



CIO PULSE REPORT

The Post-Pandemic CIO

**Views on leadership,
communication and
engagement**





IT teams have been under a lot of pressure over the past two years, and not just from the need to implement rapid technology change in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many were thrown into remote working themselves at very short notice and asked to do their jobs in less than ideal conditions. With high levels of disruption, and the associated stress, IT leaders had to proactively manage the motivation, health and wellbeing of their people more than ever before. It was a tough time for many, but have valuable lessons been learned that can be applied over the longer term?

Main Points

The pandemic turned the spotlight on people as individuals

A recent survey of IT leaders confirmed the 'silver lining' of an otherwise unwelcome experience. Over the course of the recent healthcare crisis, CIOs generally felt they got closer to the people who work for them, creating greater understanding and empathy, and strengthening relationships.

The increased focus on people remains valuable as change continues

As CIOs transition from crisis mode and look to the future, most see a need to transform the way their teams operate so they are better equipped to support the business going forward into a world of uncertainty. As part of this, the professional development of IT staff is firmly on the agenda.

The need for CIOs to develop their own skills is highlighted as key

When it comes to their own professional development, CIOs particularly highlight the need for enhanced skills in areas such as leadership, motivation, persuasion, negotiation and general relationship management. The amount of time CIOs allocate to self-development is on average about half of what they'd ideally like. Closing this gap is both a personal and business imperative.

The post-pandemic CIO role will be more people-centric than ever

Pretty much everyone appreciates the increased level of understanding, empathy and mutual support they have experienced over the past two years, and see a benefit in this continuing. Maintaining a focus on morale, motivation and wellbeing is not just good for the employee, it also leads to business benefits in areas such as productivity, creativity and staff-retention. The CIO has a key role to play in driving this, both within the IT organisation and across the business as a whole.

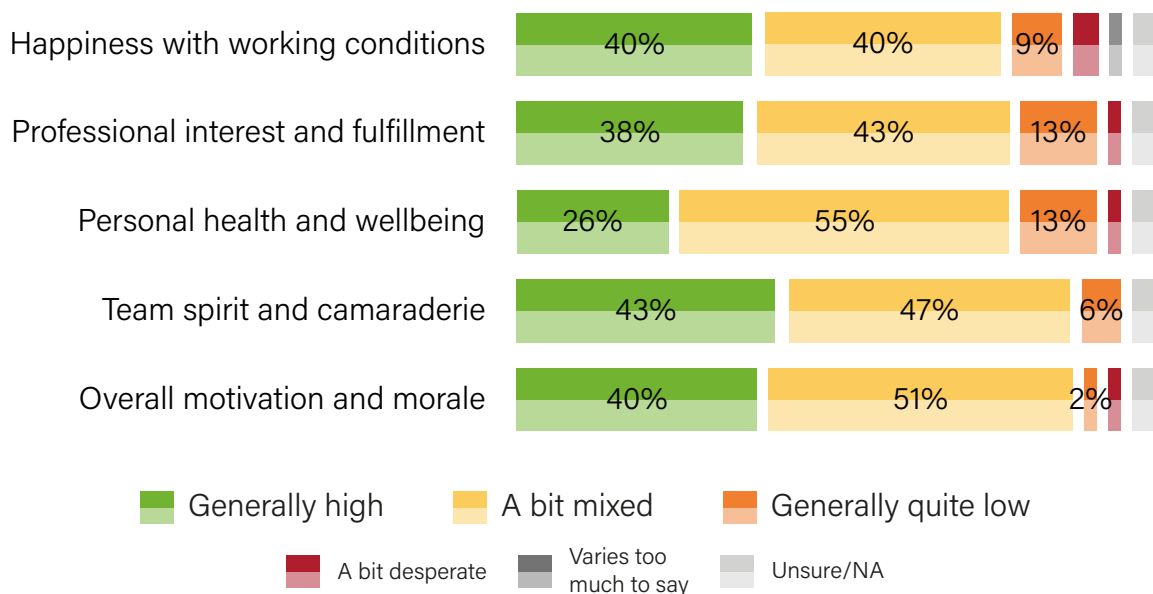
About this report: The data included in this report is based on a survey of 52 CIOs conducted independently by Freeform Dynamics in collaboration with the CIO WaterCooler in November 2021. The report itself is sponsored by 5App Ltd.

