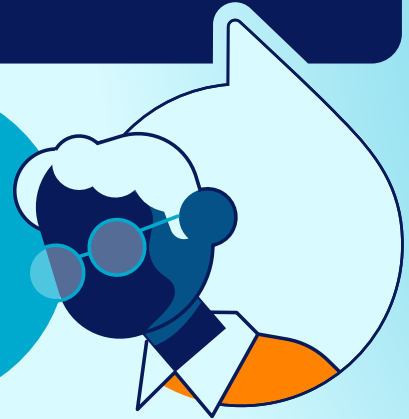


Crucial Conversations:

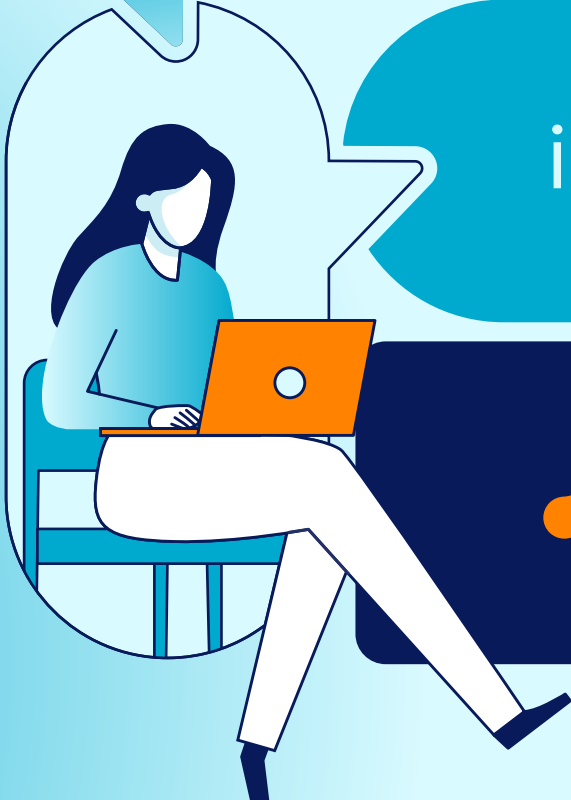
How to Achieve



CIO-CEO Alignment



in the Era of



AI



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# Exec summary:

## Five key findings for CIOs

### Misalignment at the top

A striking two in five CIOs (39%) report being misaligned with their CEO on key decision-making. Even more worryingly, 31% aren't confident they know what their CEO really wants, and 34% don't feel empowered to make long-term strategic calls—pointing to serious problems in many CIO-CEO relationships.

### Modernization funding falling short

Only 36% of CIOs believe their business is investing adequately in modernizing IT infrastructure. 41% say investment is falling short, and 23% are unsure—a clear indicator that modernization is being talked about more than it's being funded.

### Innovation disconnect

CIOs might assume that their CEO loves innovation like they do. But in fact CEOs worry that their CIOs are too eager to adopt emerging tech without fully weighing costs or disruption. What company leaders want instead is a “rational” approach from CIOs who “police innovation,” avoid “new toys,” and prioritize business value over buzz.

### AI balancing act

AI is an exception to the note of caution from CEOs around innovation. Here, CEOs are giving CIOs a double-edged mandate: Integrate AI to drive measurable business value, while also cutting costs and acting as gatekeepers against overspending. Focus doesn't stop at cost; CEOs look to CIOs to support in governance and ethical considerations as well. Ultimately, CEOs are enthusiastic about AI's potential and want their CIO to drive progress without falling for industry hype.

### De facto HR leadership

The CIO's scope now increasingly includes managing the “agentic AI workforce”—with responsibilities such as measuring AI performance, ensuring ethical use, and integrating machine and human productivity. This marks a dramatic expansion of the CIO role into one that blends IT, operations, and people strategy right across the organization.



# Foreword



## From Mike Anderson, Chief Digital and Information Officer, Netskope

Speak to any Chief Information Officer (CIO) today and they'll tell you that their job is changing fast.

Modern CIOs find their profile rising, as technology climbs the corporate agenda. They see their remits expanding. (Moderna and Coinbase, where IT leaders' jobs now also encompass HR and operations, respectively, are two prominent examples.) And as AI infuses more areas of the business, they're playing a more central role in company operations and planning. The CIO role is evolving from an IT operator to an influential business strategist.

As a result, the dynamic between CIOs and their CEO is more important than ever to enterprise success.

At Netskope, we have a front row seat to this pivotal CEO-CIO relationship. And in our work with CIOs, we hear one comment more than anything else. Don't tell me what my tech strategy should be. I know that. Tell me how to navigate my internal stakeholders to enable me to do my job. Tell me how to build trust and deliver results, in a way that makes sense to the CEO and is visible to the entire C-suite and board.

In that feedback lay the genesis of *Crucial Conversations*. Through a unique set of interviews with CEOs, complemented by research among CIOs, we've identified six essential interactions that both parties need to have, covering topics from budgeting to team management. All of these conversations, we found, are being increasingly catalyzed by AI.

