Can IT scale to keep pace with expanding business priorities?

A full plate of business priorities tests ability of IT leaders who are eager for the career growth opportunities but face staffing and integration challenges brought on by rapid digital transformation

LOOKING BACK OVER THE PAST YEAR, IT'S EASY IN HINDSIGHT TO SEE THAT THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION INVESTMENTS MADE BY ORGANIZATIONS IN RECENT YEARS PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN SUSTAINING EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY AND RETAINING CUSTOMERS.

That disruptive period also illuminated areas where more needs to be done and IT is expected to step up and make that happen: A recent IDG/Comcast Business survey of IT leaders reveals that business priorities have increased in 13 key areas of digital enablement. That brings opportunity to IT leaders who can get the job done but raises questions of how they can successfully manage an agenda where everything is a priority.

The survey of 103 respondents, ranging from IT managers to C-level executives, shows that they view this focus on digital enablement as an opportunity for their own personal and professional advancement. But they realize they can't go it alone and are looking to strategic technology partners to help them succeed and overcome stiff challenges, including skills gaps in their organization, integration issues, and keeping up with security.

To support business priorities, enterprises have deployed a broad array of digitally enabling technologies, with cloud, communications, and network cybersecurity leading the way (see Figure 1). Roughly a third had deployed key technologies more than 12 months ago, and a larger percentage of the respondents said they had upgraded them in the past year. Smaller percentages made initial deployments in the past year or plan to do so in coming months.

Businesses want even more from IT

Despite clear progress in digital enablement, more is expected. Topping the list of priorities that have increased, according to 73%, is enhancing cybersecurity, closely followed by adapting to customer digital engagement and enabling a remote or hybrid workforce (see FIgure 2).

Technology upgrades and new deployments over the past 12 months have been led by investment in bandwidth increases, cloud, communications, and security. Most of the surveyed IT leaders said their investments have been focused on medium-to-long-term strategic goals, with just 19% saying they are more focused on immediate needs.

In a clear indication of close alignment between IT and the business, 95% of the IT leaders said they are mostly or fully in agreement with their company's technology investment approach.

