

Five Priorities in

2025



**Gagen
MacDonald,**

An APCO Company

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for
**Human-Centric
Leaders**

Leading with Intention



Friends,

Good business leaders know that they must protect time and mental space to look around the corner—to anticipate how the world will change and be ready to change with it. Of course, this has always been a bit of an aspirational idea; the old Yiddish adage that “man plans and God laughs” remains famous for a reason. But it has never felt more true than it does this year.

Much of the world order that has long underpinned global companies is tectonically shifting under our feet. Twelve months from now, new developments in technology and politics will surely continue to change the direction of the world in radical ways. Businesses know they must be prepared to adapt quickly to these changes, and they are going to great lengths to prepare for them.

Things like risk-mapping exercises, digital transformations, workforce planning and reskilling are important for leaders, but in my view, there is nothing more important for thriving through turbulence than leading with intention. This will require having a deep, fortified understanding of your people.

What gives them purpose? What connects them to the work they do? What do they worry about? What issues do they care the most about seeing the company address? What would make them leave?

These are the fundamentals, of course, but they’ve never been more important. The more

you understand what connects you to your people—as well as what connects them to each other—the more you’ll be able to *stay* connected with them as you try new things and take new risks. As a business leader, it’s easy to spend more time thinking about how your company will respond to changes in policy or technology than on forecasting how stakeholders will respond to *you* thereafter. But both dimensions are critical to success. If your people don’t see why you’re doing what you’re doing—or if changes you make fray at the fundamental threads of trust between you and them—your strategies will not survive, no matter how good they sound in the boardroom.

Before we get into our priorities for 2025, I’d like to recap how we got here.

► **At the start of 2020, Gagen MacDonald forecasted five trends for the decade.**

These trends continue to inform each year’s Priorities paper. They were:

1. MONEY ISN’T EVERYTHING

Employees are looking for meaning and fulfillment at work and will sacrifice money to find it.

2. THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

Loneliness has become a very real epidemic, leaving employees feeling isolated, distrustful and alone.



3. REMOTE TEAMS ON THE RISE

More organizations are relying on geographically dispersed teams and more employees expect or want to work from home, resulting in challenges for collaboration, innovation and strategy execution.

4. THE AUTOMATION RECKONING

Emerging technologies will reshape how large segments of work are performed, resulting in significant job changes and many displacements.

5. MAXIMIZING THE GIG ECONOMY

Due to platform technologies like Uber and lean business models that rely greatly on freelancers, a growing percentage of large companies' workers will not be permanent employees.

I like to say that if the decade trends we predicted are like currents—large, sweeping forces fundamentally reshaping work—our yearly priorities cover what future-forward, people-focused leaders can do to swim with these currents in the present as we learn and adapt. This recapping exercise always makes me proud of my team's prescience, and fascinated by how the decade themes manifest into new priorities each year.

► The priorities we identified *last year* were:

1. Advancing from Change Strategies to Adoption Strategies
2. Resetting and Recasting the People Manager Role
3. Broadening the Aperture Around Returning to Work
4. Integrating AI: The CCO's New Frontier
5. Aligning and Navigating Ever-Conflicting Stakeholder Priorities

All these priorities from 2024 remain deeply relevant for businesses today, and the companies that started taking action around them last year are surely set to maintain an edge in 2025.

The theme uniting this year's 2025 Priorities is the theme that unites all our work at Gagen. It is the immense advantage that comes from truly knowing your people; from tackling problems and building toward the future with a laser focus on the world through *their eyes*. In waters this choppy, you'll be forgiven if you find yourself briefly caught in the riptide of policies, processes and technologies. You'll get back on track whenever you remember that these things are only as important as the people using and experiencing them.

Good luck this year. As always, we're pulling for you, and if you need us, we're here to help.

With love,



Maril MacDonald

Founder & CEO
of Gagen MacDonald



Five Priorities in 2025 for Human-Centric Leaders

- 1 Addressing Both the Art and Science of Merger Integration
- 2 Creating Clarity From Chaos to Navigate the Future of Work
- 3 Forging Future-Ready Organizations With Agility and Purpose
- 4 Driving Cultural AI Adoption for the Long Term
- 5 Putting People at the Center of Digital Transformation

1 Addressing Both the *Art* and *Science* of Merger Integration



Jillane Rochin
Senior Director



Michelle Therrien
Senior Director



April Winterhalter
Director



The global outlook for mergers and acquisitions (M&A) in 2025 is strong, with many analysts predicting a significant increase in deal activity. In fact, in 2024, the volume of deals greater than \$1 billion in value increased by 17 percent. Three trends are driving the change: First, companies are focused on growth and transformation; second, AI is acting as a catalyst for change and reinvention; and third, private equity players are under increasing pressure to exit mature portfolio investments.

