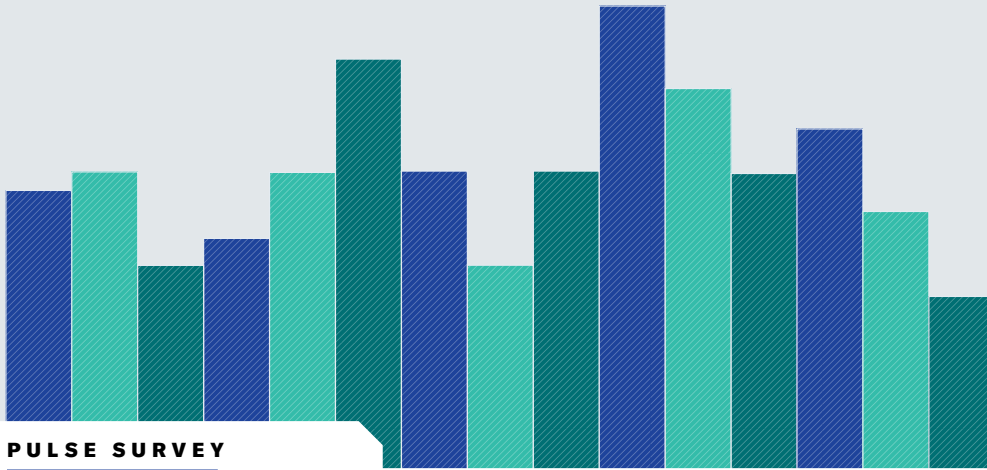




**Harvard  
Business  
Review**

ANALYTIC SERVICES



# Better Digital Transformation Depends on Aligning with How People Will Work



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## SPONSOR PERSPECTIVE

Organizations have changed the way they think about cloud.

Digital transformation was supposed to be an ongoing journey—not the turn-on-a-dime situation most businesses were thrust into when Covid-19 first took hold around the globe. Covid-19 forced a real-life, real-time digital transformation on the majority of enterprises, and many leaders have seen digital's long-term value as a result. This pandemic led to a pivotal moment as organizations scrambled to support new work-from-home policies and digital customer touchpoints: IT and business leadership teams realized that some of the steps they had already taken to modernize their IT infrastructure—moving to the cloud, investing in data and analytics capabilities, and bolstering security across an evolving technology ecosystem—paid off when the crisis hit.

Organizations that were further along in their cloud transformation journey were, for the most part, able to adapt more quickly and minimize disruptions to their business. Cloud features in every aspect of business strategy now—from operations enablement to cost optimization. The cloud transformation has emerged as a key driver of business growth as it helped accelerate the deployment of new-age technologies to improve business performance.

Cloud, data, and artificial intelligence (AI) are empowering every company to be a digital company, providing the speed and scale to innovate from anywhere. Today, organizations of all sizes are adopting cloud not just for business resilience due to the pandemic but also to turbocharge innovation and growth. Cloud-based technologies, platforms, and ecosystems are creating new opportunities for innovation.

It's not always easy to predict what changes will stick and which will fall by the wayside, but several trends seem set to shape the future of digital transformation. From intelligent technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning to cloud-based platforms, these trends are already affecting how businesses interact with customers and each other. In today's digital economy, enterprises depend on the effective use of technology not just to support ongoing business processes but also to drive new sources of competitive differentiation.

We have sponsored research by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services to gauge the possibilities, challenges, and countless innovations for businesses to explore. This report is based on a global survey including in-depth interviews with 294 business executives, and reveals the need for enterprises to quickly evolve and adapt their digital transformation strategies and embrace the changes that are most likely to impact the customer experience significantly. This means staying on top of the latest trends.

Please read this research study, which will provide you invaluable strategies for winning in the digital age.