It's been a tough couple of years

IT teams bore the brunt of the operational shift

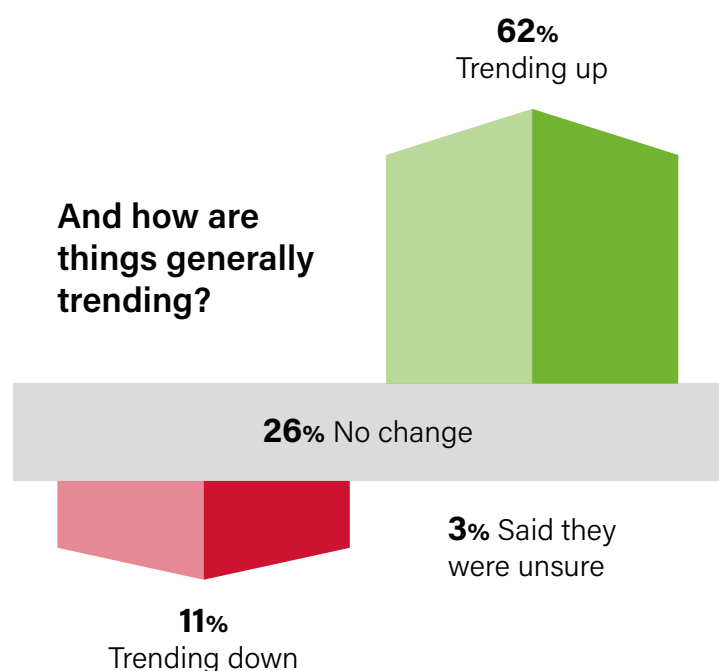
So much of the pandemic-related response during the 2020/2021 timeframe was dependent on technology. This put a huge amount of pressure on IT staff. Apart from having their personal and professional lives disrupted, they were often required to deal with business critical activity, such as enabling mass home-working, in very short timescales. This took its toll, and while some have since recovered, others are clearly still suffering from the fallout from that highly challenging period.

Given the events of the last couple of years, how would you sum up your team's feelings in relation to the following?



But people are starting to bounce back

While the pandemic lingers as we go through 2022, the good news is that life in IT continues to trend in the right direction. A few are still struggling, which is not surprising given how hard some companies were hit, but most say the outlook is positive. With the more frantic activity behind us, and both IT staff and end users generally now better geared up for home or hybrid working, most IT teams are starting to get their mojo back.