As companies across industries consolidate or divest to stay competitive, mergers and acquisitions are set to surge in coming years. These are some of the riskiest and most disruptive actions a company can take, and studies suggest that 70-75 percent of them still fail to deliver expected value.

More often than not, the human side of a merger is the difference-maker in a deal's success. This year, smart companies will invest significant time, energy and resources into getting this part of the work right.

“One of our sayings at Gagen is that companies don’t change, people do,” Gagen Senior Director Michelle Therrien said. “I find myself saying this with clients all the time. So many firms focus so much energy on the transactional, operational steps, but the people side is almost always where deals succeed or fail.

It’s all about the human-centric lens.”

Make no mistake: mergers—even successful ones—are massively disruptive. This much is unavoidable. The companies that manage to minimize disruption, however, are those that end up with a new organization whose whole is bigger than the sum of its parts.

At Gagen, our Three Things That Change Everything® framework guides the work we do in post-merger integration.

With 1) a Compelling Story, 2) Committed Leaders and 3) an Intentional Roadmap, companies can minimize disruption, setting themselves up to avoid significant talent loss and productivity drops; to navigate board-level dynamics and activist investors; and ultimately, to integrate cultures effectively.

What goes into a compelling change story?

The details vary with context, but a strong story does not just explain why the merger is good for business or the future. Rather, the story should be grounded in purpose—addressing the *whys* that have connected employees to their work, and how these whys will be served in the new arrangement.

“If you’re selling the employees on what’s going to be a lot of change for them, you have to connect to what they care about,” April Winterhalter, a director at Gagen, said. “It comes back to the classic



‘What’s in it for me?’ question. Employees need to hear why they should believe in it. They need to hear why they should change their behavior as part of it.”

This requires, of course, understanding them well.

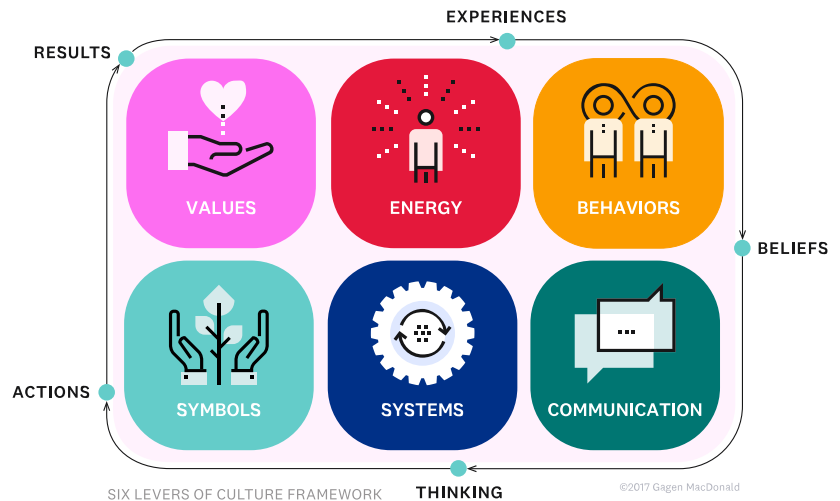
Without a strong grounding in what previously drove the Employee Value Proposition (EVP) and made work meaningful for employees, it’s nearly impossible to generate excitement around how those things are going to change. At

Gagen, we deploy various methodologies to build this understanding, from stakeholder mapping exercises to proprietary change impact assessments and culture survey tools.

Once a compelling story has been established, leaders are the next priority. Though leaders are an important channel for the rest of a company’s employees, they’re also an audience themselves. Companies need to ensure that leaders at all levels understand the vision for the merger, helping them align and come together to drive change.

“In a merger, it’s often leaders who are most impacted,” Gagen Senior Director Jillane Rochin said. “It’s their jobs that are changing the most. Things fall apart when they’re standing up and saying things they don’t believe.”