**Suri Chawla**  
**Global Head, Cloud Services**  
**Tech Mahindra**



**Kunal Purohit**  
**Chief Digital Services Officer**  
**Tech Mahindra**

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# Better Digital Transformation Depends on Aligning with How People Will Work

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many organizations achieved several years' worth of growth in just one year, in areas such as supporting new digital behaviors, increased remote work, and improvements to operations. Because the pandemic has been a time of experimentation and learning, companies now have to figure out which digital initiatives will continue into the future and how to maximize their upsides, says Frédéric Debruyne, senior partner and global head of customer-centric and digital transformations at Boston-based consulting firm Bain & Co. "The big question for CEOs is, 'How can we make sure that we can hold on to the good side of [digital] while also getting back to the good things we had in the physical world?,'" he explains.

Bain's framework for digital transformation has three central goals: increasing revenue growth, reducing costs, and improving the employee experience. Debruyne highlights the particular importance of the latter goal, since the success of any digital change effort depends on the company's workforce buying in—which means the transformation should be focused, in part, on helping people do their jobs better. "Employee satisfaction is not to be underestimated, because talented employees really enjoy working in digitally savvy companies," Debruyne says. In addition, having satisfied customers depends on having satisfied employees, so the latter is necessary for the former.

Yet improving customer satisfaction is among the goals of digital transformation where a disconnect seems to exist with outcomes. Indeed, 63% of the 294 business leaders surveyed by Harvard Business Review Analytic

## HIGHLIGHTS



63% of survey respondents say **improving the productivity and efficiency of operations** is a **top goal** of their digital transformation—the most-cited goal—yet **only 54% have seen gains** to date.



54% say their company is **taking steps to improve cybersecurity** or will be in the near future, but **only 22% say improving cybersecurity is an outcome they most aim to achieve** from their digital transformation.



41% say **competing priorities within the company are a challenge** for their digital transformation—the most-cited challenge.

Due to rounding, some figures in this report may not add up to 100%.

Services in November 2021, when asked about the goals of their organization’s digital transformation, mention improving the efficiency and productivity of operations—the most-cited answer—yet only 54% say they have seen gains in that area to date.

One overarching reason for this disconnect may be that companies are struggling to execute the basics of change management well. The survey shows that organizations are facing a range of challenges in their transformations, but only some of them are digital in nature, such as integrating new technologies with old ones. Others are perennial change management issues, including having competing priorities and getting employees on board with the effort.

Executives leading transformations should be heartened by this circumstance, since they don’t have to learn entirely new skill sets to guide digital transformations that accommodate employees and how they will work in the future. Instead, they should focus on getting the core elements of a change effort right: setting a clear vision and goals, identifying key challenges, finding effective solutions to problems, putting the right leadership in place, and being strategic about technology and cybersecurity. Companies that lay the groundwork for success in these areas will position themselves and their employees to continue growing and thriving into the future.

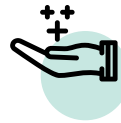
Those organizations that don’t will face an uphill battle, according to Debruyne, who notes that only 5% of digital transformations achieve all their goals and 25% end in total failure. “It’s very sobering,” he says. But even though the other 70% of companies achieve partial success, that number can be misleading. “They do achieve some of their goals, but in a mediocre way,” Debruyne explains. “The value [of the transformation] has been diluted versus their initial objective.”

This report explores the steps executives should take to set up their digital transformations to fully succeed when it comes to employees and how they will work. It covers the goals and priorities of a good transformation, the challenges companies often face, best practices for overcoming those challenges, what to keep in mind for the transformation’s digital side, how cybersecurity is a key factor, and who should lead the change effort.

## Setting Goals and Seeking Benefits

Companies have been pursuing digital transformations for years, but the Covid-19 pandemic really made clear the need for companies to provide both customers and employees with strong digital experiences. In the Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, 79% of respondents say the pandemic sped up their organizations’ digital efforts, with 42% saying they were greatly accelerated.

But the urgency of organizations’ digital transformation efforts didn’t change all of their goals for change efforts. Besides



**The best digital transformations target three main benefits: serving customers better, operating more efficiently, and improving the employee experience, according to Susanne Arnoldy, partner at PwC Germany.**

increasing the productivity and efficiency of operations, the goals most cited by respondents involve having better data analysis to uncover business/operational insights (mentioned by 48%), increasing business agility (47%), and improving customer satisfaction (45%).