FIGURE 1: **TECH INVESTMENT TO SUPPORT HIGHER BUSINESS PRIORITIES**
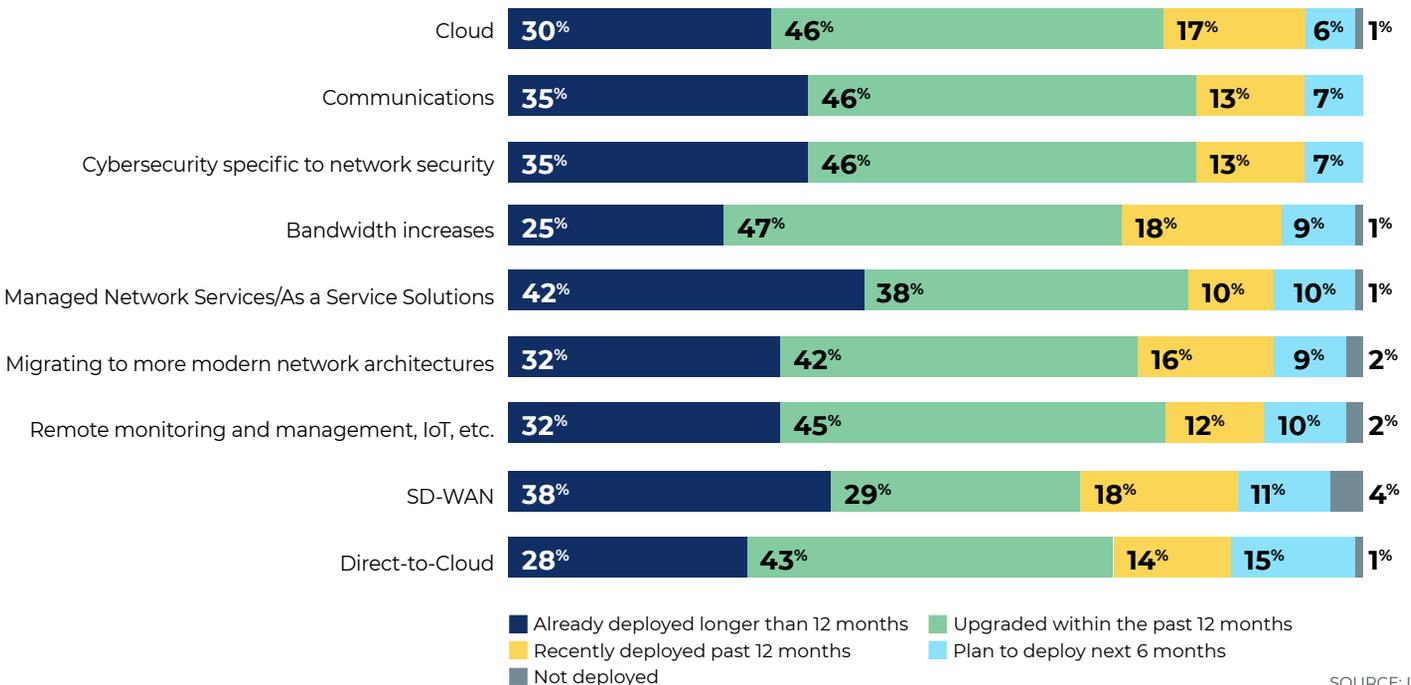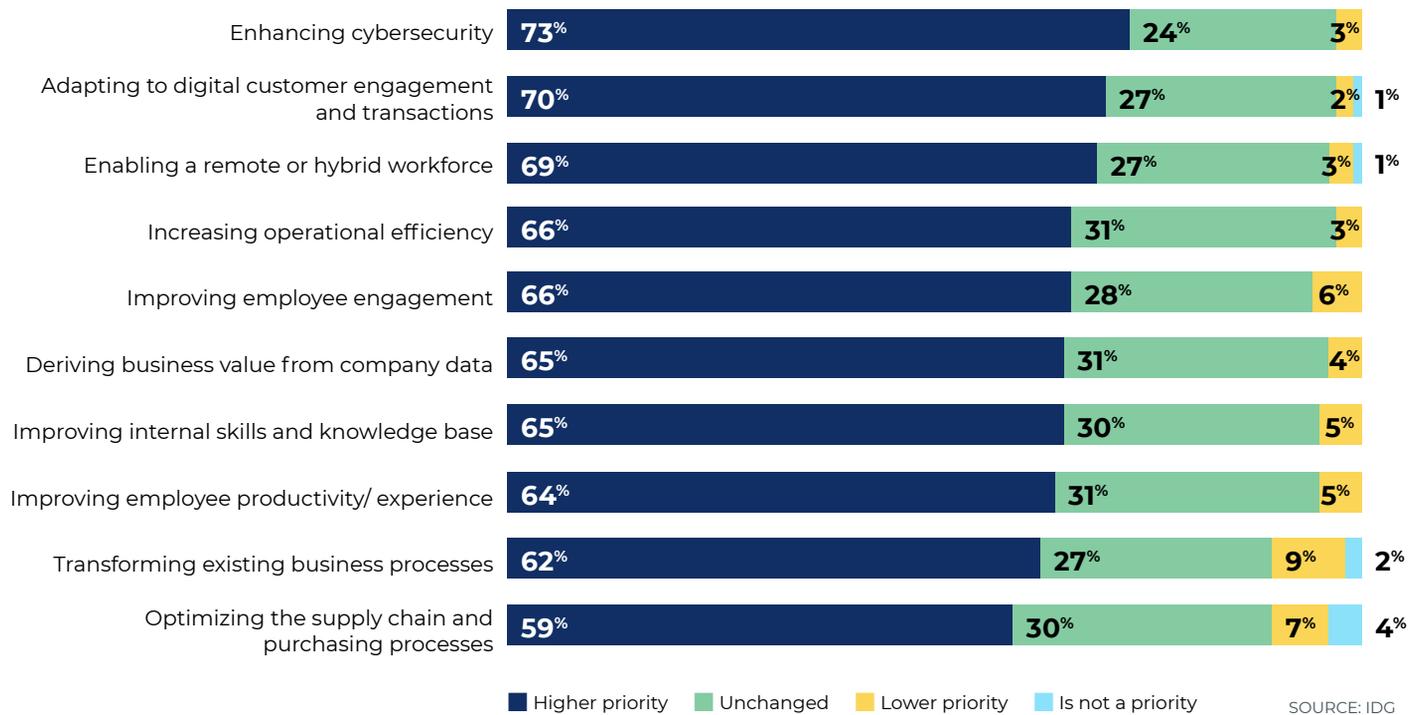
	Already deployed longer than 12 months	Upgraded within the past 12 months	Recently deployed past 12 months	Plan to deploy next 6 months	Not deployed
Cloud	30%	46%	17%	6%	1%
Communications	35%	46%	13%	7%	
Cybersecurity specific to network security	35%	46%	13%	7%	
Bandwidth increases	25%	47%	18%	9%	1%
Managed Network Services/As a Service Solutions	42%	38%	10%	10%	1%
Migrating to more modern network architectures	32%	42%	16%	9%	2%
Remote monitoring and management, IoT, etc.	32%	45%	12%	10%	2%
SD-WAN	38%	29%	18%	11%	4%
Direct-to-Cloud	28%	43%	14%	15%	1%

■ Already deployed longer than 12 months   ■ Upgraded within the past 12 months
■ Recently deployed past 12 months   ■ Plan to deploy next 6 months
■ Not deployed