**In undertaking this report, we didn't want to stop with the "what"—we were committed to capturing insights into the "how" in order to be practical and useful.**

**Our goal with this report is to give CIOs a peek inside the minds of CEOs, and offer guidance about how to position discussions in the most effective ways possible.**

We want to aid enterprise CIOs in their decision-making about where to place investments, how to hire, and how to use AI appropriately (and securely), among other hot topics that are front of mind.

We hope *Crucial Conversations* provides IT leaders with a way toward more fruitful discussions as their transformative work continues.

This report provides suggestions on priorities to align to, framings to deploy, and even specific wording to use, to help generate the most productive conversations at the very pinnacle of business.

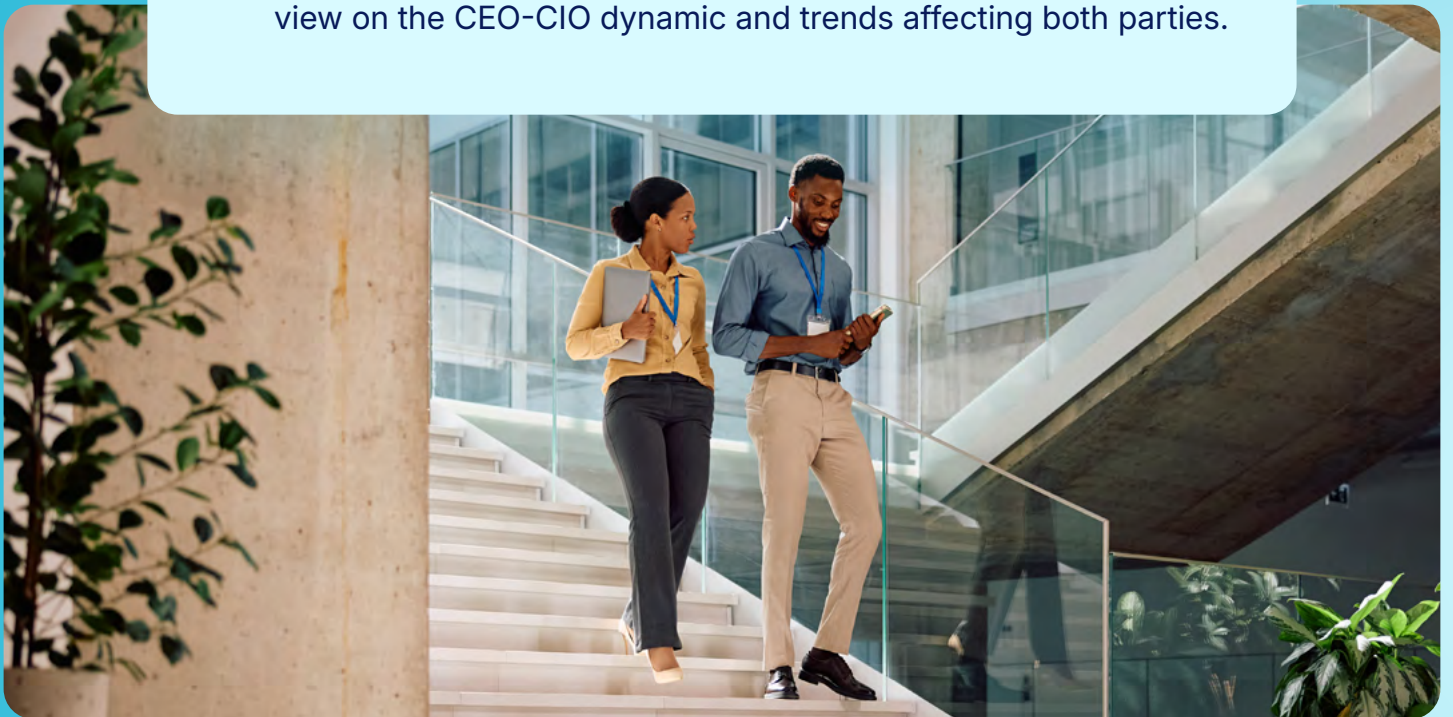
**"Many CIOs still haven't invested in one-on-one relationships with their CEOs or peers. Going forward, building that relationship equity is critical. For IT and digital leaders driving modernization, it means intentionally forging stronger ties with the C-suite that are anchored in clear communication and shared goals."**

**Joe Topinka, Founder and CEO,  
CIO Mentor**

## Methodology



Crucial Conversations was developed through a multi-stage global research process, involving CEOs, CIOs, and independent experts. Netskope commissioned independent business consultancy Trajectory Partnership to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews with 12 global CEOs (leading organizations of 5,000 employees or more) to identify the top IT-related items on their agenda and to understand their experience of working with CIOs. These CEOs ran organizations in the U.S., U.K., Germany, the Netherlands, and India, across tech, hospitality, retail, fashion, pharma, financial services, education, media, healthcare, and logistics. In addition, Netskope commissioned polling firm Censuswide to conduct quantitative research of 202 CIOs in the U.S. and U.K. to understand the CIO perspective, professional priorities, and the nature of their CEO relationships. Finally, the data was validated through interviews with experts from business, academia, and consulting to provide an outside view on the CEO-CIO dynamic and trends affecting both parties.