According to Susanne Arnoldy, partner at Frankfurt-based auditing and consulting firm PwC Germany and head of digital for the advisory business in Germany and the consulting business in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, the best digital transformations target three main benefits: serving customers better, operating more efficiently, and improving the employee experience. While some industries emphasize one benefit more than the others, and companies set goals in more focused areas, as well, she says most goals tend to roll up into those three categories. “The retail space, of course, might have more focus on customer experience, and when you look at the financial sector, they have more focus on operations, and if you look at technology startups, they focus on employee and customer experience,” Arnoldy says. “So, it differs, but I see those three points of business benefits all over the board.”

But Werner Reinartz, professor of marketing and leader of the research initiative “Digital Transformation and Value Creation” at the University of Cologne, believes increasing customer satisfaction should be a main driver of a digital transformation, even if it isn’t the first goal a company pursues. “Initially, the goals are usually around efficiencies and costs, and in many cases that is right to do,” he says. “In the medium to long run, it should be about serving customers better. And that’s the harder journey.”

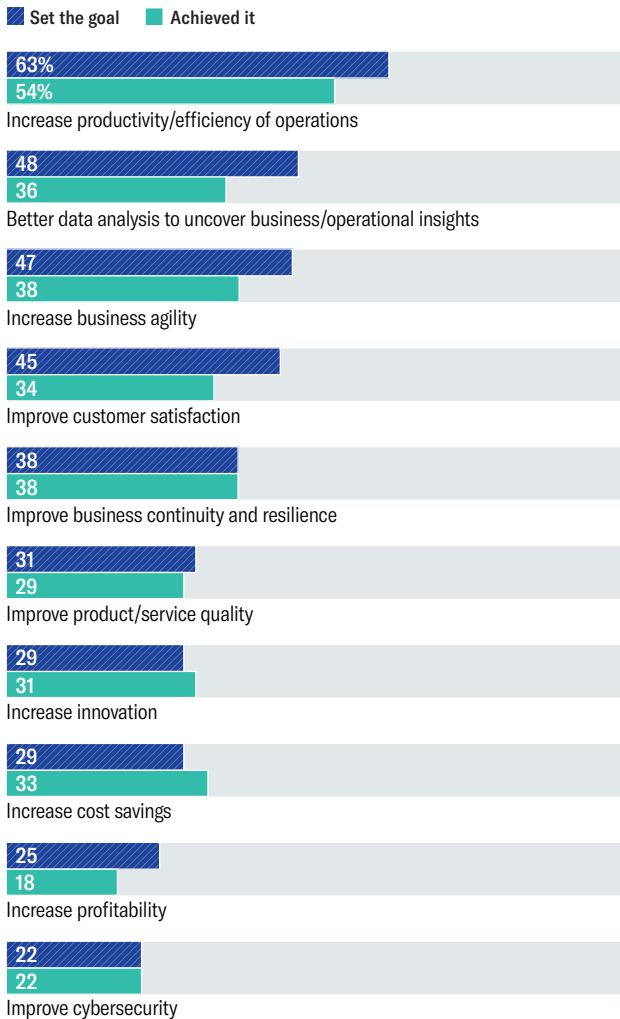
## Reassessing Talent and How People Work

Every executive knows that a digital transformation is an enormous undertaking, one that can run into several roadblocks. And while the hurdles can vary, the outcomes are the same: companies failing to achieve their transformations’

FIGURE 1

## Gaps Between Setting Goals and Realizing Them

Organizations are struggling to meet top objectives.



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, November 2021

key goals. For example, 48% of respondents mention the goal of improving data analysis to uncover business insights, but only 36% say their company has achieved it so far. A similar percentage mention wanting to increase business agility (47%), but only 38% say their company has done it. **FIGURE 1**

To get the full value of a digital transformation, organizations will have to overcome those roadblocks that are preventing them from achieving their goals. In the survey, respondents report facing a range of challenges in their transformations, with the most-cited one being competing priorities within the company (mentioned by 41% of respondents). Other top

challenges include difficulty integrating new and existing technology (37%), getting employees on board with change efforts (34%), and lack of digital skills/talent (33%). **FIGURE 2**

According to Bain’s Debruyne, the challenges companies run into can be grouped into three primary categories. The first is a lack of strategic alignment between what different parts of the business are doing. When departments and functions aren’t working toward similar ends, he says, it’s hard for the company to achieve forward progress. “You have a commercial roadmap, which is not in sync with the technology roadmap, which is not in sync with the people roadmap,” he explains.