SOURCE: IDG

FIGURE 2: **CHANGE IN BUSINESS PRIORITIES IN PAST 12 MONTHS**

Priority	Higher priority	Unchanged	Lower priority	Is not a priority
Enhancing cybersecurity	73%	24%	3%	
Adapting to digital customer engagement and transactions	70%	27%	2%	1%
Enabling a remote or hybrid workforce	69%	27%	3%	1%
Increasing operational efficiency	66%	31%	3%	
Improving employee engagement	66%	28%	6%	
Deriving business value from company data	65%	31%	4%	
Improving internal skills and knowledge base	65%	30%	5%	
Improving employee productivity/ experience	64%	31%	5%	
Transforming existing business processes	62%	27%	9%	2%
Optimizing the supply chain and purchasing processes	59%	30%	7%	4%

■ Higher priority ■ Unchanged ■ Lower priority ■ Is not a priority

SOURCE: IDG

"Two years ago, that number probably would have been less than 50%," says Glenn Katz, SVP and general manager of Comcast Business Enterprise Solutions. "Overall, and not just as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic but due to the competitive situation in the marketplace, these IT leaders are more aligned than they were in the past," Katz adds. "They are in a pretty good state right now, because they are able to spend on what they've said for a while they need to do and previously just were not budgeted to do so."

In many areas, though, half or more of the survey respondents believe they should be spending more, led by cybersecurity specific to network security, followed by remote monitoring and management as well as general cloud investment and direct-to-cloud capabilities.

Many IT leaders ready to seize newfound opportunity

Although the broad list of high-priority business goals may seem overwhelming, the surveyed IT leaders indicated that they see opportunity to benefit personally and professionally from the accelerated pace of digital transformation.
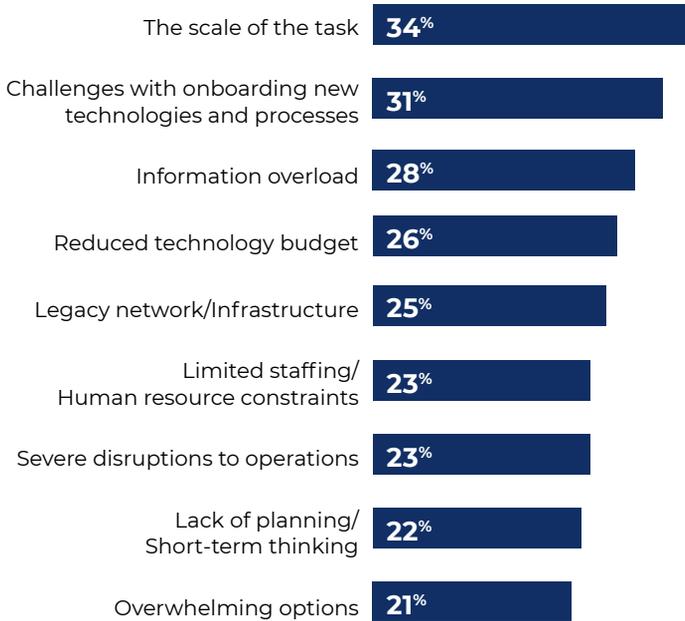
About four of five said digital transformation has positioned them for advancement, accelerated their professional development, and raised their status within their organization. "IT is a good place to be in these days if you're talented," says Katz. "In the past, IT had to be sort of technical subject matter experts, even at the leadership level," Katz adds. "Today, you've got to be a businessperson, because the businesses are expecting the IT leader to understand what drives the economic engine of the corporation and to bring suggestions on how to enable that."

Despite an elevated role in the new digital enterprise, these leaders are facing numerous challenges. The scale of the task and the need to onboard new technologies and processes lead the list of business constraints on the IT organization, and some—albeit a minority—are facing a reduced technology budget (see Figure 3).

Going it alone not an option for most

IT leaders are up to the challenge of handling the growing list of business priorities, but they recognize that they need outside help to overcome the limits of in-house resources. A staggering 91% said that the accelerated pace of digital transformation has increased their need for strategic technology partners. The remainder said that that need has stayed the same. Nobody has experienced a decline. (See Figure 4.)

FIGURE 3: **BUSINESS CONSTRAINTS ON IT TEAMS PURSUING TECH SOLUTIONS**

|	
The scale of the task	**34**%
Challenges with onboarding new technologies and processes	**31**%
Information overload	**28**%
Reduced technology budget	**26**%
Legacy network/Infrastructure	**25**%
Limited staffing/ Human resource constraints	**23**%
Severe disruptions to operations	**23**%
Lack of planning/ Short-term thinking	**22**%
Overwhelming options	**21**%

SOURCE: IDG

Not surprisingly, skills gaps are the top area where IT leaders expect that IT partners can help relieve constraints (see Figure 5). Katz explains that it's practically impossible to hire all the experts needed to manage an overwhelming list of technologies, such as software-defined networking, cloud computing, cybersecurity, and machine learning. "The list goes on and on. It's difficult for an IT department to justify hiring individuals who are experts in each of these specialties."