# Expert validators

Mike Anderson	+	Chief Digital and Information Officer, Netskope
Paola Arbour	+	EVP and CIO, Tenet Healthcare
Paul Armstrong	+	Founder, TBD Group
Kirk Ball	+	CIO, Worldpay
Danyel Bischof-Forsyth	+	CIO, 7Brew
Pascal Boillat	+	former Group CIO, Commonwealth Bank and Deutsche Bank, and currently COO, LSEG
Jim Clark	+	Strategic Insights Director, Econsultancy
Dr. Chris Gentle	+	Adjunct Faculty, London Business School
Ian Golding	+	Chief Digital and AI Officer, TC Group
Daniel Hartert	+	former CIO, Bayer AG
Peter High	+	President, Metis Strategy
Tim Jones	+	Founder and CEO, Top Line View
Louise Leavey	+	CIO (financial services)
Susi O'Neill	+	Founder, EVA
Sharon Prior	+	Managing Partner, Inovivo, and former CIO, Heathrow Airport
Ilona Simpson	+	Chief Digital and Information Officer, ZF Foxconn
David Smoley	+	former Global CIO, AstraZeneca and Flex
David Symons	+	Future Ready™ Innovation Leader, WSP
Joe Topinka	+	Founder and CEO, CIO Mentor

# The CEO perspective: The toughest job in the C-suite

✚ CIOs have a packed agenda. Many are busy modernizing their IT environments and most are maintaining vital legacy systems. At a time of major technological change, they're charged with improving their organization's use of data, deploying new AI tools and capabilities, and increasing operational resilience and security.

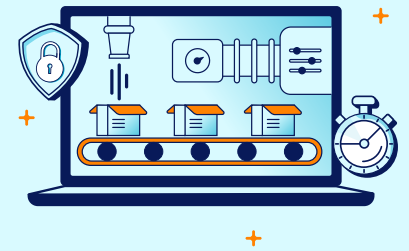
Without seamless and secure access to digital systems, most businesses would simply not be able to function. As a consequence, CEOs are increasingly asking their CIOs to step up and play a more proactive, impactful role far beyond the traditional definitions of IT responsibilities.

But digging deeper into company leaders' attitudes reveals that they're making a series of contradictory demands of their CIOs. Through in-depth interviews with 12 global enterprise CEOs, we found that they often want their CIO to be:

- Technically expert but focused on business outcomes**  
 The ultimate subject-matter authority who nonetheless filters everything through the lens of commercial impact
- Future-facing but concerned with today's priorities**  
 Staying on top of evolving tech developments, yet still delivering in the here and now
- Collaborative across the business but not domineering**  
 Involved in multiple departments as everything has an IT component, while not stepping on others' toes
- Visionary and strategic but also hands-on and detail-oriented**  
 Thinking long term and understanding the big picture without delegating too much or disappearing from key tasks

Meeting all of those expectations is a tall order, to put it mildly. In fact, the CEOs we spoke to acknowledged that CIOs probably have the toughest job in the business world right now. They described IT leadership as an often thankless task, where everything—from day-to-day frustrations with productivity software to the impact of global cyberattacks—seems to be their responsibility and their fault.

The paradoxes in what CEOs want from their CIOs can have harmful implications for organizational effectiveness. Mismatched expectations easily give rise to unclear communication, conflicting priorities, and deeper dysfunction. Unless that's addressed, the CEO-CIO relationship can falter badly—creating problems that ripple through the business.



“The CIO commands a broad and wide-reaching view across a business’s operations, while also being hyper-focused and in possession of in-depth insights. These combined perspectives are uniquely valuable to a CEO.”

Kirk Ball, CIO, Worldpay

# The CIO perspective: A changing relationship



The dynamic between CEOs and CIOs is crucial for organizations precisely because of tech's critical role at the heart of modern business. A positive CEO-CIO partnership can drive the enterprise forward, making it faster, smarter, and more competitive. A dysfunctional relationship that's rooted in misaligned thinking, however, will only result in inertia.

So what do CIOs think about the evolving nature of their alliance with company chiefs? To supplement our CEO interviews, we surveyed more than 200 CIOs and gained a deep understanding of IT leaders' views. Three key findings stood out.

## CIOs are still grappling with securing CEO support for their modernization agendas.

Despite years of talk about digital transformation, and even with the flood of interest in leveraging AI, one in four CIOs (26%) say it's difficult to get buy-in from their CEO on modernization and transformation strategies. Seemingly some IT leaders are still struggling to articulate why it's so important to reduce the valueless complexity and "technical debt" of legacy systems.

Even more strikingly, only one in three CIOs (36%) think their business is investing enough in modernizing their IT infrastructure. In contrast, two-fifths (41%) say their business isn't investing enough (while 23% aren't sure). Recent data from PwC found a similar lack of confidence: The proportion of IT leaders who feel their function is ready for reinvention has dropped by 20 percentage points since 2023, when AI began gaining traction within enterprises.