The second category Debruyne highlights is orchestrating the many moving parts of the transformation. He says this challenge is essentially about reorganizing the company around cross-functional teams and changing the operating model to support that shift. “Instead of having the marketing team, the commercial team, the technology team, the finance team, and the HR team all working in their silos and getting together once every three months, you need to turn that whole logic on its head,” Debruyne says. Creating teams where employees from various functions work side by side helps companies operate in a more agile, responsive way.

The third category is one of talent and technology, since companies need people with digital skills as well as the robust digital infrastructure that digitally savvy employees demand. Debruyne points out that some essential skills, such as data science, digital marketing, and customer design, are in short supply, which can mean digital-native firms with strong infrastructures attract the best of the best. In such cases, companies playing digital catch-up can find themselves losing the battle to get the talent they need.

An additional challenge, according to PwC’s Arnoldy, is when executives view digital as something the company can “add on” to what it is already doing, rather than comprehensively weaving digital into everything it does. She says this mindset leads to digital initiatives being isolated from the rest of the business, and to their being led not by a C-level role that can sponsor and prioritize them but by a lower-level role that lacks the ability to do so—which leaves employees wondering what the transformation is truly meant to accomplish.

These kinds of missteps also exacerbate the issue of competing priorities, she says, which can undermine the entire transformation. “Digital needs to be part of your overall strategy,” Arnoldy explains. “It doesn’t make sense to have just one program with a digital officer. It needs to be in the heart of the business.”

## Solving Problems and Planning for Success

To prepare their digital transformations for success, companies should begin with exactly what Arnoldy says—putting digital



When departments and functions aren't working toward similar ends, it's hard for the company to achieve forward progress. "You have a commercial roadmap, which is not in sync with the technology roadmap, which is not in sync with the people roadmap," says Frédéric Debruyne, senior partner at Bain & Co.

FIGURE 2

### Challenges of Digital Transformations

Competing priorities are among the things holding organizations back.



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, November 2021

at the heart of the business. But doing so requires organizations to do a few important things.

First and foremost, the executive team—senior managers, including the CEO—should understand that the transformation is going to be a core long-term project, one that can't be subsumed by other priorities. Viewing it as anything less, Debruyne says, is likely to lead to failure, because a fundamental shift in the company's identity and operations

must have executives' unbroken attention. "If you're trying to tackle a digital transformation as one of your 20 objectives, it's not going to work," he says. "You need to have clearly in mind that it's going to be in your top three priorities—and not for the next six months, but probably for the next three to five years."

As companies develop roadmaps for their change efforts, they should be thoughtful about where to start them. Successful organizations choose one or a few domains whose potential to be transformed they feel confident about, then use the lessons from those test cases to scale. Debruyne suggests choosing a domain that is customer-centric, since connecting early wins to customers can demonstrate the transformation's benefits to employees and executives alike. "The more customer-centric you can be with your first initiative, the better, because you're doing digital mostly to win on the market," he explains.

The University of Cologne's Reinartz also emphasizes the importance of focusing the digital transformation on customers. He says that digitizing or automating processes may help to reduce costs, for example, but can also remove the human element from customer interactions, which is something executives should be wary of. "You have to be very careful that your relationship to the customer doesn't become brittle because you lose the personal touch," he says. "That happens, in fact, to many companies, because they're lured away by the efficiency of digital channels." Indeed, 45% of respondents identified improving customer satisfaction as a goal, yet just 34% say their organizations have executed on that priority.

To get the entire company on board with the transformation, Arnoldy suggests developing personas of various types of employees, based on their interests, priorities, and likely concerns and questions. Executives can then use these personas to customize communications to employees, which is especially useful in situations where, for example, workers may worry the digital transformation will make their jobs obsolete. "Someone who is 20 years in the firm and has no experience with technology needs another kind of communication, compared to someone who's just coming from university or has studied informatics," Arnoldy points out. She says employee personas should be created by a

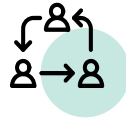
combination of executives and lower-level employees, so the group can draw on everyone's points of view and experience.