After a story is in place and leaders have bought in, the time arrives to drive change adoption across the organization. This requires a huge amount of intentionality and planning. At Gagen, we start this process by working with leaders to establish the behaviors that will need to change across the company, exploring how to drive those across the most critical levers for affecting change. Our **Six Levers of Culture™** framework guides our roadmaps, helping leaders gain a multidimensional vantage on culture and identify gaps in adoption.



In the face of something as complex as a merger, it’s easy to fall into the trap of building an equally complex integration plan in response. But in an era wherein nearly half of all workers are feeling burnout, this tends to be the opposite of what employees need—especially during mergers.

“We think as much about what not to say as about what to say,” Winterhalter said. “We’re really mindful of limiting the noise. Clarity matters more than quantity. If seven stakeholder personas are enough, we won’t create 20 more just to cover every possibility. We won’t have five different versions of an announcement if we believe we only need one. We focus on getting the right message to the right people when they need to hear it. And we take great care to emphasize what’s *not* changing alongside what is.”

These aren’t arbitrary choices. They’re decisions that are driven by understanding of—and ultimately, empathy for—employees.

Rochin emphasizes that this focus on distilling information extends past what we say, into when and how we say it.

“Companies usually have different workstreams—HR, IT, procurement, facilities and so on—driving an integration, and often, they’ll all be planning with separate Gantt charts, unaware that they’re about to dump three different huge announcements or changes on employees in a given week,” she said.

“We frequently find ourselves flagging things like that—helping companies space information out or consolidate and simplify it. It’s important to make sure someone is thinking through the lens of the employee and how they’ll experience the changes to increase and accelerate adoption. That’s where we come in.”

The companies that bring rigor, intentionality and a human-centered lens to post-merger integration will be those that unlock the full potential of their combined strengths. Two plus two doesn’t always equal five, but with a diligent focus on people and culture, it can. ■

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Michelle Therrien
Senior Director



2 Creating Clarity From Chaos to Navigate the *Future of Work*



Elle Arlook
Senior Director, APCO



Hillary Goodman
Managing Director



Preparing for the future of work (FOW) is about ensuring employees have what they need to move the business forward. This includes feeling seen, heard and connected to their organizations, as well as being equipped with the knowledge, skills and direction to do great work.

Many changes are coming to how we work, where we work and the nature of work itself, but there is no one-size-fits-all approach for companies to prepare for these changes. Whether navigating corporate activism, in-office policy debates or the multigenerational workplace, what works for one company is not bound to work for another. The foundation of a strong FOW approach is a fortified understanding of your people—how they work, what matters to them and what they need to deliver business results.

Listening organizations—ones that use employee voices not just as a pulse check on leadership, but as a guiding strategic force—will be those that have a leg up in the future of work.

When it comes to taking a stand on societal issues, this will mean developing a strong, in-depth sense of your people and what unites them. In this era of deep partisanship, terms like “DEI” (diversity, equity and inclusion) and “ESG” (environmental, social and governance) have become far more divisive than many of the ideas beneath them. As [APCO research](#) has found, there are still issues—be they around

healthcare access, support of domestic workers or pay equity—that unite employees within every organization. The smartest organizations will prioritize finding them, and they will build their corporate advocacy programs around them.

They will also go to great lengths to make sure they’re articulating the *why* behind them properly. In the case of DEI, for instance, organizations need to be conscious of the conflict that many perceive between diversity programs and merit. Strong DEI programs have never been about pitting these ideas against one another. Successful ones have been about better harnessing the talents of individuals from different perspectives, and using diversity of perspective as a competitive advantage.

“DEI shouldn’t be a political battleground,” APCO North America Equity & Justice practice lead Elle Arlook said. “It should be a business strategy. The companies set to thrive and strategically adapt aren’t going to drop it entirely because the political winds have changed. Rather, they’re going to reframe, articulate its connection to business performance and, above all else, make sure that the language they use and the issues they focus on resonate with employees, customers and stakeholders.”

Similar concepts underpin the best approaches to in-office policy. Different organizations—and different functions within those organizations—need different things in terms of where and how



they work. Whether the task is navigating return-to-office (RTO) questions or optimizing hybrid or remote setups, smart companies will begin by getting a systematic, data-driven view on their people and what they need. At Gagen, our Six Levers Culture Assessment™ helps companies develop this vantage, mapping the behaviors, mindsets and skills their people need for the future along the six dimensions of culture. From there, they build plans to address gaps, and the workplace setup falls into this broader approach.