**"When it comes to your CEO relationship, focus on quality over quantity. It's more important to have engaged communication, and be closely aligned with their priorities, than to have a high number of interactions for the sake of it."**

David Smoley, former Global CIO,  
AstraZeneca and Flex

**"The more proactive, consistent, aligned and priority driven the CIO and their teams are, the less "air gap" between IT and the business. This requires agility, resiliency, and partnership with all levels of business."**

Paola Arbour, EVP and CIO, Tenet Healthcare



## The CIO role is in transition, potentially creating confusion.

There's a gap between the role that CIOs want to have and the one they are currently asked to undertake. Nearly half of CIOs (48%) want to be very involved in broader strategic priorities outside of IT, but in reality only one in three (34%) are.

Meanwhile, CIOs are rethinking their focus—away from technical domain expertise and toward general business impact. 40% of CIOs say that they need to be more aware of business strategy and objectives today than they did in the past. A further 37% think that technology expertise is now less important than business strategy and stakeholder management for the role of the CIO.

## CEO-CIO alignment varies considerably, hindering the delivery of longer-term modernization strategies.

When asked if they're in sync with their CEOs on decision-making, a remarkable two in five CIOs (39%) report being misaligned—a huge number of suboptimal corporate relationships. Significant numbers of CIOs also admit to struggling with their job and boardroom dynamics: 43% sometimes think they speak a different language to their CEO when it comes to IT, and consequently a similar number (44%) do not always know how best to approach strategic conversations with their CEO.

Not surprisingly, then, around one-third of CIOs (31%) admit they're not confident they know what their CEO wants from them, and 34% do not feel empowered by their CEO to make long-term IT strategy decisions.

## So what's a CIO to do?

The answer, for those IT and digital leaders who want to deliver a modernization agenda that supports business growth, is to forge a more productive CEO relationship grounded in clearer communication and shared perspectives.

In practical terms, that means CIOs must crack the code in three key areas:

- Better understand what CEOs really care about
- Know which conversations it is critical to have with the CEO
- Take the right approach to those discussions to drive optimal outcomes

In the rest of this report, we'll dive into each of those areas in detail.

**“CIOs need to find their voice in pushing the exec team and CEO, even developing their own thoughts on priorities and areas of focus in their own plans and communicating those rather than wait for the rest of the organization to do a better job of this. Be the change you seek and provide a rationale for others to follow!”**

**Peter High, President,  
Metis Strategy**

# Understanding the CEO's bigger picture



In recent years, digital initiatives have become increasingly connected to some of the most influential decisions that CEOs have to make. From spotting disruptive new innovations like AI, to protecting customer data, technology is now a key factor steering an organization's strategic direction. The imperative for CIOs is to grasp where they can contribute to business strategy.

**“The tenure of CEOs is getting shorter and shorter. Their window to make an impact is shrinking.”**

**Dr. Chris Gentle, Adjunct Faculty,  
London Business School**

According to the CEOs we spoke to, there are five thematic areas high up on their agendas where they are looking for support and input from their CIOs. These go beyond the typically IT-focused areas that CIOs are used to overseeing, and reflect tech leaders' increasingly broad relevance across the business.

In this section, we'll explore each theme in greater depth so that CIOs can get inside the minds of CEOs—and link their agendas together.



## Navigating market volatility and uncertainty

Since the COVID pandemic, the issues of business resilience and supply chain disruption have risen in salience for a generation of company leaders. The constant crises of the early 2020s seem to have become a new normal, sustained by recent economic volatility and a sense of wider geopolitical uncertainty. Among other effects, this is leading to protectionist policies that add friction and cost to global trade, and fast-changing regulatory environments that make investment decisions more complicated.

Among CEOs, there's a sense that this volatile and uncertain environment isn't going away any time soon. The lesson they've taken from recent experiences has been to build greater resilience into core systems within their organizations, as well as to conduct enhanced scenario planning and table-top exercises for worst-case outcomes.

Company leaders want their CIO to be more cognizant of these risks and potential remedies. They expect CIOs to prioritize diversification and resilience, as insurance against disruption and volatility. Flexible, real-time systems can enable business agility, for example in making sudden changes to sourcing strategy in response to new tariffs or supply chain problems. They also want to see scalable or variable IT solutions presented, which can provide them with more options in an uncertain economic environment.

**“CIOs have to protect and build and grow an organization through tech. What's often missing in the C-suite generally is the impact of external factors like geopolitical disruption. There's blind faith that the CIO will be able to circumvent these issues.”**

**Sharon Prior, Managing Partner, Inovivo,  
and former CIO, Heathrow Airport**

## Keeping up with the speed of innovation

Innovation naturally falls into the CIO's sphere, and CEOs say they rely on their CIO to track new technologies as they emerge. This is no easy task, especially in today's noisy landscape when new breakthroughs and potential disruptions seem to crop up on a weekly basis.

There are some important nuances here, though. Company leaders don't expect to jump on every passing bandwagon. They want their CIO to understand which innovations matter to the business—and communicate their significance clearly—while not getting distracted by tech for tech's sake. Similarly, not all relevant innovations are created equal—some require faster understanding than others. CIOs are expected to help distinguish between them, creating a pathway for adoption and integration where appropriate.

