

Future of Work Trends: A Gartner Trend Insight Report

Published 20 October 2021 - ID G00745430 - 16 min read

By Analyst(s): Matt Cain, Chris Howard

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

The significant shift in workforce dynamics driven by the pandemic will continue to reverberate for many years. Executive leaders can optimize talent outcomes by harnessing the pandemic-driven digital acceleration trends that are shaping the future of work.

Overview

Opportunities and Challenges

- The single greatest factor that will drive organizational success through the decade will be the ability to pair continuing technological advances with talent strategies. Every significant business initiative will have a digital underpinning.
- Historically, the digital employee experience has been the responsibility of the IT organization. Executive leaders now must closely oversee the talent implications of technology investments to ensure organizational success.
- While once-complex technologies such as coding, analytics, web design and automation are now accessible to non-IT workers, few organizations have a programmatic approach to ensure that more employees exploit these services, leading to competitive disadvantage.

What You Need to Know

- The 2022 Gartner View From the Board of Directors survey shows that digital technology initiatives and a focus on the workforce are the top business priorities for 2022 to 2023. ¹ The intersection of the two — talent and technology — is what we call workforce digital dexterity.
- Ensuring that employees are able to exploit changes in the technology landscape is a team effort requiring coordination between team managers, HR, facilities management, and IT and business unit executives.
- Offering a multitude of technology-centric career development and advancement opportunities is essential to employee retention and attraction strategies, and to the expansion of digital capabilities. Helping non-IT employees develop business technologists skills must be part of the executive leader remit.

Insight From the Experts

All Major Future of Work Trends Have a Significant Digital Component

The sweeping changes in work models driven by the pandemic will have a significant impact on the employer-employee relationship. As our Future of Work Reinvented Resource Center highlights, ² granting workers more flexibility in where, when and how much they work drives greater effort, promotes engagement, and helps retain and attract talent. This pandemic-driven shift in work models was unexpected and sudden, and will have a permanent effect on work strategies going forward.

The pandemic has also accelerated the shift to digital processes since most in-person and analog operations failed and were replaced with digital constructs. In this body of research, we focus on the continued trajectory of this significant shift in the evolution of work — namely the impact of technology on every facet of the work experience. Figure 1 calls out the trends that will have the biggest impact on how work gets done throughout the decade. Each of the trends has a corresponding report on its significance and what executive leaders can do about it now .

Taken together, these trends lead us to a series of inescapable conclusions:

- Workforce digital dexterity — the ambition and ability to use technology for improving business outcomes — along with an agile and open mindset — are perhaps the most critical elements in driving organizational success over the next decade.

- Current ways of promoting digital skills have underperformed, and a human-centric approach to digital enablement — supported by executive leadership — is needed to drive success.
- All executive leaders need to be increasingly alert about technology advances and participate in the continuous improvement of the digital employee experience

We hope you enjoy this exploration of these future work trends.

Kind regards,

Matt Cain and Chris Howard

Executive Overview

Definition




This collection of research identifies the top digitally mediated trends that will have the greatest impact on how work gets done through the end of the decade.

The underlying theme of this research is that the most desirable work skills will increasingly require digital dexterity — along with an open mindset and agile behavior (see [Building Employees' Digital Dexterity: A Key Capability for Future Business Success](#)). The pandemic — and the lack of preparation for it — highlighted the importance of focusing on future scenarios. Given the importance of technology on the future of work, executive leaders must develop a sophisticated understanding of the interplay of technology and talent strategies.

There are no black swans among the top trends — all the trends are underway, though some are more advanced than others (see Figure 1). This is a critical point: because the trends are in flight means that a broad spectrum of executives are in a position to understand, influence and drive the trends that will make a significant contribution to individual, team and organizational goals.

The pandemic — and the ensuing war for talent — has highlighted the importance of the employee experience in helping drive performance and retain talent. This body of research underscores the criticality of the *digital* employee experience, which, in a world where most work processes are digital, increasingly constitutes the largest part of the broader employee experience.

