

Future of Work Reinvented: Human-Centric Digital Enablement Fuels Workforce Digital Dexterity

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By Analyst(s): Matt Cain, Lane Severson

Initiatives: [Executive Leadership: Talent](#); [Digital Workplace Applications](#); [Future of Work Reinvented Resource Center](#)

Traditional approaches to workforce digital enablement have underperformed. Executive leaders must take a new approach — based on employee engagement and shared responsibility — to create a workforce culture of digital dexterity.

Overview

Impacts

- Traditional IT-centric approaches to workforce digital enablement have failed to keep pace with the rate of technology change, which suggests a new approach is needed.
- Ensuring employees can connect the need to improve their digital dexterity to their professional development goals is critical to digital skills development.
- Helping employees see how their digitally enabled activities directly support the goals of the organization is essential to organizational prosperity.

Recommendations

Executive leaders who want to improve digital enablement of the workforce should:

- Create contextualized and sustained success by soliciting engaged participation from executive leadership to emphasize and operationalize workforce digital dexterity.
- Promote digital dexterity skills by closely coupling the program with factors that promote employee engagement such as career development opportunities, autonomy in task execution and manager trust.

- Make workforce digital dexterity a perpetual endeavor with a significant impact on continuing business success, rather than a specific project running for a finite period of time.

Introduction

The pandemic accelerated the need for employees to improve their digital skills to be able to work effectively from a remote location. Many employees had no choice but to develop competencies around a collection of cloud-based personal- and team-productivity applications. At the same time, most face-to-face and paper-based processes failed, and were quickly replaced with digital applications and workflows. In parallel, many business models had to rapidly accommodate new consumer behaviors driven by the need for isolation and safety, which expanded digital service delivery in most cases, increasing worker digital dexterity requirements for customer fulfillment.

All of this change added up to a digital tsunami that clarified the need for a laser-like focus on workforce digital skills enablement. In many ways, the pandemic marked the end of the post-Industrial Age and ushered us into the true digital age. This shift occurs as we move from the SaaS and cloud era of computing into the AI and Internet of Things (IoT) era, where inanimate objects gain intelligence. In this new era, machine intelligence will become pervasive in business and consumer lives (see Figure 1).

In the eras before SaaS and cloud, new technology would be introduced, followed by a period where we assimilated and operationalized the new technology. With the SaaS and cloud era, the technology waves drew closer together, and then change became constant, leaving no time to assimilate technology advances in terms of work patterns, etiquettes and behaviors, triggering the need for digital dexterity. With the rise of hybrid work, employees are more dependent on the digital skills of colleagues when working remotely, exacerbating the need to build processes and social constructs to exploit constant technology disruption. And in the latter part of this decade, we will see the gradual shift toward the metaverse, the next evolution of the internet. In the metaverse, more of our lives will be spent online in a virtual world, fueling business service delivery in this immersive digital environment. The following presentation provides a step-by-step guide to embracing a human-centric approach to digital enablement:

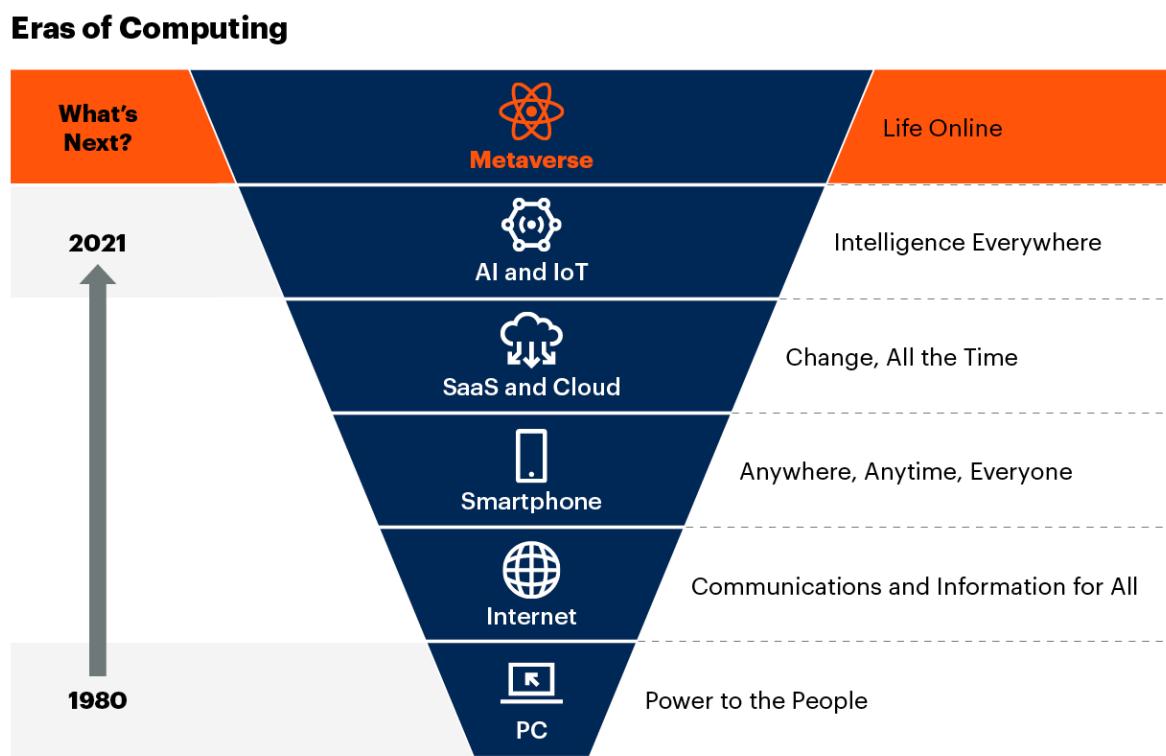
Human-Centric Digital Enablement

The 2022 Gartner View From the Board of Directors Survey ¹ provides substantial support for a relentless focus on digital enablement:

- Digital technology initiatives and a focus on the workforce are the top business priorities for 2022 and 2023. The intersection of the two – talent and technology – is what we call workforce digital dexterity.
- Sixty-four percent of boards made efforts to alter the overall economic structure to a more digital economic architecture, underscoring how digital constructs are increasingly ingrained in every step of the business model.
- Forty percent moved digital-business-related budgets to business functions to accommodate digital investment, highlighting the transfer of digital initiatives to business leaders.
- The top two digital priorities for 2022 and 2023 are new, upgraded or integrated technology, and accelerating digital initiatives, suggesting the pace of change will only further accelerate.

The lesson to be drawn from these dynamics is simple. To fuel organizational prosperity, we need to be relentlessly focused on improving workforce digital dexterity – defined as the ambition and ability to use technology for better business outcomes.