It should also be noted that CIOs are not the sole originators and owners of innovation, which often happens at the edge of a company, closest to the customers. CIOs need to tap into this source of insight and listen to the people with the most current knowledge of customer problems. This is especially relevant to AI deployments, which are typically designed to solve existing pain points.

## Integrating AI into their organizations

One innovation that is finding significant purchase within business is AI. The challenge here is to cope with the exceptional pace of AI development and grapple with its profound implications for how work gets done. AI-driven disruption can easily cause organizational whiplash. Just a couple of years ago, inflated expectations from CEOs saw some businesses run enthusiastically toward generative AI, while CIOs tried to rationally temper expectations. Now, deploying agentic AI is high up the enterprise agenda.

While organizational approaches vary, depending on their maturity and comfort with new technologies, no one wants to be left behind by what comes next. As larger companies move from AI experimentation to more active adoption, the expectation among CEOs is that their CIO will help drive this process. They are the ones tasked with identifying and collecting AI use cases from across the business, effectively integrating the technology into workflows and wider systems, and leveraging AI's advantages to drive efficiency in headcount far beyond the IT team itself.

The mandate from the CEO is that AI must achieve tangible business benefits, not indulge in unnecessary technical innovation (with its incumbent costs and risks). CEOs also want CIOs to think ahead and consider (and protect against) the implications of AI for data privacy and regulatory requirements.

**"I need someone to bring the new world to me."**

CEO, U.S., Apparel/Fashion

**"As CIOs, our job isn't just to keep the lights on—it's to help you see what's possible before the competition does."**

Mike Anderson, Chief Digital and Information Officer, Netskope

## Evaluating the benefits and impact of technology

As technical experts, CIOs are expected to evaluate new technologies coming into the organization—and just as importantly, to gauge the value of existing systems. Current tech must prove its worth through genuine business impact, not simply retain its status through a fear of disruption.

CEOs want their CIOs at the forefront of validating vendors, testing tools, and assessing applications. But IT leadership mustn't stop there. It's up to CIOs to turn this into real change across the enterprise—prioritizing activity, advising on implementation, and measuring its ultimate effectiveness.

## Managing cyber risks and security challenges

The costs of business disruption have never been clearer—from the financial impact of lost sales and system upgrades to reputational damage, customer dissatisfaction, and lower stock prices. CEOs understand that it is essential to protect the organization from cyber risk and associated security challenges. But they want their CIO to help explain and justify the right approach to minimizing these risks, at a time when breaches and attacks are increasingly sophisticated and seen as increasingly inevitable.

This requires CIOs to communicate in plain and non-technical terms to wider business stakeholders. To protect vital security spending at a time of constrained budgets, it also demands they talk about business impact rather than just IT consequences.

**“When someone is conservative and incurious their mindset is wrong. It’s ‘if it isn’t broke, don’t fix it.’ That’s not helpful. This is a nightmare scenario to be in. Because it doesn’t drive you forward as a company.”**

CEO, India, Pharma

**“Data loss, for everybody, is the most paranoid thing. And of course data protection. That wasn’t on anybody’s radar six or seven years ago.”**

CEO, Netherlands, Retail



## Six Crucial Conversations: Practical guidance



Knowing CEOs' top priorities is one thing. But to really build more effective relationships with them, CIOs also need a better understanding of, and approach toward, the conversational domains where those priorities turn into business decisions.

From our insight into the thinking of both parties, we've identified six crucial conversations that regularly take place between CEOs and CIOs—the places where, metaphorically speaking, the rubber hits the road.



If CIOs manage these interactions well, they will be more successful in pushing their modernization agenda forward. This requires them to talk differently to their CEOs than they've tended to do historically.

This section explores each of the six conversational domains in turn. Based on our in-depth interviews, we provide an insight into how CEOs are approaching these discussions and what they're looking for from their CIO when they take place. We also share advice from successful CIOs on what good looks like in these conversations, with tips on how to make progress happen.





## Conversation one: Cost



### What CEOs think

The CEOs we spoke to admitted to a degree of uncertainty when it came to scrutinizing and approving IT investment. Their personal level of confidence about IT matters will shape the nature of their involvement in the process. Ultimately these factors combine to create a level of dependence on their CIO that varies from company to company.

But it is understanding the value they get from all of their IT spending that is the challenge they most look to their CIO for help with. Many CEOs are unclear how much of their IT investment is about enabling efficient business operations, and how much drives value creation and growth. Most of their focus is inevitably on the latter.

One area where the cost conversation is coming into sharpest focus right now is with AI adoption. Specifically, CEOs told us they were giving their IT leaders a mandate for identifying where AI can best solve important business problems, such as tackling costs or increasing efficiency. (Many CEOs are also giving their executive team an instruction to find a percentage of savings across business units.) This requires a careful CIO balancing act: to deploy new tools within an overall context of reducing expenditure.