In addition, Arnoldy says, companies should set up change management teams to help oversee and drive the transformation. A dedicated team can support everything from developing employee personas to selling the transformation internally to helping people learn new skills. She explains that PwC uses internal teams of "change agents," lower-level employees who are trained in skills the firm wants all employees to have, such as using analytics and automation tools and working agilely. The change agents undergo training once a week for nine months through a digital accelerator, and they are responsible for disseminating their new knowledge to their colleagues and teams. This approach to learning, Arnoldy says, has helped to both retain and recruit employees. "It's a program which helps us to be more attractive, and we really have seen the change. We can really measure its worth," she explains.

While not all executives need to be directly involved in the change management team, Debruyne says it's paramount that the CEO, CFO, and head of HR are in sync. The CEO and the head of HR have to make sure the company has the people it needs, which involves such tasks as upskilling and rethinking how workers are incentivized and how they collaborate. At the same time, he adds, the CFO has to make sure digital initiatives can be funded, which might require a new approach to financing. "It's not by having a static yearly budget that you're going to succeed in digital transformation, because you need to be more agile," he asserts. "So, you need to adapt the way you fund it."

New approaches to collaboration and how people work are also important to get right, Debruyne adds, because they're key ways companies can compete with digital giants such as Amazon and Netflix. Firms that haven't made great progress on their digital transformations may worry they're doomed to lose talent to competitors. However, Debruyne says those fears may be unfounded—if companies can create strong digital environments that help employees grow into the professionals they want to be. Not everyone wants to work for a digital giant, he points out, and there's more to recruiting than just compensation—which means executives should also focus on helping people build their careers, learn new skills, and serve customers. "Typically, we see that companies that can do this at an excellent level can really thrive on the talent market," he says.

Finally, since many of these aspects of digital transformation involve technology, Debruyne says executives must make sure the chief information officer (CIO) or technology officer is on board from day one. Business goals and technology goals for a transformation should work hand in hand, which means the executives setting them must partner closely and pool their expertise. And ideally, Debruyne adds, the head of



**The CEO and the head of HR have to make sure the company has the people it needs, which involves such tasks as upskilling and rethinking how workers are incentivized and how they collaborate, says Bain's Debruyne.**

technology should have a deep understanding of the business. "In our experience, digital leaders have technology officers that are business savvy," he explains. "They understand very well the business needs and customer needs, and they can translate them into their technology roadmap." That kind of leader can keep the company's technology efforts pointed in the right direction.

## Being Strategic with Technology and Cybersecurity

To keep the technology aspects of a digital transformation on the right track, executives have to be thoughtful about what the company uses technology to do. That attention to detail means having a strategy or roadmap to guide tech efforts, and Arnoldy cautions that companies must do the hard work to develop the strategy before getting started with the new tools. If they don't, they risk those efforts being unfocused and wasting time and money. "It's not hard to start working with technology," she says. "It's harder to have the systems, processes, and governance in place to shape how you work with it."