Figure 1: Eras of Computing



Source: Gartner
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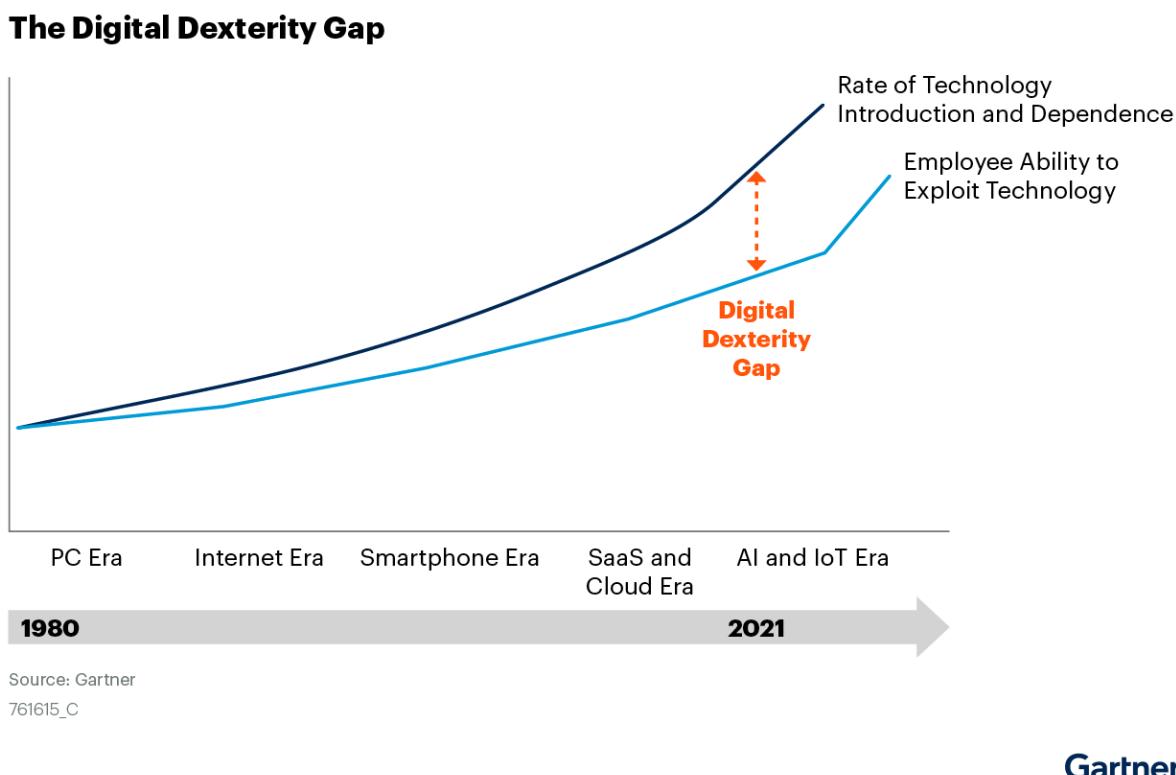
Impacts and Recommendations

Workforce Digital Enablement Hasn't Kept Pace With Technology Change: A New Approach Is Needed

Over the past 20 years, the IT organization has had a relentless focus on improving the operational fitness of the computing infrastructure. During that time, the IT organization – without much thought, it just happened – became responsible for ensuring employees could effectively use the technology it was supplying. That situation was not a huge issue when applications were run on-premises and the rate of change was slow. Most software publishers released a new version every three years and organizations occasionally skipped a release, further slowing the rate of change.

The status quo changed – dramatically – with the move to the SaaS and cloud era, when software publishers began running the applications in their own data centers (the cloud, essentially). The publishers did away with the concept of version numbers and instead moved to continuously upgrade their software. This shift greatly accelerated the pace of technology change, and it led to what we call the digital dexterity gap, where the pace of technology change is faster than employees' ability to consume the change (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Digital Dexterity Gap



Clearly, the IT-centric approach to digital enablement – where training is basic, sporadic, optional and divorced from business activities – is not keeping pace with technology change, and consequently, a new approach is needed. This new strategy has two pillars:

- Responsibility for workforce enablement must become a shared responsibility among all executive leaders, team managers and employees.
- The enablement strategy must be based on the factors that promote employee engagement.

Shared responsibility for digital enablement is critical because reinforcement of digital upskilling's importance must come from business leaders and managers, who have the credibility and knowledge to tie it directly to business impact. Pairing the digital enablement strategy to engagement factors helps employees understand how they personally prosper by investing in digital skills improvement.

Recommendations:

- The C-suite must make digital enablement a regular part of the agenda, prioritize discussions in company meetings and ensure funding is set at appropriate levels.
- Executive leadership must participate in steering committees or advisory boards that guide digital workplace or similar strategies.
- Team managers must be familiar with all the options for improving digital dexterity skills and connect team members to those resources when needed.
- Team managers must make digital enablement a regular topic of team discussions including subjects such as barriers to skills acquisition, identifying digital friction and best-practice sharing.
- HR must make digital enablement an element of skills acquisition strategies, advocate for adding digital dexterity to job descriptions and performance reviews, and support the development of new roles that mix technology and business skills.
- Employees should be encouraged and rewarded for making digital dexterity a top skills development priority.