## What CEOs want from CIOs

The CEOs who participated in the research consistently asked for CIOs to flip their thinking. Rather than always recommending more spending as a way to bolster digital systems, improve resilience, and maintain competitive edge, CIOs should instead focus on challenging suppliers and driving efficiencies. In the words of more than one CEO, they want their CIOs to “act as a gatekeeper” when it comes to IT costs.

That gatekeeper mentality needs to be accompanied by straightforward words. CEOs are clear about their desire for CIOs to simplify technical jargon and explain budget-related decisions in terms that other, non-technical C-suite peers can readily understand. This means that CIOs have to think and express themselves in a way that connects their spending choices to business priorities, key decision-making frameworks, and the value that will be created. Doing this requires them to have a deep awareness of wider organizational strategy and ROI calculations.

Regarding their remit to implement AI and drive efficiency gains, CIOs are commanded to be realistic. CEOs are conscious that this topic, more than any other, is prone to excessively high expectations. They want their IT leaders to cut through AI hype and provide level-headed advice based on real commercial benefits, rather than evangelizing for the technology.

Lastly, CIOs need to consider how best to manage cost relative to delivering a business capability, including people, process, and technology costs. The calculation is not always clear-cut. Part of the conversation with the CEO, therefore, should cover which element of a given system just needs to work, and which elements help differentiate from standard or competitor systems and might justify additional investment.



“

### Conversation starter tip

Our current infrastructure limits our agility more than it enables it. I'd like to walk you through a modernization path that creates more flexibility, security, and cost control.

”

“ [The CIO] was our BS meter. Somebody would come in and want to charge us the sun and moon. He'd go: 'Let's rewrite it this way, or give them a specific list of things.'”

CEO, U.S., Apparel/Fashion

“ CEOs are getting pitched [AI] solutions all the time. The CIO can cut through the crap and separate the bullshit and hype from the opportunity.”

Jim Clark, Strategic Insights Director, Econsultancy

“ CIOs should share their IT agenda with the CEO based on two key IT mandates: the efficiency mandate (operating as efficiently as possible) and the value mandate (creating competitive advantage and innovation). This provides good orientation as to what you're talking about, and allows you to structure the conversation into cost aspects and business value aspects.”

Daniel Hartert, former CIO, Bayer AG

“ When we cut costs, we are often increasing our risk profile. Conversely, when we invest, we are buying down risk and building new capabilities that drive revenue and competitive advantage. That's how to frame this conversation – not 'How can we reduce IT spending?' but 'Are we making the right strategic investments to manage our risks and deliver the most value to the business?'”

Ilona Simpson, Chief Digital and Information Officer, ZF Foxconn



## Conversation two: Risk



### What CEOs think

Risk is a complicated topic and one where it's difficult to generalize with confidence. For CEOs, risk considerations span competitive, physical, financial, cybersecurity, and many other areas, and a CEO's unique personality and risk appetite shapes how they approach the issue. The CEOs we interviewed said they are generally optimists who drive the business forward in the belief of positive future returns. This means they are perhaps more open to risk than their CIOs and might make a different calculation about the risk-reward profile of a given decision.

So while our CEOs recognized that IT is now almost certainly their largest risk vector, they were also very clear who has the final say on business-critical decisions. It is CEOs themselves who set the risk tolerance for the organization and take individual calls.

As with the cost conversation, AI is one of the areas where risk is currently top of mind, referenced proactively by most research participants during their interviews. For some CEOs, embracing AI is an urgent requirement, and they're desperate not to get left behind. Others expressed a reluctance to be at the forefront—they certainly don't want to be in the headlines for a high-profile data breach associated with AI. They preferred instead to be fast followers, learning from others and applying those lessons without the need for their own cost- and time-intensive experimentation. It's important that CIOs understand their CEO's risk appetite when it comes to AI, as it will shape so much of the subsequent conversation.

## What CEOs want from CIOs

CEOs see risk as a spectrum, and they appreciate that no decision is free of potential negative consequences. Their role is to make informed judgments based on a thorough understanding of all factors. To that end, CEOs ask for CIOs to present decisions as costed options including detail on the risk levels and other associated trade-offs for each one. This enables the CEO to make a determination with the best available information, relying on the CIO's expert view.

CIOs must also be a credible voice in discussions with stakeholders at the most senior levels. On occasion they will need to provide reassurance to key audiences such as investors, regulators, customers, and staff. That requires a calm head, an authoritative style, and high levels of integrity.

Some CEOs we spoke to said they look to their CIO to balance risk and reward in pursuit of company objectives—treading a middle path between optimism and gloom, and keeping their eyes fixed firmly on what matters for the business. Others, though, explicitly ask their CIOs to take a more pessimistic bent, tracking projects closely to avoid unpleasant surprises and anticipating problems before they happen. CIOs should take care to understand the individual preferences of their CEO to judge the optimal approach.

Most of all, CEOs said they want a “trusted lieutenant” in their CIO. Someone who makes sensible decisions, knows when to escalate and report emerging issues, and is aligned on shared goals.



“

### Conversation starter tip

Let's look at where we're taking the right risks—and where we might be playing it too safe. The goal is to make tech a smart enabler of growth, not a blocker.