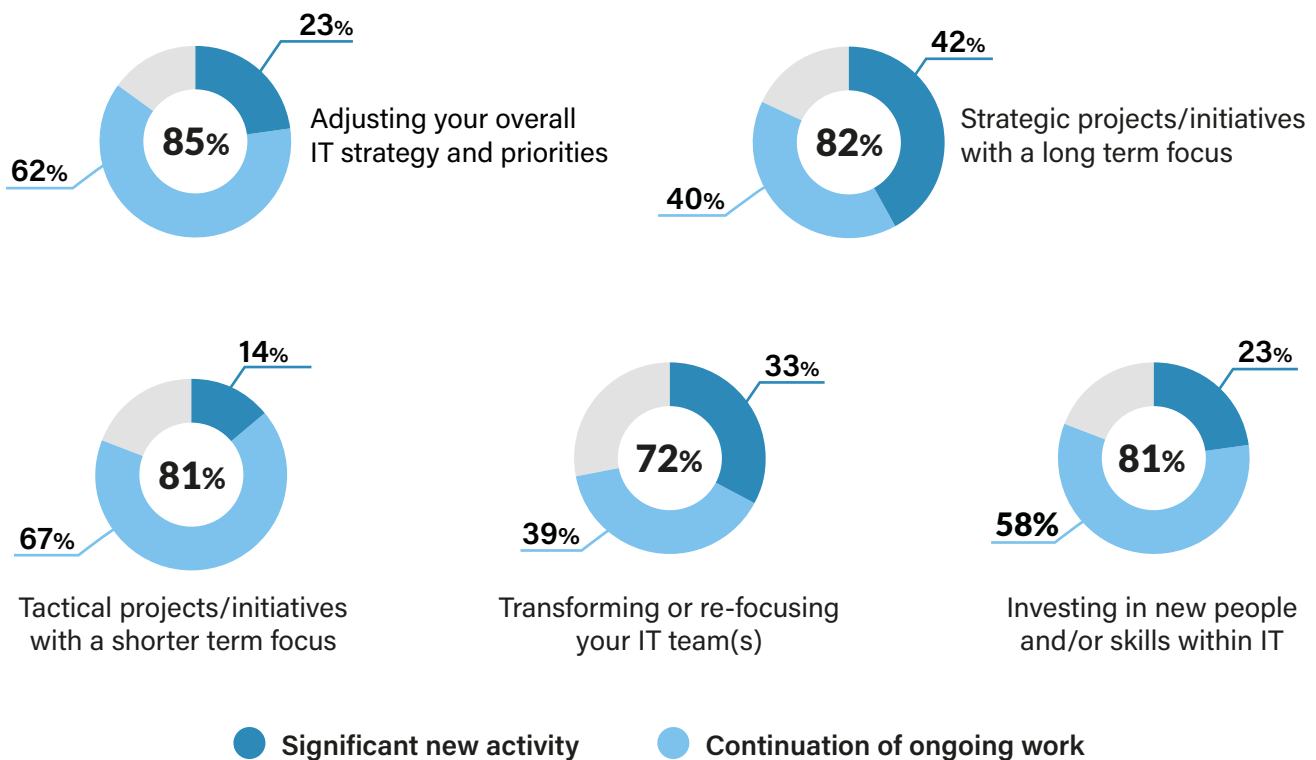


From negative to positive stress

A different kind of busy

The initial scramble to implement home-working and do whatever else was necessary to keep the business operational now seems like a long time ago. But this doesn't mean that IT teams are able to relax, just that the emphasis has shifted to more positive imperatives. This doesn't only include tactical work to deal with day to day business requirements, but also getting back into strategic initiatives aligned with longer term business objectives; something that's very encouraging to see.

Current IT priorities and agenda



Focus on IT team transformation and development

As CIOs develop and drive a revised strategic agenda, they also need to make sure their teams are in good shape for the future.

In many cases, the pandemic highlighted weaknesses in team structures, processes and competencies that constrained IT's ability to respond as quickly and flexibly as CIOs would have liked. In addition, teams were not always geared up to exploit some of the alternative technologies, solutions and delivery options that turned out to be useful, or at least could have been useful if the necessary knowledge and expertise was in place. Examples here include modern platforms and tools to enhance agility and automation in the datacentre, and cloud services to accelerate the deployment or extension of business solutions in an efficient and scalable manner.

Against this background, it's not surprising to see IT team transformation, along with investment in people and skills, called out as short to medium term priorities. This clearly means a continued level of change, and a need for CIOs to lead and manage their teams through it.

Lessons in leadership and management style

As CIOs lead their teams through the next period of change and transformation, experience gained during the pandemic is likely to prove extremely useful. Keeping teams motivated and moving, for example, required mustering all of those 'soft' people skills and using them proactively as well as reactively. Some CIOs coped with this well, while others were taken out of their comfort zone. Either way, most tell us they learned a lot and emerged better-equipped for the future.

With all of this still front-of-mind, the timing was good to capture relevant insights from CIOs taking part in our study. Here, for example, are some great tips on leadership and management style.