As forward-looking companies determine the office setups their people need this year, they'll embrace personalization, attempting to be as flexible as possible accommodating every employee's needs, strengths and priorities to whatever extent these things don't conflict with business results or the needs of the broader team.

"A lot of leaders get caught up thinking that they can't allow some employees one thing if it's not allowed for others," Gagen Managing Director Hillary Goodman said. "But that can be an oversimplification. If you're clear in your rationale about the *why* behind your policy and about how different jobs require different things, you can be more flexible. Making objective policy decisions based on employee need states builds leader trust and credibility."

This emphasis on a personalized lens—on tailoring the employee experience as much as possible without compromising on standards or expectations—will be the backbone of successful multigenerational workforces as well. Differences in employee needs and in ways of working only grow wider when a company spans multiple age demographics, and the more companies can tailor each employee's experience, the better off they'll be.

This will often mean training leaders of multigenerational teams to embrace this mindset

of personalization. How often should we do team calls vs. one-on-ones? Should we communicate over the phone, over email or over direct messages? Do we always need our cameras on? How often do we need to meet in person? Different team members will have different responses to these questions, and there will inevitably be some norms that simply aren't flexible. **The best team leaders, however, will not cling to uniformity. They'll do their best to meet everyone where they are.**

A listening organization, in other words, is not just about listening at the top. It's about equipping everyone throughout an organization to listen better to each other. ▀





Jenn Allison
Managing Director



Patricia Bayerlein
Executive Director



3 Forging Future-Ready Organizations With *Agility* and *Purpose*

As geopolitical developments rupture long-held premises of global business, new technologies upturn industries and unprecedented security risks take shape, smart organizations are investing heavily in preparation. They are understandably eager for foresight; for the ability to anticipate the unknown.

In times like these, though, companies must expect to be surprised. While preparation will always be important, smart companies this year will spend less on trying to predict the future and more on building agile organizations; on being ready to adapt to whatever comes.

The organizations that manage to pull it off will be those with a fortified understanding of who they are.

A business that is synced with its stakeholders on its purpose—on why it exists as a company and how it creates unique value for the world—has a compass to navigate the unknown and reinvent.

This clarity around purpose helps executives make high-level decisions and maintain stakeholder buy-in. And when it's distributed throughout an organization, it empowers everyone from middle managers to frontline

employees to make better, quicker decisions with confidence that they understand what's most important to the organization.

“Sometimes leaders forget that purpose is not just a slogan or a tagline,” Gagen Executive Director Patricia Bayerlein said. “It’s meant to drive action. The best companies use it not just for preservation, but for innovation and reinvention.”

A company that wants to be ready to adapt will need to rethink aspects of its strategy, structure and culture—cultivating agility, experimentation and psychological safety across the business.

On the level of strategy, companies will need to equip themselves with experts who can help see around the corner of complex issues and shifting regulatory environments. Access to true subject matter experts will be paramount for developing a multidimensional view on issues, assessing their impacts on stakeholders and making quick, informed decisions about how to proceed.

They’ll also want to invest more in building the brands of their leaders. As APCO research has found, a CEO’s reputation and thought leadership output has a large—and growing—impact on consumer trust, employee loyalty and financial performance for the broader business.



Gagen Managing Director Jennifer Allison sees all these as important steps. In many ways, though, she believes the most important thing to cultivate on a strategic level is time for leaders to think.

“The more time leaders have to personally think about these things, the more proactive they’re going to be able to be,” Allison said. “There’s really no replacement for that. It’s so easy, as a leader, to let your calendar run your life. If you take good inventory of how your time is being spent, reimagine management structures and aspects of organizational design and strategically free more of your time up, you can both create opportunities for those you manage and protect mental space for yourself to think about bigger things.”

On the level of structure, smart organizations will seek to foster comfort with cross-functional, agile collaboration. Facilitating cross-functional teams and pushing them to tackle organizational problems on shorter timelines than they’re used to fosters crucial agility for times of true crisis. The same can be said about scenario-planning exercises. While you can rarely predict exactly what’s coming, these exercises still build crucial muscle memory for efficient decision-making and silo-breaking collaboration.

For as critical as these adjustments to strategy and structure will be, however, there is likely nothing more important than cultivating a learning culture.