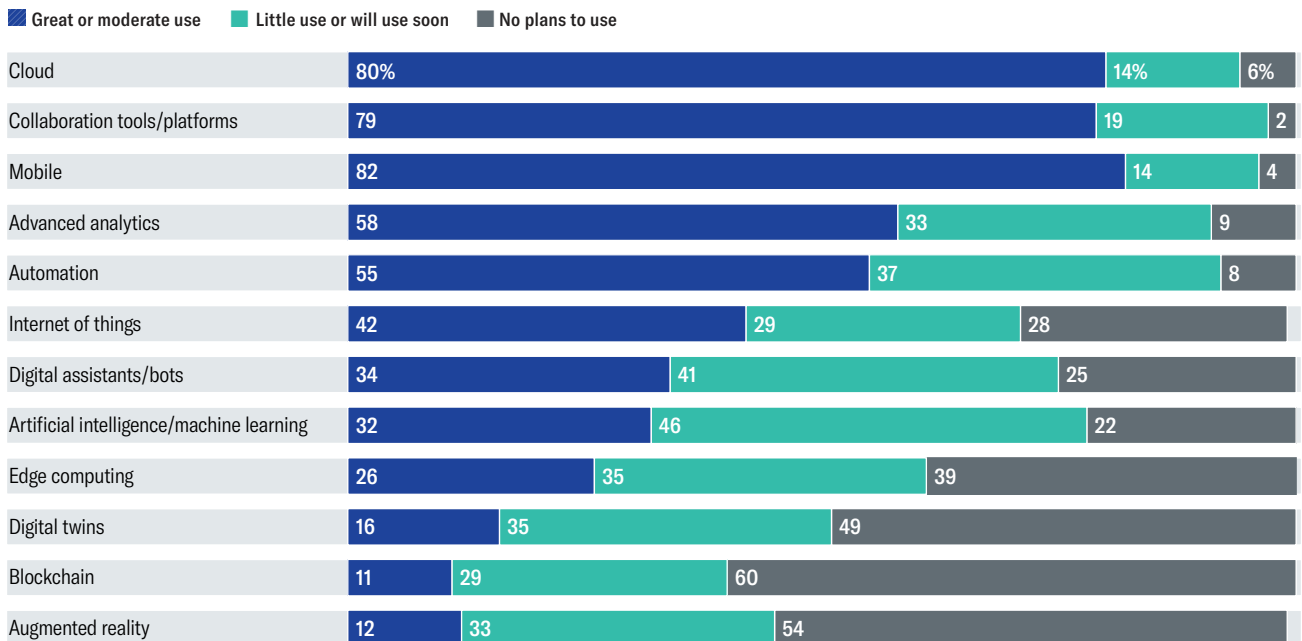
Cloud, mobile, and collaboration tools and platforms are each moderately or greatly used by around 80% of respondents' organizations, but the most cutting-edge technologies still lag in use for now. For example, while 32% of respondents say their company uses artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning a moderate or a great amount, nearly half (47%) are using them only a little or don't use them now but plan to soon. At the same time, sizable percentages of respondents say their company has no plans to use technologies such as blockchain (60%), augmented reality (54%), and digital twins (49%). **FIGURE 3**

These findings describe what's become common within organization—that some digital technologies have become a regular part of business while others, like AI, despite endless

FIGURE 3

## Technologies at the Core of Digital Transformations

Cloud, mobile, and advanced analytics have the most usage so far.



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, November 2021

media hype, are still relatively nascent. “Deploying cloud infrastructure and really leveraging the cloud is a trend that is quite mature,” Debruyne says. “Less mature is how to deploy AI and machine learning. That’s an area where companies are starting to invest and making progress, but it’s really still in the exploration phase.”

Dynamics like these are why companies hoping to leverage digital technologies need a plan before diving in. Having one can be the difference between a project’s success and failure, according to Arnoldy, especially with tools that companies are still figuring out, like blockchain. “If you just say, ‘I want to have a blockchain project,’ then everyone is sitting around and thinking, ‘What can I do?’” she says. “And that is when you see these projects fail very often.”

Debruyne says a company’s digital infrastructure should be adaptable and modular, since flexibility is paramount. “That means that the frontline technology is adaptable based on microservices, on application programming interfaces, and that you can have frontline applications that adjust rapidly to changing customer needs,” he explains. “That’s really, really important.”

Key to this initiative, he adds, is that data can’t be trapped in silos; disparate data sources must be pooled so that

employees across the business can easily access what they need and so the company can develop 360-degree views of its customers. Taking these steps will also require technology executives to work closely with roles such as chief marketing officers and chief experience officers, who likely have a good understanding of customer and employee needs, respectively.

## Cybersecurity Can’t Be a Second Priority

Of course, embracing new technology means potentially opening the company to new cybersecurity concerns. For example, tools such as collaboration platforms can make employees more productive and help them serve customers better, which, in turn, can make them more satisfied in their jobs. Yet most data breaches are due to human error, which means employee access points for digital tools are a prime target.