Ensure Employees Connect the Need to Upgrade Their Digital Skills to Their Personal Goals

The factors that drive employee engagement are well known (see Table 1). These factors act as a guide for a sustained digital dexterity enablement strategy. Employees, for example, want autonomy in how they solve problems, service customers or execute a project. Digital enablement pairing with the desire for autonomy helps employees master a broad set of personal- and team-productivity applications to be used for everyday work. For many organizations, the core applications are contained within Microsoft's M365 suite or Google's Workspace suite, amended with multiple independent applications for disciplines such as collaborative work management, OKRs or visual collaboration. Proficiency with these applications enables employees to choose their own path for solution design and task fulfillment.

Table 1: Top Employee Engagement Factors

Personal	Organizational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Autonomy to get things done ■ Continuously informed ■ Career development and advancement opportunities ■ Supportive managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Continuous work efficiency improvements ■ Effective change management leadership ■ Contribution to business outcome ■ Networking opportunities and contribution recognition

Source: Gartner (January 2022)

Similarly, research consistently identifies career development and growth opportunities among the top factors that promote employee engagement. Digital enablement pairs nicely here, since the goal is to help employees develop digital skills that open new avenues for contribution to business results. We advocate establishing an on ramp for interested employees via technology-enhanced talents, or more colloquially, a “digital side hustle” (see Figure 4). Employees are able to devote part of their time to develop their digital side hustle and those talents will be shared with the rest of the team. Employees who have further ambitions can enlist in a “business technologist” program, which is a more formal approach to developing skills in areas such as AI, automation, application development or analytics (see [Future of Work Trends: Tinkerers Become Mechanics](#)).

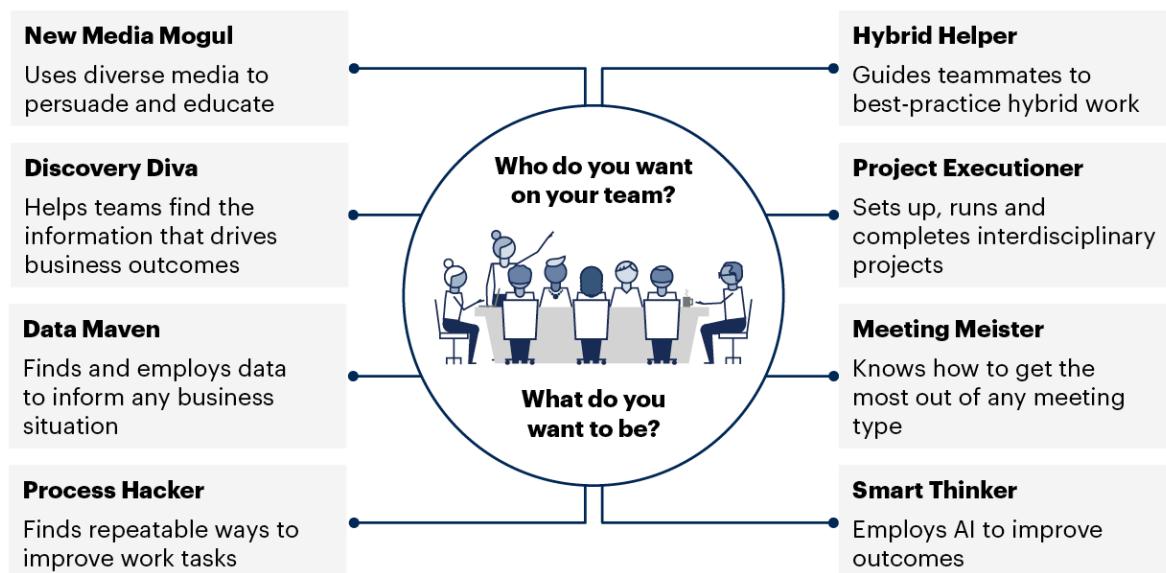
We also know employees have a strong desire for managers who are supportive and actively help them fulfill career goals. Digital enablement pairing ensures managers are aware of all the digital enablement opportunities that are available to employees, such as:

- Becoming a team champion (helping others on the team develop digital competencies and acting as a liaison to the IT group)
- Joining a program for developing – for example – robotic process automation skills
- Participating in a reverse-mentoring program to help others develop digital dexterity skills

Consequently, the manager is able to connect the employee to these various resources, opening new paths for career growth.

