

# Crucial Conversations: Line of Sight

- Connecting infrastructure decisions to strategic business outcomes



# Crucial Conversations: Line of Sight

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## INTRODUCTION

# I&O's line of sight to the top

For decades, Infrastructure & Operations (I&O) teams have been the dependable backbone of the enterprise—keeping systems running, secure, and available. But now, at the highest level in organizations, expectations of IT infrastructure are changing.

CEOs and CIOs are recalibrating their priorities in the age of AI, and raising the bar for what “good” looks like from their IT teams. According to Gartner®, “within two years, CEO representation on technology buying teams has surged from 13% or less across all roles except sales, to as high as 66%, overtaking all other senior roles.”<sup>1</sup>

CEOs view their CIO as a trusted lieutenant, helping them navigate today’s rapid rate of technological change. In turn, CIOs are looking to their I&O leaders to optimize the IT estate and ensure it can achieve the goals of innovation, agility, and security the business now expects. And so, on a practical level, much of the responsibility for turning these new priorities into reality will fall to I&O professionals, redefining how they operate and giving them an opportunity to play a more strategic role.

In *Crucial Conversations: Line of Sight*, we dig into the implications of these evolutions for I&O leaders, how they best maintain alignment to changing CIO and CEO priorities, and how they’re responding already.

Based on interviews with global CEOs, and research with both CIOs and I&O professionals, and adding expert insight from Netskope’s team, we present a picture of a function in transition—embracing a pivotal role in IT modernization, while balancing the consequences of rising expectations.

In our new technology era, IT infrastructure has gone from operational necessity to engine of growth. This report helps I&O leaders meet the moment.



# Today's CIO-CEO agenda

Before turning to I&O leaders themselves, let's look at how CEO thinking is changing when it comes to the IT estate—and what they're demanding from their CIO. Netskope's research found three key trends in senior executives' outlooks.

## 1. A growing desire for visibility and trust.

Many CEOs still view the company's infrastructure as a black box that they don't understand, especially given the rapid evolution of cloud, AI, and complex hybrid architectures. CIOs and I&O leaders are now expected to help provide clearer insight into the health, risks, and opportunities housed within the enterprise's systems. And when issues do emerge, CEOs want transparent communication so that problems can be solved quickly.

## 2. Rising demand for proactivity and strategic courage.

CEOs want CIOs and their I&O teams to embrace change, not just react to it. They're expected to anticipate what the business will need in the years ahead, make bold calls about modernization, and treat infrastructure as a dynamic asset that can drive competitive advantage. In a climate where even modest fixes can unlock outsized efficiency gains, I&O can no longer afford a defensive "if it ain't broke" posture.

## 3. Finally, CEOs are calling for practicality with purpose.

They don't want IT teams to indulge in new toys or technology for technology's sake. They want solutions that are grounded, well-evidenced, sensibly costed, and aligned to business resilience. When things do go wrong—and in complex environments, they inevitably will—leaders expect I&O teams to bring forward solutions, not problems.



# New realities

Netskope surveyed I&O leaders to understand how they are reacting to the growing expectations being put upon them, as well as the infrastructure they look after.

The research results show that I&O professionals are on the cusp of major change. Their remit has expanded rapidly over the last year, driven by greater business demands, higher AI adoption, and increased scrutiny from senior leaders who, in the past, largely left their functions alone.

I&O leaders have noticed this shift and are working urgently to respond. But many of them doubt whether their current infrastructure, resources, and organizational alignment are sufficient to meet the new expectations being placed on them.



## Rising expectations—and pressure

Across the board, the I&O leaders polled in our research reported a dramatic increase in expectations. Four in five (**80%**) said their organization's IT infrastructure has become central to delivering on core business goals.

Strikingly, the same number (**80%**) said expectations from senior leaders have risen in just the last 12 months. Among the areas where demands have increased the most are IT infrastructure performance (**48%**), its ability to enable AI-related innovation (**47%**), its expansion to support new products and services (**44%**), and its security (**43%**).