Cisco’s 2021 Cyber Security Threat Trends report found that 90% of data breaches happen because of simple phishing, when an attacker tricks someone into giving up their login credentials or other personal information.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the Ponemon Institute and IBM’s Cost of a Data Breach Report 2021 found that the average cost of a data breach in 2021 rose

to \$4.24 million—the highest average cost in the 17-year history of the report.<sup>2</sup>

These stats should serve as a warning to executives, especially because the Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey found that many organizations may not be sufficiently prioritizing security in their digital transformations. While 54% of respondents say their organization is taking steps to improve security or will in the near future, only 22% say improving cybersecurity is an outcome they most aim to achieve with the transformation.

In fact, organizations currently may be more concerned with their partners' and vendors' security than their own. When asked what factors influence the decision of which partners to work with on a digital transformation, 53% of survey respondents mentioned security—the most-cited answer.

Cybersecurity is a fast-evolving field, and there are no easy answers for how best to protect the company. For now, executives should ensure security is a central part of their transformation plans—or else, if a breach happens, they risk damaging their relationship with customers. “If you’re not strong enough on that side, all your good [transformation] efforts can be ruined by a major breach that takes a lot of time to recover from,” Debruyne says. “And you breach customer trust, which is a big issue.”

Companies should also appoint strong leadership to lead their cybersecurity efforts. Fifty-six percent of respondents mention chief technology/digital/infrastructure officers as being closely involved in cybersecurity decision making—the most-cited role—followed by IT teams (48%), CEOs (38%), and chief security officers (35%). This finding suggests that decision-making power for security is entrusted to those with specialty knowledge more than to those with a general business perspective. Yet while specialty knowledge is essential in a complex domain like cybersecurity, Debruyne says the range of factors in security, from the technological to the human, means companies need an approach that takes them all into account. Here, too, it’s paramount for leaders to partner together, ensuring robust cybersecurity practices are woven throughout the organization to respond to whatever threats arise. “It’s really a holistic strategy that companies need to have, because you cannot predict it all,” he says.

### Leading with the Right Roles

Likewise, to balance and drive the many priorities of their digital transformations, companies must have the right leadership for them. There’s no right answer for which role is the best; more important is that the person has a strong sense of business goals as well as technology goals, and how the two fit together.

According to Arnoldy, not long ago many companies put their transformations in the hands of someone who had digital

experience but didn’t necessarily have sufficient business knowledge to guide the project. More recently, she says, that has begun to change. “Two or three years ago, you had a chief digital officer or chief digital program manager who was a lead for digital transformation, but...now you have more business leaders with the responsibility.” This shift has brought corporate strategy to the forefront of transformation efforts, she explains, by putting the onus of digital on executives who lead lines of business.

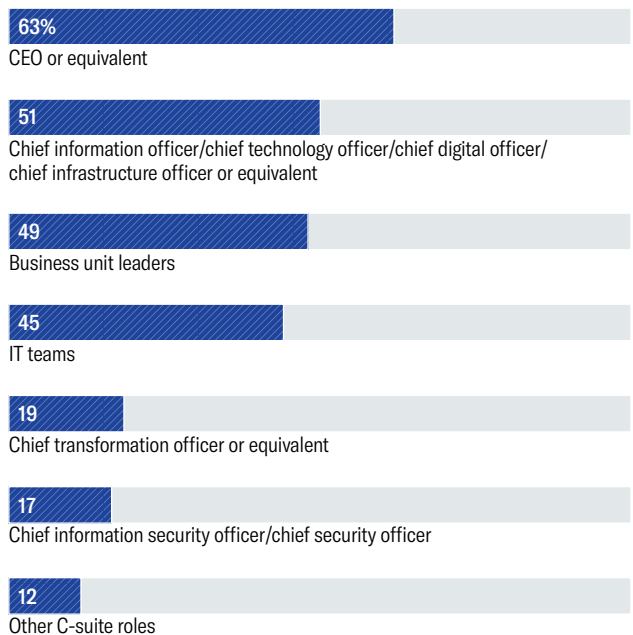
Debruyne adds that what companies shouldn’t do is delegate the leadership a few levels below the C-suite. Putting that kind of role in charge will prevent the project from having the visibility and priority it needs to succeed. As Reinartz points out, “You need to make big changes in the way the company thinks and organizes itself. And that can be done only if somebody has the mandate and the power to create those shifts.”