Agility starts with what is rewarded on a day-to-day level, and the most successful companies in 2025 will be those that embrace a culture of failing fast. Employees need to be empowered to experiment, make decisions, admit mistakes and find what works.

The companies that marry psychological safety with organization-wide clarity of purpose will have a leg up as they try to deliver on their strategy.

It’s not just individual employees, after all, who need permission to fail fast. As leaders pursue new acquisitions, seek new revenue streams and go after new audiences to stay ahead, everything is not going to work as planned, and the smartest ones will embrace a *mea culpa* mindset. They will openly acknowledge missteps, effectively extract key learnings and quickly pivot to stay aligned with their goals and values.

It’s a tall order, no doubt. But it’s what it will take to thrive in 2025. 📌



4 Driving Cultural Adoption of AI for the *Long Term*



Becky Jimenez
Senior Director



Kristy Lapidus
Director



Many organizations have rolled out customer-facing products that use artificial intelligence (AI), but when it comes to the culture side of things—to how people collaborate and work together each day—most organizations have still spent a lot more time talking about AI than driving real use cases for it. This year is the year that the best organizations will invest in cultures that can truly adopt AI.

For organizations, adopting AI right now is much like buying clothes for a rapidly growing 10-year-old. They have to invest in something, but they also know that whatever they buy has a high chance of being irrelevant in a year.

What do you do in a situation like this? In our view, you limit investment in distinct, tangible tools, focusing instead on building a culture capable of adapting and continuing to harness the technology as it advances.

A learning culture like this can be built in the present, and the companies that invest in this work will see exponential returns down the line.

Plato once said, “What is honored in a country will be cultivated there.” The same is true for companies. The best way to cultivate the behaviors and competencies you need is to reward them.

In the case of AI, businesses need to be investing in upskilling, incentivizing every usage across functions, encouraging transparency and engaging everyone in [Enterprise Risk Stewardship®](#).

“Leaders have an interesting dance with AI,” Gagen Senior Director Becky Jimenez said. “Many need to be clearer on what they expect from employees while also learning to loosen their grip a bit. When the goal is experimentation and innovation, a command-control culture doesn’t get the job done.”

Smart companies must double down on educational opportunities that facilitate AI adoption. Regular workshops and seminars should be held to build employee comfort with the tools. These should not just focus on directly using AI tools, but also on the supplemental competencies—such as data literacy or fact-checking—that facilitate the strongest uses of AI. Systematized reverse mentorship programs, wherein younger employees help more senior ones learn to use the technology, can foster a culture of continuous learning and innovation.

The goal of these programs shouldn’t simply be to make people more efficient at their jobs. It should be to make them *better* at their jobs—be that because they’re able to accomplish more or because they’re able to work from deeper insights. The goal should not be to do the same work in less time; it should be to add more value in the same amount of time.

Incentivizing transparency will be vital for this. Often, employees hesitate to admit all the ways they use AI in fear of diminishing how their own value is perceived in the organization. This is not



good for businesses, which need to be tapping employees as a driver of innovation. Leadership communication that establishes clear guidelines and encourages thoughtful experimentation will be paramount for culture adoption. So will building programs that celebrate employees who discover new use cases and find ways to work smarter.

“A lot of the time, the sharing part is the hardest part,” Jimenez said. “People become knowledge hoarders, and companies miss out on so many good ideas.”

Engaging all employees in Enterprise Risk Stewardship®—in behaving responsibly when it comes to intellectual property, sensitive data, ethical use cases and other concerns—will be essential for mitigating risk. And transparency will be at the core of these efforts, as well. The best risk stewardship programs will not just get clear on *what* employees have to do, but also *why* the organization cares. And on the flip side, as companies try to reign in the “bring your own AI” (BYOAI) trend—in which employees are using their own personal AI tools instead of those sanctioned by the organization—they should do their best to foster a safe, open conversation with employees. This is not to say they should compromise on their standards of quality or privacy—they shouldn’t. But leaders can gain a lot from honest conversations with employees about what they need and the limits they see in the available tools.

“When companies facilitate safe, open conversations with employees about why they don’t use a given tool, they learn a lot about blind spots and areas for improvement, often from innovators and early adopters who can move their businesses forward past legacy conventions and assumptions,” Gagen Director Kristy Lapidus said. “The more we can surface ideas from subject matter experts and foster innovation that makes people’s working lives easier, the better AI adoption tends to go.”