But this strategic elevation comes with personal pressure: **83%** of I&O leaders felt expectations on them have intensified, with **39%** describing the increase as significant. Yet only a minority felt fully empowered—just **18%** are completely confident they have the people and budget to meet future performance, resilience, and security requirements.

That disparity between rising pressure and inadequate resources is a key driver of anxiety and concern among I&O professionals.

## Future focus

In response, I&O functions are taking a pragmatic approach and prioritizing work in areas that are tangibly tied to business continuity and modernization. Their top three priorities are:

- Improving the security and performance of hybrid work/remote access technologies (**43%**)
- Improving visibility into network operations and performance (**35%**)
- Supporting the organization's adoption of AI, including agentic AI (**34%**)

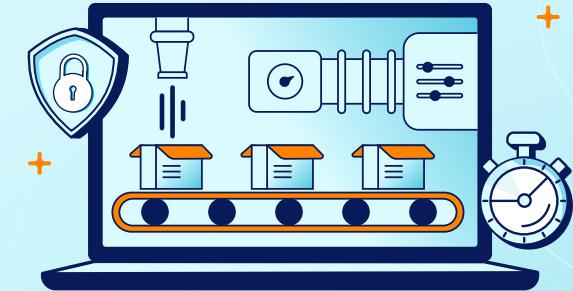
These concerns link closely to the demands of the business. They also reflect both the operational reality of today's distributed workforces and the strategic urgency of AI adoption—areas that directly influence CEO and CIO confidence in IT infrastructure. By focusing on these priorities, I&O leaders aim to have the greatest impact they can on business success.

## Confidence gaps

Despite their ambitious intent, I&O leaders expressed significant doubts about how well their current infrastructure will be able to meet expectations. Only **38%** thought their infrastructure is fully equipped to handle the new demands being placed on it. Meanwhile, majorities believed expectations around performance (**55%**), resilience (**58%**), and security (**59%**) are unrealistic given today's systems.

I&O respondents ranked performance and resilience as the top factors that their senior business leaders look for in IT infrastructure. But they aren't particularly confident that they can control those areas. Only minorities of I&O leaders felt "very confident" in managing performance (**32%**), visibility (**29%**), cost (**26%**), security (**24%**), or resilience (**20%**)—highlighting a serious gap between their responsibility and perceived influence.

New IT models, and changing external forces, make life difficult too. Over half of I&O respondents (**52%**) felt that "as-a-service" technology gives them less control than ever over their core infrastructure. And **63%** said it's hard to be proactive with their IT strategy when the business, and the world around them, is changing so fast.



Only  
**38%**

of I&O leaders believe their infrastructure  
is fully equipped to handle the new  
demands being placed on it.

## Leadership misalignment

Our research revealed a gulf in perspective between I&O leaders and the CEO-CIO tier. Nearly two-thirds (**63%**) of I&O respondents felt far removed from the strategic conversations that shape IT decisions. Only **43%** saw strong alignment between day-to-day infrastructure priorities and long-term business goals.

Meanwhile, a remarkable **20%** admitted they lack a clear understanding of either their CEO's or CIO's objectives. This alignment gap leaves I&O leaders unmoored from the strategic direction of the business—and undoubtedly hampers their ability to be more proactive and deliver greater impact.

But it also contributes to the sense of opaqueness CEOs report regarding the IT estate—**61%** of I&O respondents felt their CEO is often frustrated that their infrastructure isn't as transparent as they would like. Clearly there's more work for I&O teams to do here.

## Moving forward

When asked what would enable them to meet rising expectations more effectively, I&O leaders called for:

- Faster and more efficient onboarding of new technologies and suppliers (**46%**)
- Increased investment in the network (**42%**)
- Better alignment and clarity of leadership plans (**42%**)
- New skills in the team (**40%**)
- Increased headcount (**40%**)
- Consolidation and simplification of current infrastructure (**40%**)

Those needs reflect a consistent theme: I&O leaders want to operate with greater speed and innovation, but their current environments struggle to keep up. There isn't one silver bullet to help modernize, however, and I&O leaders feel that a range of additional investments are necessary to help them operate at the level demanded by the business.