As for who should lead, Debruyne says that while the CEO has to “live and breathe” the transformation, day-to-day oversight should fall to a chief operating officer (COO) or a similar operations-minded role. “[The best role is] someone coming from the business ranks with a big [profit and loss]

FIGURE 4

### Who Makes Decisions About Digital Transformation

Most roles doing so have deep business expertise, not just technological chops.



Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, November 2021

accountability, simply because it gives a lot of legitimacy and credibility to the effort,” he explains. “We don’t believe that a digital transformation can be successful if it’s purely led by a technology role.” He adds that an even better approach is to have dual leadership of the project, such as from a COO and a technology leader who can combine their expertise.

Respondents seem to agree with what Arnoldy and Debruyne suggest. When asked who the decision makers are for their companies’ digital transformations, they mentioned several roles that have business knowledge and a few with technical expertise. Topping the list were the CEO (mentioned by 63% of respondents), the chief information officer/chief technology officer/chief infrastructure officer (51%), business unit leaders (49%), and IT teams (45%). **FIGURE 4**

## Conclusion

Digital transformations are an opportunity for companies to reshape how employees will work in the future. But for these change efforts to succeed, executives have to balance a number of priorities. They must set a clear vision and goals, solve pernicious challenges, give the project effective oversight, and be strategic with technology and cybersecurity.

Achieving these objectives will be easier if executives also focus on the basics of change management, including both aligning employees on the strategic direction and aligning the project’s various roadmaps so that everyone is working in the same direction. Companies that get these steps right will be more likely to realize the full benefits of their transformation, including more satisfied employees who can better help customers. Arnoldy offers an additional directive for executives leading transformations: empower employees to help shape the company’s new identity. Digital transformations have the potential to take a company’s outdated playbook and rewrite it for the technology-enabled future. But agile, nimble, and digitally savvy companies need employees who are encouraged to stay alert to new digital opportunities for the business. Indeed, executives would do well to let go of top-down leadership and create cultures that support proactive action instead, she says.

Doing so can keep the company oriented toward the possibilities and challenges of the future. “What leadership teams need to understand is that it’s no longer limited to executives to decide how to lead,” Arnoldy says. “It’s something that all members of a firm need to think about.”

## Endnotes

- 1 “2021 Cyber Security Threat Trends,” Cisco, 2021, <https://umbrella.cisco.com/info/2021-cyber-security-threat-trends-phishing-crypto-top-the-list>.
- 2 “Cost of a Data Breach Report 2021,” IBM, 2021, <https://www.ibm.com/security/data-breach>.

## METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

A total of 294 respondents drawn from the HBR audience of readers (magazine/ newsletter readers, customers, HBR.org users) completed the survey.

### Size of Organization

**12%**  
Fewer than 100 employees

**19%**  
100 – 499 employees

**13%**  
500 – 999 employees

**22%**  
1,000 – 4,999 employees

**6%**  
5,000 – 9,999 employees

**29%**  
10,000 or more employees

### Seniority

**25%**  
Executive management/  
board members

**43%**  
Senior management

**30%**  
Middle management

All other grades are less than 3% each.

### Key Industry Sectors

**13%**  
Manufacturing

**13%**  
Financial services

**11%**  
Technology

**9%**  
Education

**8%**  
Government/not for profit

All other sectors are less than 8% each.

### Job Function

**21%**  
General/executive management

**9%**  
Sales/business development/  
customer service

**8%**  
Administration

**8%**  
R&D/innovation/  
product development

**8%**  
Finance/risk

All other functions are less than 8% each.

### Regions

**34%**  
North America

**27%**  
Europe

**21%**  
Asia Pacific

**8%**  
Latin America

**8%**  
Middle East/Africa

**1%**  
Other

Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.



# Harvard Business Review

ANALYTIC SERVICES

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