Figure 1: Future of Work Trends: Faster, Smarter, Informed

Future of Work Trends: Faster, Smarter, Informed		
 Faster	 Smarter	 Informed
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work is distributed• Everything goes hybrid• Teams become agile• Hyperautomation fuels growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• AI joins the team• Computers get conversational• Simple things become smarter	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information finds you• Tinkerers become mechanics• Everything gets measured and tracked

...only the digitally dexterous thrive...

Source: Gartner
745430_C

Over the past 40 years we have suffered through — and been delighted by — multiple eras of computing. This began with the IBM PC in 1980 and progressed through the internet era (information and communications for all), to the smartphone era (everywhere computing) to the SaaS/cloud era (rapid technology upgrades). Now, in 2021, we are entering the artificial intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IoT) era (intelligence everywhere).

These eras, of course, are cumulative, and a person entering the workforce today is expected to master the technology of the current era and all that preceded it. The pandemic rapidly moved us to a greater digital foundation as most interactions went virtual, paper-based and analog work processes failed, and it was sink-or-swim time for workers forced to learn to perform all duties while working remotely. The momentum of the pandemic and digital changes will extend for years, resulting in faster technology advances leading to continuous change in the way work is structured and employees experience it. We have broken our future of work trends into four categories — the first three — work is faster, smarter and informed — are the digitally mediated trends that we believe will have the biggest impact on how work gets done through 2030. The last category — future of work scenarios — highlights peripheral areas that impact and incubate the evolution of work— the development of smart cities, skills acquisition, frontline workers and customers.

Research Highlights

Work Is Faster

The relentless push for speed — in product development, in customer service, in virtually every business operation — has been with us since the invention of the wheel. So from that perspective, it's not surprising that the drive for speed is accelerating. In this Work is Faster research collection, we examine the new paths that are being built to accelerate all aspects of the business cycle. Executive leaders should be investing in new team organizational and operational structures such as talent marketplaces, agile and fusion teams to drive business outcomes, and should be exploring new hybrid business model constructs.

Related Research

[Future of Work Trends: Work Is Distributed](#)

Our trend **work is more distributed** — refers to an environment where hybrid work is already embraced, and where there are significant degrees of flexibility in areas such as what skills are applied to which activities. Other distributed work factors include who is doing the work, more agile distribution of work across teams, breaking down functional silos, and cross-functional teams becoming common, especially as they relate to digital initiatives and digital product management. With distributed work, digital channels and a collection of everchanging cloud-sourced, personal and team productivity applications — what we call “the new work hub” enables distributed work. Internal talent marketplaces become the key enablers for connecting talent to work activities. In cases where more routine work occurs, workforce optimization tools dynamically distribute work activities.

[Future of Work Trends: Teams Become Agile](#)

Team dynamics are also featured in our next trend — **teams become agile**. The idea here is that a workstyle that was created to accelerate software delivery has proven so successful that it is moving outside of the IT organization into mainstream business operations. An interdisciplinary team that includes a variety of skills not often found in permanent team structures can be essential to the success of agile-centric initiatives. These teams can use agile principles to navigate the uncertainties associated with digital business activities, as well as business processes in general, far better than traditional approaches. Agile operations plus interdisciplinary teams are the core building blocks of business model acceleration.

Future of Work Trends: Hyperautomation Growth Initiatives Delivered by High Performance Fusion Teams

Hyperautomation fuels growth describes how hyperautomation — the disciplined approach to rapidly identifying, vetting and automating as many business and IT processes as possible — makes work faster. Hyperautomation activities are accelerated through the use of fusion teams. A fusion team is a multidisciplinary team that blends technology or analytics and business domain expertise, and shares accountability for business and technology outcomes. Instead of organizing work by functions or technologies, fusion teams are typically organized by the cross-cutting business capabilities, business outcomes or customer outcomes they support.