# 61%

of I&O leaders feel their CEO is often frustrated that their infrastructure isn't as transparent as they would like.





## CHAPTER 2: NEW REALITIES

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New realities

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### Ready but restricted

Overall, our research reveals an I&O community that recognizes its strategic importance. They're undoubtedly feeling the pressure of expanding expectations, but they're also eager to rise to the challenge. Practitioners are shifting their priorities and embracing new technologies, and they've internalized the mandate for greater transparency, proactivity, and practicality.

But their ability to deliver is constrained by legacy systems, misaligned expectations, resource limitations, and insufficient visibility into the C-suite's long-term agenda.

The organizational opportunity is clear: empower I&O leaders with the investment, influence, and clarity they need to transform infrastructure into a more resilient engine for enterprise success.



# Strengthening alignment with organizational goals

As our data shows, I&O leaders are looking for stronger alignment with their CIOs and CEOs. This alignment will be crucial to meeting the rapidly intensifying expectations placed on them and their enterprise infrastructure, resilience, and AI readiness.

But how should I&O leaders best go about building those deeper and more effective links with the C-suite? Based on Netskope's experience and discussions with customers, five recommendations stand out, all centered on helping I&O professionals evolve from technical operators to strategic partners.



## Who is Netskope?



Understanding the challenges facing CEOs, CIOs, and their teams, Netskope has reimagined security and networking for the demands of modern business and the organizations that support it.

Netskope's AI-powered platform both protects and accelerates data, without having to sacrifice either security or performance.

The Netskope One platform consolidates the delivery, security, and optimization of access for any user or device, from anywhere, to any application—with end-to-end connectivity that is fast and reliable.

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Goal 1

## Translate infrastructure decisions into business outcomes

The most effective I&O leaders communicate in terms of business outcomes. Instead of framing discussions about network and security investments in terms of “VPN modernization” or “ZTNA roll-out,” they talk instead about the impact the right technology investments can have on agility and risk reduction. They also use quantifiable data, based on cost savings and productivity gains, to demonstrate likely impact.

At the start of conversations with the C-suite, I&O leaders should outline the reasons for engaging, for instance to plan ahead, reduce any friction when deploying new technologies, or better align to organizational goals. That immediately establishes credibility and relevance.

Shifting from a tactical role of maintaining networks and hardware to a strategic role of managing outcomes and context positions I&O as an enabler of growth, rather than a cost center.

“When choosing metrics, know your audience. While platform and infrastructure KPIs may be very valuable for intra-team management—and it is important to ensure enabling tools and platforms perform well—for the board you have to re-frame metrics to align to clear outcomes.”

Ian Golding, Chief Digital and AI Officer, TC Group



## How Netskope Adds Value

Netskope gives I&O leaders the visibility and metrics needed to tie infrastructure decisions directly to business outcomes. By unifying networking, security, and experience insights, leaders can clearly demonstrate productivity gains, reduced risk, and lower operational cost, making C-suite conversations outcome-focused rather than technology-focused. With a single platform powered by NewEdge, the world’s most performant private security cloud, Netskope helps I&O move from tactical operations to become a driver of business agility and value.



“

With Netskope, security switched from being a disabler for our business to being an enabler of the business. That’s at the core of what we want to do. It essentially gives us the best of both worlds: security and performance.”

Vincent Bel, Director, Security Operations, Bureau Veritas

+ Goal 2

## Engage earlier and more actively in strategic planning

I&O leaders often enter conversations too late, for instance after a cloud migration decision or a major AI investment has already been made. That puts them on the back foot and forces them to focus on solving problems with existing technology, rather than shaping future plans.

To elevate their role and shift from reactive to strategic, leaders need to seek earlier involvement in business planning. They need to ask about long-term initiatives, future locations, upcoming product launches, or expected AI use cases. With these insights, I&O leaders can design infrastructure that adapts at the pace of the business, rather than constantly retrofitting.

