panel Survey: Survey data on candidates comes from the 2021 Gartner Candidate Panel Survey. This survey – conducted in May and June 2021 – collected the preferences, experiences and behaviors of 3,000 candidates across the globe. This survey polled recent candidates in 10 countries, 24 industries and 21 functions. Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole but do reflect the sentiments of the respondents surveyed.

⁴ 2017 Gartner Manager Effectiveness Survey and Connector Managers Develop Better Audit Talent

⁵ 4 Steps to Boost Psychological Safety at Your Workplace, HBR.

Note 1: Table of Leadership Competencies and Descriptions

Table 1

Competency	General Description
Change advocate	Identifies and acts upon opportunities for continuous improvement as well as transformational change where warranted. Encourages prudent risk taking, exploration of alternative approaches and organizational learning. Demonstrates personal commitment to change through actions and words. Mobilizes others to support change through times of stress and uncertainty.
Influencing others	Communicates ideas or positions in a persuasive manner that builds support, agreement and commitment. Takes actions that directly or indirectly influence others in order to create buy-in, gain trust, motivate actions and win concessions without damaging relationships.
Political Savviness	Demonstrates an understanding of organizational and political reality. Is aware of how the organization is structured, its culture, and different power groupings and agendas. Uses this understanding to inform and shape behaviors and decisions and act accordingly. Effectively negotiates and builds coalitions internally and externally to achieve missions and objectives. Possesses skills in empathy, conflict management and option generation based on risk-reward calculations.
Empowering others	Encourages others to take appropriate accountability for their work. Provides the information, training and resources necessary to enable others to make expedient, practical decisions that impact the performance and success of an event or project, as well as successful career arcs for professionals.
Continuous learning	Acquires strategies and best practices for gaining new knowledge, behaviors and skills. Builds on and applies existing knowledge. Takes ownership for personal growth. Listens to understand, and seeks insight into self and effectiveness of action. Constantly challenges own knowledge, experience, skills and self-understanding to improve personal and professional effectiveness. Tries new approaches to learning and broadens scope of work to learn from experience. Engages in active feedback and learning from others, both within and outside the organization.

Competency	General Description
Self-confidence	Accomplishes own work and overcomes setbacks. Makes sound decisions, takes risks and accepts responsibility for own actions, regardless of outcome. Sets a vision and creates an environment for success. Ensures that productive working conditions exist. Provides clear guidance and direction. Communicates with confidence and assertiveness.
Business acumen	Solicits information on company direction and goals, and on the industry's competitive environment, to determine how their function can add value for the organization and for customers. Makes decisions and recommendations clearly linked to the organization's strategy and financial goals, reflecting an awareness of external dynamics. Demonstrates awareness by providing clear explanations for actions taken relative to customer requirements, organizational needs and industry trends.
Outcome-driven	Focuses on desired results and business outcomes. Sets and achieves challenging goals. Clearly defines mutual expectations of self and others in a team setting. Takes appropriate actions to ensure obligations are met. Defines performance standards in terms of doing what is appropriate and doing it well. Revises standards in response to changing business needs. Is resourceful and takes calculated risks to achieve results; works to achieve goals despite barriers or difficulties.
Innovative	Improves company and value network performance by applying original thought to existing and emerging technological methods, processes, products and services. Employs sound judgment in determining how innovations will be deployed to produce desired results.
Strategic thinking	Examines issues and creates plans with a long-term perspective. Generates ideas and critically evaluates future scenarios. Applies external and internal factors to strategy development. Considers long-term strategic impact when making decisions or setting direction. Ensures that short-term goals support long-term strategy and that functional strategy is in alignment with overall business strategy.

Note 2: Competencies Proficiency Levels

Being developed (BD):

- Demonstrates minimal use of this competency

- Has limited knowledge of the subject matter area
- Needs frequent assistance or close supervision for direction
- Currently developing competency

Basic (B):

- Demonstrates limited use of this competency
- Has basic familiarity of subject matter area
- Needs additional training to apply without assistance or frequent supervision

Intermediate (I):

- Demonstrates a working or functional proficiency level sufficient to apply this competency effectively without assistance and with minimal supervision
- Has working or functional knowledge of the subject matter area

Advanced (A):

- Demonstrates an in-depth proficiency level that is sufficient to assist, consult or lead others in the application of this competency
- Has in-depth knowledge in the subject matter area

Expert (E):

- Demonstrates broad, in-depth proficiency sufficient to be recognized as an authority or master performer in the applications of this competency
- Has recognized authority or expertise in the subject matter area

Note 3: Gartner's Four Manager Types

1. **Teacher managers** draw from their own experience to provide feedback on employees' work.
2. **Cheerleader managers** focus on providing positive encouragement and take a hands-off approach to management.
3. **Connector managers** get to know their employees' needs, build connections among team members and refer employees to others in the organization when they don't have an answer themselves.
4. **Always-on managers** provide continuous coaching and feedback to try and guide their employees toward higher performance.

Document Revision History

Develop High-Performing People Managers to Maximize Workforce Effectiveness - 19 August 2019

Recommended by the Authors

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription. The Impact of Connector Managers on Psychological Safety Through Disruption Toolkit: IT Leadership Competency Assessment

Toolkit: Skills and Competency Assessment to Maximize Your IT Workforce Effectiveness

CIOs Must Reinvent Their IT Employment Value Proposition to Compete for Top Talent

Using a Digital Talent Management Framework to Future-Proof the IT Workforce

Toolkit: Becoming a First-Time Manager

© 2022 Gartner, Inc. and/or its affiliates. All rights reserved. Gartner is a registered trademark of Gartner, Inc. and its affiliates. This publication may not be reproduced or distributed in any form without Gartner's prior written permission. It consists of the opinions of Gartner's research organization, which should not be construed as statements of fact. While the information contained in this publication has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable, Gartner disclaims all warranties as to the accuracy, completeness or adequacy of such information. Although Gartner research may address legal and financial issues, Gartner does not provide legal or investment advice and its research should not be construed or used as such. Your access and use of this publication are governed by [Gartner's Usage Policy](#). Gartner prides itself on its reputation for independence and objectivity. Its research is produced independently by its research organization without input or influence from any third party. For further information, see "[Guiding Principles on Independence and Objectivity](#)."

Actionable, objective insight

Position your IT organization for success. Explore these additional complimentary resources and tools for CIOs:

Resource Center

CIOs' Role in Digital Transformation

Insights, advice and tools to help CIOs address their top challenges.

[Learn More](#)



Research

The Gartner CIO Agenda

Leadership, organizational and technology priorities CIOs must address.

[Download Research](#)



Tool

Gartner Digital Execution Scorecard™

Uniting the C-suite and board to achieve your digital priorities.

[Get Started](#)



Webinar

Top Strategic Technology Trends

Trends that will accelerate digital capabilities and drive growth.

[Watch Now](#)



Already a client?

Get access to even more resources in your client portal. [Log In](#)

Connect With Us

Get actionable, objective insight to deliver on your mission-critical priorities. Our expert guidance and tools enable faster, smarter decisions and stronger performance. Contact us to become a client:

U.S.: 1 855 811 7593

International: +44 (0) 3330 607 044

[Become a Client](#)

Learn more about Gartner for IT Leaders

gartner.com/en/information-technology

Stay connected to the latest insights