Future of Work Trends: Everything Goes Hybrid

The last trend in this section, **everything goes hybrid** is a business practice riff on the pivot to hybrid work models. Prior to the pandemic, many workers went to the office. During the pandemic, those employees worked from home. Postpandemic, a third way emerges where workers split their time between home and office, based on the work to be performed. Many business practices are following the same trajectory. A traditional delivery model is forced to become virtual due to the pandemic, and then postpandemic, a third way emerges. This third way is a hybrid model, which, in most cases, represents an acceleration of business practices that have a profound impact on how work gets done.

Work Is Smarter

Similar to the relentless drive to improve the speed of business, the continuing effort to build more intelligence into work processes is the subject of the Work is Smarter research collection. That drive will be increasingly orchestrated by two factors: the continuous improvement of AI capabilities, and the ease with which they can be written into business activities. Executive leaders should be assembling resources to ensure that they are able to exploit the tremendous potential driven by the dropping cost of advanced computing services such as natural language processing, machine vision and IoT services.

Related Research

[Future of Work Trends: Simple Things Become Smarter](#)

The basic premise of our **simple things become smarter** trend is that the vast economies of scale driving down the cost of computing — in areas such as sensors, networks, AI and cloud-based storage — increasingly enable continuous improvement in the intelligence of just about anything.

At the same time, these technologies are being packaged in ways that make them far easier to be consumed by organizations. Applications, highways, meters and speakers — to name a few — can sense things around them, collect data, respond to queries and execute commands. Executive leaders need to be aware of the competitive advantage to be gained by making simple things of all varieties smarter.

Future of Work Trends: AI Joins the Team

With increasing business operation complexity and a rapidly rising tide of data, employees need more assistance to deliver better business results. Our **AI joins the team** trend discusses how

business systems are starting to not just automate tasks, but independently act and collaborate on their human collaborators' behalf. The increased integration of AI techniques throughout various systems and their increased capability to behave autonomously are transforming AI from tools to teammates.

Future of Work Trends: Computers Get Conversational

Our **computers get conversational** trend explores the consequences of natural language technologies enabling individuals to interact with computers via a conversation. Natural language query, chatbots and virtual assistants increasingly allow the workforce to ask for information, perform transactions and initiate workflows by simply asking the computer to do these tasks. While not without risk from poor implementations, these technologies, if done well, are incredibly empowering because employees can get tasks done without having to learn the custom commands and navigation idiosyncrasies of a burgeoning set of applications.

Work Is Informed

Data is the lifeblood of business operations, and the efficiencies driven by new ways to create, target and optimize the data and information life cycle are the subjects of our **Work Is Informed** research collection. Work will be transformed over the next decade by data fueling a variety of AI constructs, which, in turn, will transform how we detect patterns, consume content and restructure processes. Data and content analysis will lead to proactive delivery of information based on explicit and tacit factors, and generate computer-driven nudges. The tools used to orchestrate data and content will become increasingly easier to use. Executive leaders need to ensure that data literacy and providing employees with the agency to drive change are institutional values.

Related Research

[Future of Work Trends: Tinkerers Become Mechanics](#)

Tinkers become mechanics describes how rising digital skills, coupled with easier-to-use technology, allow employees to create technical solutions to business problems without relying on IT. There are three factors driving this trend. The first factor — complex technologies for analytics, application development, website design and workflow design — is becoming far easier to be used by digitally dexterous workers outside of IT (the *tinkerers*). They use the technology to boost their skills — becoming *mechanics* in the process. These business technologists (our official term for this role) are necessary because the IT group cannot meet the incessant demand for custom technology solutions (the second factor). Empowering employees — to eliminate work friction or develop a business opportunity — is what will ultimately lead to sustained digital transformation (the third factor).

[Future of Work Trends: Information Finds You](#)

The ability of AI services to extract meaning out of content such as videos, transcripts and meetings, coupled with services that understand what type of information is most helpful to us are the subjects of our **information finds you** trend. And conversely, these AI-driven services also help organizations understand what information is *not* helpful, and therefore, suppress delivery. This trend examines the emerging tools that will help employees cope with an increasing flood of notifications, alerts and communications, and to extract value from a rising tide of content. That AI-driven content capture and analysis will be coupled with best practice “nudge engines,” which will be applied to an infinite number of use cases including manager best practices, employee wellness, application navigation and time management.