**“You have to be aligned with business metrics. In particular, understand the commitments made to shareholders and tie back the programs you need to deliver on those.”**

David Smoley, former Global CIO, AstraZeneca and Flex



## How Netskope Adds Value

Netskope equips I&O leaders with the visibility and architectural foundations required to plan strategically—ahead of new business requirements—even when being asked to respond quickly. For example, Netskope One Digital Experience Management (DEM) provides end-to-end visibility across users, sites, networks, apps, and the security stack, enabling confident performance baselines and capacity planning. Netskope's Universal ZTNA solution modernizes secure access without the complexity of VPNs or NAC to easily support new sites, new apps, new acquisitions, and flexible work models.



“

Netskope has not just maintained network performance levels, its systems have actually improved it...We realize that Netskope has the scale and capabilities to help us as we grow, and we are particularly excited by Netskope's reach in China through its NewEdge security private cloud.”

Julien Rossignol, Product Owner Network Security and SD-WAN, Bel Group

+ Goal 3

## Advocate for architectural simplicity and consolidation

One of the big sources of misalignment between the I&O function and the C-suite is the issue of reactive, incremental fixes. I&O leaders often try to solve an immediate issue such as poor remote access or inconsistent user experience without addressing the underlying architecture (often because of a lack of buy-in from above for the necessary investment). This is becoming more and more of a problem as the fast pace of AI adoption makes "Band-Aid" approaches to network problems increasingly untenable.

I&O leaders gain credibility when they step back and propose longer-term solutions that address foundational problems. I&O professionals must consider how best to partner with a vendor who can help them rearchitect access, security, and connectivity.

Today's CIOs and CEOs want clarity and reassurance. Improved network architecture gives them both.

**"At some point, aging systems pose unacceptable risks to the organization, and you must decide when to invest in modernization. Ideally, you introduce a new capability that also eliminates a legacy system."**

Danyel Bischof-Forsyth, CIO, 7Brew



## How Netskope Adds Value

Netskope addresses architectural complexity with a single, unified security and networking platform that moves I&O teams from reactive "Band-Aid" fixes to strategic consolidation. The Netskope One platform seamlessly combines Security Service Edge (SSE) and next-generation SD-WAN to deliver zero trust security and ultra-fast connectivity for any user, device, or location. Netskope's consolidated platform reduces operational overhead, eliminates fragmented security tools, and enables the business to accelerate cloud and AI initiatives with guaranteed performance and security.

“

With Netskope, we saw the opportunity to consolidate technologies across our business groups.”

Andrea Foppiani, Senior Manager, Global IT Infrastructure and Cloud Security for Orbia

“

Netskope will continue to impact our operational costs and capital investments. Plus, the ease of use, productivity, and simplification of security oversight are helping Orbia deliver on our mission of advancing life around the world through technology.”

Andrea Bergamini, Vice President, Global Infrastructure and CISO at Orbia



+ Goal 4

## Create ongoing visibility for senior leaders

Many C-suite executives feel that infrastructure is a “black box.” One of the best ways to strengthen alignment for I&O leaders is through transparent reporting that demystifies the IT estate and explains the outcomes each piece of the infrastructure supports. Clear insights that focus on performance, uptime, risk posture, and the impact of modernization will help build trust with busy, outcome-obsessed CIOs and CEOs.

When CEOs and CIOs have confidence in I&O’s reporting, they have confidence in I&O.

“Senior leaders don’t want to understand the inner workings of infrastructure. They want confidence that it will work when they need it and clarity when it is at risk. I&O leaders earn that confidence through transparency about risks and trade-offs and by demonstrating financial literacy that shows where the next dollar creates the most value.”

Mike Anderson, Chief Digital and Information Officer, Netskope



## How Netskope Adds Value

As a core service of the platform, Netskope One Digital Experience Management (DEM) gives I&O leaders complete, end-to-end visibility across users, networks, applications, and security services. With AI-powered analytics, it highlights performance trends, identifies issues, and prioritizes events based on business impact. By turning complex IT operations into clear, actionable insights, Netskope enables senior I&O leaders to see the full picture, build trust, and make informed decisions confidently.