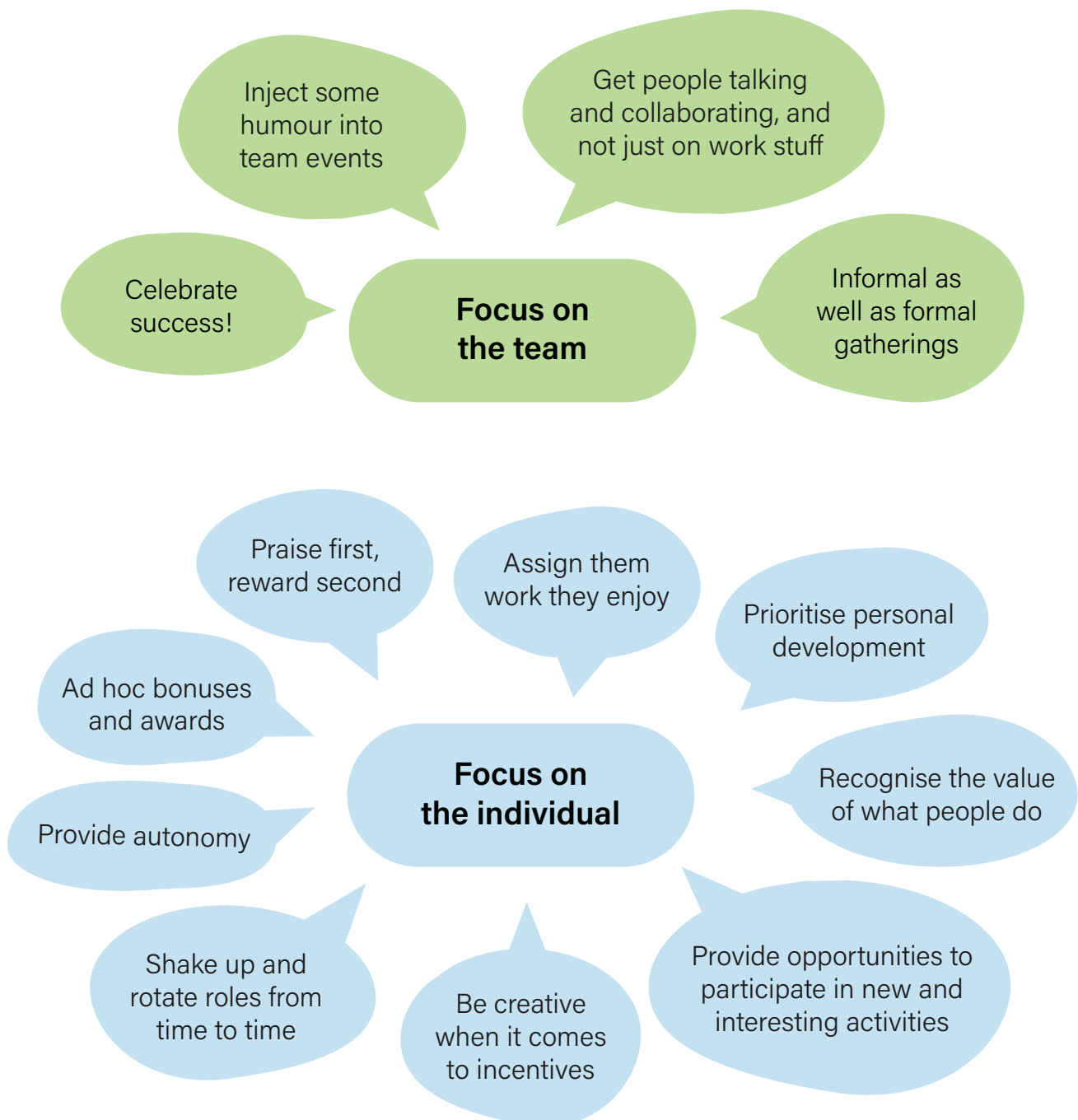
Can you share any principles or tips to help to get and keep teams motivated and pulling together?



People as people, not just resources

During the pandemic, CIOs had to pay particular attention to interacting with team members on a human as well as a work level. Periods of confinement and physical isolation from colleagues meant much more 'checking in' was necessary to make sure everyone was doing OK. Along the way, CIOs frequently remarked that they got to know the people working for them much better, something many would like to see continue. Again, we gathered some great insights this time specifically concerned with effective management and motivation of teams and individuals.

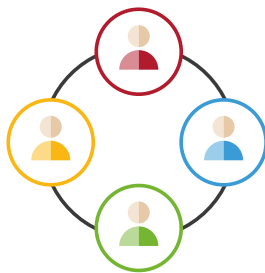
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The CIO as an engagement linchpin

Zooming out to the bigger picture

So far we've been majoring on how CIOs lead, motivate and manage their teams. If you look at the role overall, however, communication and engagement is clearly much broader than that. Working with stakeholders within the business on priorities, budgets, plans and so on is a critical part of the job, as is managing supplier relationships.



IT Team



CIO interactions



Stakeholders



Peer Group

Potentially
also customers,
partners, consultants,
sub-contractors ...