”



“ [The CIO should say] ‘We can give you 98% assurance that this is going to run and that’s going to cost you this much. If you want to push that to 99.5%, it’s going to cost you this much.’ So there’s a sort of a continuum of how much do you want to spend, and how safe and certain do you want to be.”

CEO, U.K., Financial Services

“ To curate a conversation that neither descends into the finer detail, nor becomes so lofty it doesn’t relate to anything, it can be useful to follow the same structure that you find in some effective and well-used frameworks. For instance, in the NIST Cyber Security Framework, Identify, Protect, Detect, Respond, Recover and Govern, are all categories that lend themselves to the right level of CEO focus.”

Ian Golding, Chief Digital and AI Officer, TC Group

“ 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)

“ The cost of doing nothing [around security] is massive—though people often only realise when things go wrong. Insurance and reinsurance can be real costs.”

Tim Jones, Founder and CEO, Top Line View



## Conversation three: Innovation



### What CEOs think

For most of the CEOs we surveyed, innovation is at the heart of their business. They want all of their senior team to be continually thinking about what's emerging and how they can use it to add value.

Some CEOs, however, had a more complicated attitude. For them, "innovation" can be viewed as another word for "complexity," which increases costs and raises risk levels. Even more disparagingly, some see "innovation" as code for an unproductive desire to experiment, and perhaps "chase shiny objects," distracting the company from its core activities and at the expense of delivering true business objectives. It's a helpful reminder that attitudes to innovation are situational and will often depend on industry and business model.

AI appears to be a major exception to this view. Among the CEOs we spoke with, there was a general sense of excitement and enthusiasm about AI's potential for increasing efficiency and understanding inside their organizations, and where relevant, in transforming their customer offerings.

CEOs were optimistic that automating repetitive tasks should lead to greater focus on, and impact for, customers. This might involve operating with fewer staff and using AI agents to drive greater scale and productivity. Certain functions, such as sales and marketing, are undoubtedly in the spotlight more than others in this regard.

## What CEOs want from CIOs

Here CIOs have one of their hardest balancing acts, as CEOs want them to be aware of latest developments while also curbing their enthusiasm for adopting them wholesale. Overall, the CEOs we spoke to had an instinctive concern that CIOs generally embrace innovation too actively, bordering on naivety. They worry that CIOs don't always think through innovation's costs, disruption, and other trade-offs in detail.

This concern led many CEOs to demand a more thoughtful, even skeptical, approach from their CIO. CEOs describe this as a "rational" attitude to innovation, where CIOs "police" what is allowed into the organization and what isn't. Most of all, in their view, CIOs must avoid frivolous tools or technology for technology's sake—what was dismissively described as "new toys"—and instead focus strictly on what will create business value and positive outcomes.

One way to overcome this CEO suspicion is for CIOs to get into the habit of providing itemized roadmaps. These should set out the path for implementing new innovations, but just as importantly, also communicate the rationale for them and the steps to get there, not just the end vision. Itemized roadmaps make innovation feel practical and reassure CEOs that their IT leader is thinking the process through methodically. Another option is to take a venture mindset to innovation and place a series of small bets, with milestones identified and funding metered as progress becomes apparent.

With AI, however, there's greater appetite for innovation, and CEOs want their CIO to be an expert advisor on its possibilities. The AI conversation is unusual in that it's likely to be a technology discussion that the CEO or even the board actively initiates, perhaps even based on playing with AI tools themselves. (This might lead some CEOs to think they know all about this cutting-edge technology, or even—as Gartner has found—to doubt their CIO's AI savviness in comparison with their own. CIOs will need to navigate sensitive conversations with possibly overconfident leaders.)

CEOs wish to see a can-do spirit from their CIO, with a willingness to drive progress and adopt improvements from AI rather than merely managing their existing systems. Here it's change, not stasis, that is the order of the day.



“

### Conversation starter tip

There's no shortage of shiny objects and over-hyped innovation around right now. Let's focus on where it actually improves how we operate, grow, and compete.

”

“The role of the CIO is to keep the management team informed about latest developments and to work with the business to translate any of those developments into meaningful commercial outcomes.”

CEO, U.K., Financial Services

“Innovations need to occur within the business’s existing focus areas. It’s the job of the CIO to enable a safe, sound and secure environment to experiment and innovate, but most importantly to also fail safely and capture learnings fast.”

Pascal Boillat, former Group CIO, Commonwealth Bank and Deutsche Bank, and currently COO, LSEG

“The CIO can have two roles—one to keep the business running smoothly and efficiently, the other to innovate to support top-line growth. Artificial Intelligence can support both, and that is the opportunity for CIOs.”

David Symons, Future Ready™ Innovation Leader, WSP

“Effective innovation always starts with a use case, rather than a technology. Avoid ‘shiny things syndrome’ by working within small, agile, cross-functional teams that prioritize actual business challenges and understand what you would like to be able to do, or do better or differently.”