FIGURE 4: **NEED FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERS**

43%
Greatly increased

Stayed the same
10%

48%
Increased
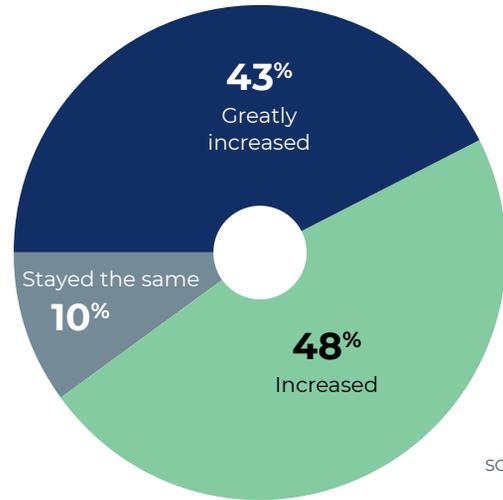
SOURCE: IDG

Related to skills issues are the difficulties IT leaders are experiencing in integrating and upgrading technology and processes as well as keeping up with security. Those are just the most prevalent of a laundry list of areas where they say they need help to keep up with the challenge of digital transformation. None of the respondents said their need for external help has decreased.

All-in on strategic IT partners

The survey is a clear indication that IT leaders are under pressure from the business to just get things done. Most of the respondents already rely on strategic IT partners to help manage eight out of nine key technology areas. Within 12 months, all but a small minority will be relying on partners in all of those areas.

FIGURE 5: **AREAS IT PARTNERS COULD HELP**

Skills gaps in the IT organization	**43**%
Integrating/ Upgrading new technology and processes	**42**%
Keeping up with security including data privacy, storage, and management	**42**%
Preparing for emerging areas of technology	**33**%
Risk management, governance, and compliance	**33**%
Business continuity/disaster recovery	**30**%
Infrastructure management	**30**%
Sort through options	**26**%

SOURCE: IDG

In the areas of network cybersecurity and the cloud, 74% of the survey participants rely on partners, heading a list that finds more than 60% using technology partners for communications, remote monitoring, and managed network services. For those planning to work with strategic IT partners during the next 12 months, migrating to modern network architectures leads the list of challenges they need to address, followed by managing direct-to-cloud.

More and more, IT leaders are turning to managed services providers to deal with some heavy-lifting issues such as network transport, SDN, and secure access for the numerous software-as-a-service applications that businesses increasingly rely on. "These IT leaders are less inclined to take a do-it-yourself approach," Katz says. "Cloud-based security and zero-trust networking are increasingly important, as there is such prolific use of cloud technology that you're not going to drive through a traditional virtual private network."

In addition, says Katz, many organizations are striving for diverse transport architectures that increasingly rely on broadband to meet the needs of the hybrid workforce and of direct-to-cloud access. "With applications that are running in real time at a location where, let's say, commerce is being done via a cloud application, you need to have 100% availability, because there's not much being stored locally," he explains.

As organizations bring in more external experts, internal resources can be focused on key strategic areas where internal teams can produce a bigger payoff for the investment. That means focusing on core attributes that drive their company's competitiveness, such as data and analytics, plus e-commerce.

IT leaders are hopeful that by partnering more with strategic technology partners, they will be able to achieve a better work/life balance, according to 58% of the survey respondents. Certainly, relying on those partners for functions such as keeping the network up and running 24/7 is going to provide those IT leaders with a better likelihood of enjoying a good night's sleep, with less need to worry about key fundamentals. Furthermore, 52% said they'll be able to focus more time on their own career advancement and 51% said that partners will help mitigate the skills gap issue.

Seizing the moment

It's been widely documented that amid the tumult of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses have accelerated the pace of digital transformation. But the pandemic has also perhaps forever transformed the perception of the IT function away from the "keep the lights on" model of earlier years to its being a key strategic enabler for the success of the business.

This transition has simultaneously elevated the status of, and reliance on, IT leaders. The way many businesses were able to leverage digital solutions in dealing with challenges such as enabling work from home or elsewhere has provided a compelling endorsement for digital transformation efforts that many had already adopted as a key business strategy element before the pandemic.

That's evident in the way businesses are loading up on their IT wish list and prioritizing just about everything. IT leaders who can deliver stand to further advance their career and the role of IT, and the survey indicates that most are eager to seize that challenge, illustrating the human effect of digital transformation on those who are called on to lead the charge. Clearly, though, those leaders cannot go it alone and must rely even more on external partners to complement the capabilities of their internal teams and ensure that they can benefit from increased business expectations.

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