Suppliers

While not usually a formal part of the job description, interacting with CIOs and professionals from other organisations is also expected. Whether this is via social networks, online communities or industry events and gatherings, exchanging ideas and experiences with peers is important to learn from others and generally keep up to date.

Common patterns

If you think across the interactions laid out above, the same patterns of communication and engagement appear over and over. Sometimes you are trying to inform and educate, and perhaps change people's perspectives to open their minds and inspire them. On other occasions you are trying to sell specific ideas and gain buy-in and commitment. These and other engagement patterns repeat enough to justify building strong and reusable competencies around them.

CIOs who do this and maintain a good set of people-related skills and techniques are better able to operate successfully, which brings us to the question of how well they address their own professional development needs.

Focus on soft skills

Considering the range of engagement types and patterns discussed previously, the top 5 priorities highlighted by the CIOs for personal development make absolute sense.

CIO Personal Development Top 5 priorities



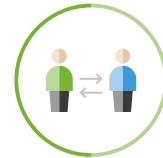
Leadership Skills

Bringing people with you through visioning, values, and so on



Motivational Skills

Keeping your team positive and committed and pulling together



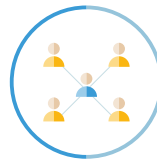
Negotiation Skills

Approaches/techniques to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes



Persuasion Skills

How to articulate your case and get stakeholders and others to say 'yes'



Relationship Skills

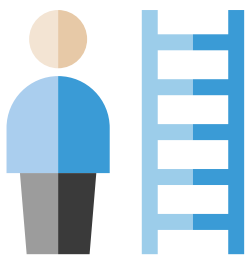
Building and maintaining a strong internal and external network



In addition to the above, a whole range of secondary priorities were called out. It's not necessarily that these are less important, just that more CIOs think they have these covered.

Other key areas for personal development

Approx 50% of CIOs regard each of these as a priority



Communication

presenting, writing, listening and so on



Conflict resolution

creating harmony when people don't see eye to eye



Personal brand building

e.g. to enhance your visibility and reputation



Analytical

working with data, cause and effect modelling, etc



Problem solving

techniques for working through challenging situations



Decision making

e.g. business case development and/or appraisal

The CIO skills development gap

Taking responsibility

If you are a CIO, taking time out to spend on your own personal development can feel a bit self-indulgent, especially with so many other calls on your time.

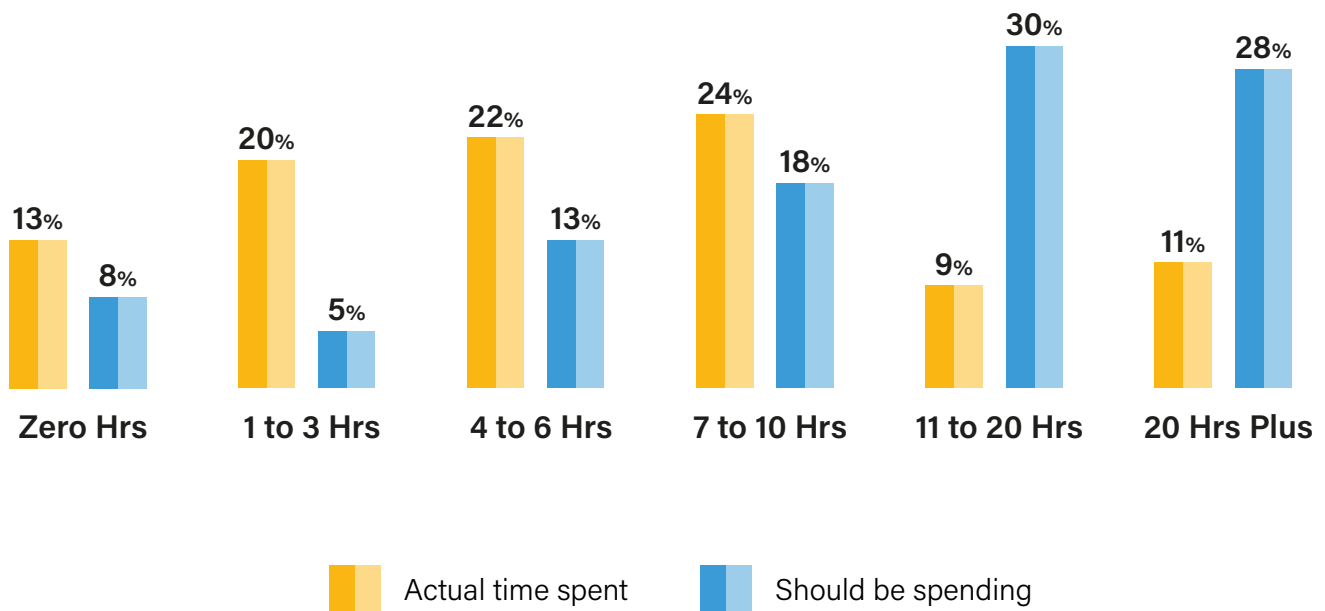
This is the wrong way to think about it, though, as others that rely on you need you at the top of your game. A strong set of people skills is the mark of a good leader and as we've discussed, is key to your ability to motivate, persuade and negotiate, and to deal with difficult situations.