Figure 3: Digital Side Hustles

Digital Side Hustles



Source: Gartner
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Recommendations:

- Define foundational standards for personal- and team-productivity application proficiencies and create mechanisms, including agile learning, to help employees easily grow their skill sets.
- Ensure employees know which personal and team productivity tools are essential for getting work done and when to use them, and exhibit a growing proficiency with those applications.
- Create new career development options by facilitating informal technology specialization learning (a side hustle) or more formal business technologist opportunities.
- Empower managers to connect employees with the technology learning services available within the organization, such as becoming a technology champion, joining a fusion team or joining an IT rotational program.

Help Employees See How Their Digitally Enabled Activities Directly Support Business Goals

This section is similar to the previous one, but the appeal here is to organizational prosperity rather than personal prosperity. The strategy is predicated on the idea that employees are anxious to contribute to improved business results, and they keenly want to be an agent for business success. Employees, for example, are anxious to eliminate digital or work friction (impediments to efficient business operations). Work friction is often a result of complex or inconsistent workflows, lack of integration between legacy and modern technology, poor data quality, or laborious and repetitive task execution. By promoting skills in automation, analytics or low code development, employees can lessen or eliminate those common sources of digital friction (see [Case Study: Kick-Starting a Low-Code/No-Code Community of Practice \(Heathrow Airport\)](#)). Organizations' focus should be allowing business-led IT efforts to publish and distribute their solutions throughout the organization.

Employees are also anxious to expand their business networks, which helps them develop deeper insight into organizational design and operations, and scout for new work opportunities. Employees, therefore, can be offered multiple ways to network with others based on a plethora of digitally themed opportunities. They can join and/or create a community of interest or practice for digital services or tools, including helping others with technology best practices or problem resolution. They may be able to join a center of excellence built around AI or blockchain. They may also find opportunities to join a fusion team that pairs business experts with technology experts to iterate and expedite digital solution design. Participation in these endeavors should be coupled with an effort to reward and recognize these contributions inside and outside the team. This recognition creates a virtuous feedback loop, tacitly encouraging other employees to follow the same path.

Recommendations:

- Create a feedback loop where employees can see how their digital contributions (for low code development, analytical expertise, API-level integration) tie directly back to improved business outcomes, and are recognized for those contributions.
- Help employees expand their in-house network by encouraging them to join broader technology-centric initiatives such as communities of practice, centers of excellence, fusion teams or social learning groups.
- Ensure the internal communications team helps spread the good news about digital dexterity accomplishments via the intranet, newsletters, town halls and events.

- Ensure employees are encouraged and have a method to identify digital friction in day-to-day work and have the agency to reduce or eliminate that digital friction — working outside IT with appropriate governance models or working directly with IT.

Evidence

¹ The 2020 Gartner View From the Board of Directors Survey was conducted to understand how boards of directors will address risks from economic and political volatility and a multipolar world and their intent to convert digital acceleration to digital momentum. The survey also helps understand the impact of the key societal issues that took center stage during the pandemic on boards' strategy and investment approaches. The survey was conducted online from May through June 2021, among 273 respondents from the U.S., Europe and Asia/Pacific. Companies were screened to be midsize, large or global enterprises.

Respondents were required to be a board director or a member of a corporate board of directors. If respondents served on multiple boards, they answered for the largest company, defined by its annual revenue, for which they were a board member.

The survey was developed collaboratively by Gartner analysts and the Research Data and Analytics team.

Disclaimer: Results of this study do not represent global findings or the market as a whole but rather, reflect sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

Recommended by the Authors

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

[Quick Answer: How to Build a Champions Network to Scale the Digital Workplace](#)

[A Digital Workplace Strategy Must Embrace 'Democratized Delivery'](#)

[How Do OKRs Fit Into the Digital Workplace?](#)

[The Future of Work Requires Executive Leaders to Embrace Radical Flexibility](#)

[Building Employees' Digital Dexterity: A Key Capability for Future Business Success](#)

[Future of Work Trends: A Gartner Trend Insight Report](#)

[Improve Internal Communications Effectiveness to Promote Workforce Engagement](#)

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