Jimenez stresses that all this needs to pair with a focus on value realization. What does the return on these investments look like? Is it

retention? Efficiency? Better customer service? Whatever organizations choose, they need to be diligent setting metrics and returning to them as they drive all this change. At Gagen, we use an adapted design thinking methodology to help organizations assess where they are with AI, where they can realistically create value and how they can maintain a human-centered approach as they drive adoption.

“It all comes back to the human lens,” Jimenez said. “You’re only as mature with AI as your people are, and it’s just as important—if not more important—to be investing in them as it is to be investing in new tools.” ▲

“Leaders have an interesting dance with AI. Many need to be clearer on what they expect from employees while also learning to loosen their grip a bit. When the goal is experimentation and innovation, a command-control culture doesn’t get the job done.”



Becky Jimenez
Senior Director

5 Putting People at the Center of Digital Transformation



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Director



Tim Luukkonen
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Greg Voeller
Senior Director



As technology systems continue to evolve, the pressure is only growing on businesses to integrate them quickly and stay ahead of the market. There is little doubt that global companies will be making massive investments into new tools and lean, modern business practices over the coming year. But digital transformation often fails, and not necessarily because the technology doesn't do what it was supposed to do. Rather, it's because people don't use it as hoped.

To get the intended return on these costly and time-consuming digital transformations this year, smart businesses will need to put people at the center of them.

As a term, "digital transformation" can be a bit misleading. While digital transformations are about fundamentally changing something about your business strategy through technology—this is what differentiates them from other business transformation initiatives—successful ones are not actually centered around technology. They're centered around changing how humans *interact with* technology.

It's a subtle distinction, but one that can't be missed. If people don't change with the technology, the intended outcomes never arrive.

The project should not be driven or evaluated by implementation metrics (How many employees migrated over to a new timekeeping system?) or theoretical possibilities (How many more visualizations and analyses are possible with a

new analytics platform?). Success should be measured, rather, through the lens of *adoption*—by rigorously measuring how behaviors or mindsets have shifted in people. If people have become more productive, more engaged or more data-driven in their workflows, a digital transformation has not just worked in theory; it has worked in practice.

Gagen Senior Director Greg Voeller uses what he calls a change adoption "playbook" to drive these outcomes with clients. In it, he marries our [Three Things That Change Everything®](#) methodology with a four-quadrant, operational process around what needs to be defined, prepared, adopted and sustained among stakeholders.

"When we say 'everything' in The Three Things That Change Everything®, what we're really talking about are people's mindsets, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors," Voeller said. "Those things are ultimately the heart of driving adoption. We go to great lengths at Gagen to be as methodical and detailed as we can in mapping everything out along these dimensions, and using them to evaluate success."

This focus on practicality drives Gagen Senior Director Tim Luukkonen's approach. For digital workplace and intranet initiatives, Luukkonen uses a maturity model to gather these initial inputs on where an organization or function's digital practices stand. All digital



transformations he helps lead, however, begin with methodological assessment of human realities.

“You have to know where people are before you decide to take them somewhere new,” he said. “When organizations try to run before they can walk, the tool they invested in—which usually can do everything they hoped—ends up sub-optimally used, or not used at all. The first step in any digital transformation is talking to employees; asking what they hate doing, and where we could make things easier.”

How does AI change the equation? Many organizations are wondering this as they look to introduce agentic and generative AI to different facets of the business this year. But Gagen Director Kristy Lapidus, who leads Gagen’s AI practice, says these developments don’t change the efficacy of the adoption playbook.

“This year, pretty much every digital transformation should involve AI in some way, but the fundamentals of the approach don’t change,” Lapidus said. “Successful digital transformation is driven by a clear-eyed picture of what people need. You use these inputs to build out and prioritize early use cases, and eventually, to measure success.”

Ultimately, the challenge of putting people at the center starts with planning and budgeting.

“To fully deliver on your success measures, you have to invest just as much into your human-centric solutions as you do into your technology and digital platforms,” Voeller said. “Results come from the quality of your solution, multiplied by the degree to which you drive change acceptance and adoption. It takes a real investment to get the latter part right.”

“When organizations try to run before they can walk, the tool they invested in—which usually can do everything they hoped—ends up sub-optimally used, or not used at all. The first step in any digital transformation is talking to employees; asking what they hate doing, and where we could make things easier.”



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