“Visibility is critical to making SASE successful and as an early adopter of DEM we found it immediately provided valuable insights into our users, network traffic and application performance while using Netskope.”

Matt Bruce, Director of Information Security, Fox Rothschild LLP

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Goal 5

## Position I&O as an enabler of safe, fast AI adoption

AI adoption is fundamentally reshaping connectivity, data flows, and security. CIOs and CEOs now expect I&O to be ready with answers. That means understanding different AI tools and deployment approaches, mapping the processes and teams affected, and recommending the safest, fastest ways to enable AI-driven innovation across the business.

I&O leaders should position themselves as AI enablers, with the ability to secure access to models, protect sensitive data from prompt injection or leakage, and leverage AI internally to automate operations. This both reduces C-level anxiety and strengthens trust.

**“In today’s AI-rich, cloud-driven environments, trust is currency. Whether it’s zero trust architectures or responsible AI principles, we must ensure our CEOs understand not just that we’re secure, but how security supports resilience, reputation, and regulatory alignment.”**

Louise Leavey, CIO (financial services)



## How Netskope Adds Value

Netskope One protects and secures AI use across users, agents, data, and applications, providing complete visibility and contextual, real-time controls. Among many use cases, Netskope secures agentic AI communication and Model Context Protocol (MCP) by providing deep visibility into MCP activity, enabling teams to understand usage, assess risk server scoring, and enforce granular, context-based policies. Security can block or alert on unauthorized MCP traffic and monitor communications to prevent data loss, unintended actions, and exposure of sensitive information. This enables organizations to embrace AI safely, without compromising compliance or trust.



**“We are currently allowing people to experiment with AI as much as possible, while making sure that we protect our data from public-facing systems. The business has a future only if we safeguard all our data.”**

Stuart Walters, CIO and Partner, BDO UK

## CONCLUSION

# Forging stronger connections

In modern enterprises, IT infrastructure is no longer seen as a mere utility. It's now recognized by CEOs as a vital driver of growth, resilience, and AI-enabled innovation. Consequently, business leaders expect their I&O teams to deliver bold thinking that creates competitive advantage and keeps pace with the organization's ambition.

I&O leaders feel this shift acutely. They recognize the rising expectations they face, the accelerating tech agenda (especially in AI), and the pressure to modernize legacy architectures while maintaining performance and security.

They also notice the gaps—in particular, a lack of clarity from senior leadership, constraints on budget and skills, and limited visibility into the strategic conversations that shape the future of the IT estate. Yet, as we've seen, I&O professionals are ready for a more strategic role and eager to build the capabilities required to meet the moment.

Next, to forge stronger connections with their C-suite, I&O leaders must translate infrastructure choices into business outcomes. They must join the strategic planning cycle

earlier, advocate for modern architectures, provide better visibility into the IT estate, and lead the charge on safe AI adoption. These shifts are now core to delivering what CEOs and CIOs need from their organizations.

But I&O leaders shouldn't have to navigate this transformation alone. Netskope was designed for today's paradigm—when AI, cloud, data, and security converge—and organizations need a platform that can simplify, secure, and accelerate at the same time.

To help inform your next strategic moves, download our whitepaper [Evolving Your Network Security From Today to Tomorrow.](#)





# About Netskope

Understanding the challenges facing CEOs, CIOs, and their teams, Netskope has reimagined security and networking for the demands of modern business and the organizations that support it. Focusing on business value and managing the evolving risk landscape, Netskope's AI-powered platform both protects and accelerates customers' organizations so they can operate without having to sacrifice either security or performance.

Technology leaders want to support their organization's growth plans, protect their data, and deliver the best user experience possible. Netskope's platform, products, and services are architected in a completely new way in order to achieve these goals.

Thousands of customers, including more than 30 of the Fortune 100, today trust the Netskope One platform, our Zero Trust Engine, and our powerful NewEdge Network to reduce risk and gain full visibility and control over cloud, AI, SaaS, web, and private applications—providing security and accelerating performance without trade-offs.



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