If you look at it this way, looking after your own personal development is not a luxury, it's a clear responsibility for anyone in a CIO role. Something to bear in mind if you, like many of your peers, are currently falling short in terms of time commitment in this area.

Time allocated by CIOs for personal development

Actual time spent is around 6 hrs per month on average

Desired level is at least twice the actual on average



Learning and development practicalities

In practical terms, formal training is likely to be a part of the personal development mix, but even before the pandemic undermined face-to-face classroom options, it was always hard to take time out to attend courses.

The good news is that online learning has come on leaps and bounds in recent years, which makes it easier to fit training around other activities. You might be surprised at how much high quality leadership, management and communication skills instruction is now available.

Learning from peers via managed CIO communities and social networks is another option, and closer to home, allowing team members to educate you is a great way of staying current. Far from undermining your authority this will actually strengthen your relationships and make team members feel more valued.



The positive pandemic shift

During our research over the past couple of years, IT leaders have repeatedly told us that the shared experience of restrictions and lockdowns has brought them closer to their people, their colleagues within the business, and even supplier account teams. Something as simple as checking in with someone over video conference in their home environment has totally changed the interpersonal dynamic in many cases.

Keeping it going

The risk, of course, is that all of the lessons learned will be forgotten as we transition to whatever form of 'normal' ultimately emerges. This would be a shame as pretty much everyone we have spoken with in our research has appreciated the increased level of understanding, empathy and mutual support they have experienced. But how do you keep this going when the impetus of a healthcare crisis disappears?

Proactivity and structure

Feedback during the study pointed to the need for an engagement strategy based on a structured, multi-channel approach. Technology can obviously help here, though it's worth looking at solutions specifically designed to support employee engagement and development, as generic collaboration environments tend to be too noisy. The right solutions can assist with cultural change and transformation as well as enabling the right kind of employee engagement on a day-to-day basis - communicating news, celebrating successes, and generally fostering mutual understanding between teams.



Solidifying the enhanced CIO role

Beyond technology, perhaps the most important imperative is to make the increased emphasis on people skills a permanent feature of the post-pandemic CIO role. This will not just enhance life, wellbeing and productivity within IT; there's a clear opportunity for CIOs to adopt a thought leadership role and propagate solutions and best practices across the business as a whole.

About



Freeform Dynamics

Freeform Dynamics is an IT industry analyst firm. Through our research and insights, we help busy IT and business professionals get up to speed on the latest technology developments and make better-informed investment decisions.

For more information, visit www.freeformdynamics.com.



CIO WaterCooler

The CIO WaterCooler is a free, open and supportive community that provides resources to help IT leaders develop and identify solutions, gain knowledge from their peers and build networks to support them in becoming leaders in both their industry and business.

For more information, visit www.ciowatercooler.co.uk.



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5App Digital Hub is a modern employee engagement platform. It helps divisions, departments and teams to connect, coordinate and harmonise across the organisation to accelerate the success of major change initiatives. On a day-to-day basis, 5App Hub quickly becomes the 'go to' place for individuals to develop their skills in a hybrid working environment. Complementing traditional collaboration solutions, 5App Hub is already a pivot for digital transformation in over 100 large enterprises globally.

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