[Future of Work: Everything Gets Measured and Tracked](#)

A similar dynamic is occurring in the world of data, where information capture is the subject of our **everything gets measured and tracked** trend. This is accomplished through sensors embedded in inanimate and organic objects (IoT) or cloud-based systems that can capture and extract meaning out of every keystroke, and AI systems that analyze emotions and attention states. This convergence of the physical and digital worlds means every microbehavior of people (voice and image sentiment), machines and even livestock gets analyzed. Executive leaders will need to make use of this data to optimize jobs, teams and processes as an essential driver of competitive advantage and organizational resilience while respecting privacy.

Future of Work Scenarios

When we were assembling these future work trends, a couple topics kept popping up that were not exactly about work skills, but were deeply related to the future of work. These topics include learning, cities, customers and frontline workers — so we decided to include them in this Future of Work Scenario collection. Executive leaders should take a broad view of future of work trends, and increasingly connect those trends with adjacent future trends about frontline workers, urban areas, learning practices and customers.

Related Research

[Future of Work Trends: 5 Trends Shaping the Future of Frontline Workers](#)

Many organizations in verticals like retail, healthcare, manufacturing and logistics have significantly more frontline workers than desk-based workers. Our **five trends shaping the future of frontline workers** research examines how they are subject to the same high-level trends affecting the future of work as desk-based workers. These include hyperautomation, increased sensorization and more advanced analytics, including image and video analytics. To be successful, organizations need to deploy human-centric design and engage frontline workers in ideation, design and delivery of these solutions.

[Future of Work Trends: The Agile Learning Imperative](#)

Because digital skills are increasingly marbled through all future-of-work trends, including hyperautomation, business intelligence and AI-driven applications, skills will shift with technology change. Our **future of work demands agile learning** trend explores how executive leaders must create a culture of continuous learning that increases organizational resilience. Employees must become continuous learners to keep their skills up-to-date for success in their current role, and they must reskill periodically to advance their career or to jump into a new high-demand role.

[Future of Work Trends: Future of Work-Life Integration in Smart Cities](#)

The development of smart cities and intelligent urban areas — the topic of our **future of work-life integration in smart cities** research — is closely linked to the economic, environmental and demographic opportunities of society. Cities are aligning support functions to the individual needs of citizens to create a dynamic service experience and entrepreneurship of citizens and communities. This is especially true when cities increasingly compete on issues regarding the quality of their industrial and citizen ecosystem, workforce and digital skills, industrial and open data availability, and an ambient and sustainable environment with increasing touchless interactions (a pandemic-accelerated phenomenon).

[Future of Work Trends: Top 3 Customer Experience Trends](#)

These **top 3 customer experience** trends describe how organizations must shape their future by planning for a flexible response to customer demand and improved value propositions. This will require continuous improvement in work outcomes and talent management strategies. Organizations who are setting customer experience goals must align their ambition with the strategies for the workplace, digital enablement, and for attracting and managing talent.

Gartner Associates Supporting This Trend



Matt Cain



Chris Howard



Sumit Malhotra



Stephen Emmott



Lane Severson



Michael Woodbridge

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 serve on multiple boards, they answered for the largest company, defined by its annual revenue, for which they are 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 reflect sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

² [Future of Work Resource Center](#)

COVID-19 shattered assumptions about work. Organizations reacted quickly, but now is the time to intentionally reinvent the future of work. Leaders have a unique opportunity to evolve from location-centric to human-centric work design to drive performance and attract and retain top talent.

Recommended by the Authors

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

[How to Identify Future of Work Trends](#)

[Why You Need a Unified Future of Work Strategy](#)

[How to Prioritize Future of Work Trends](#)

[Hype Cycle for the Digital Workplace, 2021](#)

[5 Ways Digital Friction Is Silently Killing Your Firm's Productivity](#)

© 2021 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](#)."