Ian Golding, Chief Digital and AI Officer, TC Group



## Conversation four: People



### What CEOs think

In some of the businesses we spoke to, every project is viewed as an IT project, which makes the CIO an influential part of organizational development and team management. Others, however, see the CIO's responsibilities as quite separate from people matters; indeed, the suggestion of a connection between may raise quizzical eyebrows.

Nonetheless, IT is becoming more intertwined with team operations for a few reasons, all of which are on the CEO's agenda today. First, as remote and flexible working have gone mainstream, IT has become central in enabling organizational productivity and even attracting top talent. Second, real-time data and workplace applications can now increasingly help leaders understand individual performance and identify areas for improvement. Third, and most radically, the CIO is evolving into a de facto "HR leader" for the fast-growing agentic AI workforce, which operates alongside or in place of human workers.



## What CEOs want from CIOs

With people and machines operating in an increasingly integrated and fluid style, CIOs must learn to talk more about performance and resourcing well beyond their own team. AI is forcing the pace here. CEOs want their CIO to take the lead in evaluating opportunities with AI to understand where organizational efficiencies can be found that will materially impact the Human Capital Plan. That's an urgent priority for many companies today, where investors want to see AI deliver gains, and "doing more with less" is a common mantra.

As agentic AI is embedded more frequently across business systems including CRM, HR, and customer service applications, IT leaders also have to grapple with a set of dilemmas that were once the domain of people management. For example, their CEO might need to identify which skills the business needs, how to measure and manage the agentic AI workforce's performance, and how to ensure that AI makes ethical decisions. The CIO is a vital expert resource to assist.

When it comes to people issues, CEOs don't jump straight to investing in new IT tools. In fact, their focus is much more on getting the best out of current systems. That's where they want CIOs to help first. Maximizing the value of existing IT applications is often understood to be a human problem, not a technological one. It's about shifting entrenched attitudes and ingrained ways of working, rather than adding brand new features or affordances. CEOs urge CIOs to make an impact here, bringing value without incremental cost.



“

### Conversation starter tip

As AI scales, we'll need a clear plan for where it creates capacity, where it complements people, and where we need to reinvest in skills. Let's map that together.

”

“We’re working on human behavior because a lot of the problems are [human]. It’s not ‘get amazing tools.’ [It’s] how do you get the behaviors of the people that are managing this data to change? So that’s what we’re working on. That’s what [the CIO] is doing.”

CEO, U.K., Tech/Consulting

“We’re not just integrating technology; we’re helping redefine operating models, reskilling teams, and navigating new ethical terrain. The idea of CIOs as de facto ‘HR leaders’ for agentic AI is provocative — and increasingly accurate.”

Louise Leavey, CIO (financial services)

“The CIO should be front and center in the creation and implementation of a human capital plan—something that is essential to the success of any business strategy.”

Pascal Boillat, former Group CIO, Commonwealth Bank and Deutsche Bank, and currently COO, LSEG

“CIOs and CHROs can form a powerful partnership in co-owning how AI integrates into work, culture, and talent strategy. It’s not just tech or people anymore; it’s both, intertwined.”

Joe Topinka, Founder and CEO, CIO Mentor



## Conversation five: Measurement



### What CEOs think

As with the cost conversation, the discussion on measurement is challenging for many of the CEOs we spoke to. They confessed that measuring the performance of technology is difficult because of their relative lack of technical knowledge. This situation is only getting more challenging with the pace of modern AI development.

For that reason, some CEOs said they gauge the success of IT initiatives by looking at Net Promoter Scores (NPS) or user satisfaction levels at the end of the project. Others focus more specifically on the speed and performance of given systems, asking whether it marks an advance on prior infrastructure and is meeting the key performance indicators (KPIs) set earlier.

More generally, CEOs always place return on investment at the top of their agenda, specifically hard dollar savings to justify capital expenditure. But philosophically they also recognize that not everything is tangibly quantifiable, and sometimes qualitative feedback or other softer metrics can be used to judge success.

## What CEOs want from CIOs

Given how challenging it can be to adequately measure IT outcomes, CEOs ask CIOs to simplify their reporting metrics for the non-technical stakeholders who sit around the boardroom table. Fundamentally, that boils down to a few key questions aligning to business goals: Is it working, is it on time, and is it on budget?

Additionally, as in some of their other conversations, such as risk and innovation, CEOs' counsel to CIOs is to reframe everything through the lens of business outcomes, and report in straightforward language. For new AI-driven programs, this means articulating how success is being quantified and how they are contributing to organizational goals: whether they are leading to more sales meetings, or speeding up the time it takes to turn new employees into effective operatives, for example.

The reliance of CEOs on their technology chiefs also extends to supplier relationships too. They want their CIO to set KPIs with suppliers, challenging them to deliver best-in-class outcomes as efficiently as possible. This is where their technical expertise can help drive better measurement conversations—and ultimately results—for the organization.



“

Conversation starter tip

Let's define what success looks like from your lens first. That's how we make sure the tech is aligned—and measurable.

”

**“** The CIO is responsible for aligning the IT team’s objectives with the business objectives. That is down to them. Setting technology roadmaps is down to them, managing the cost, the operations, the infrastructure.”

CEO, India, Pharma

**“** 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

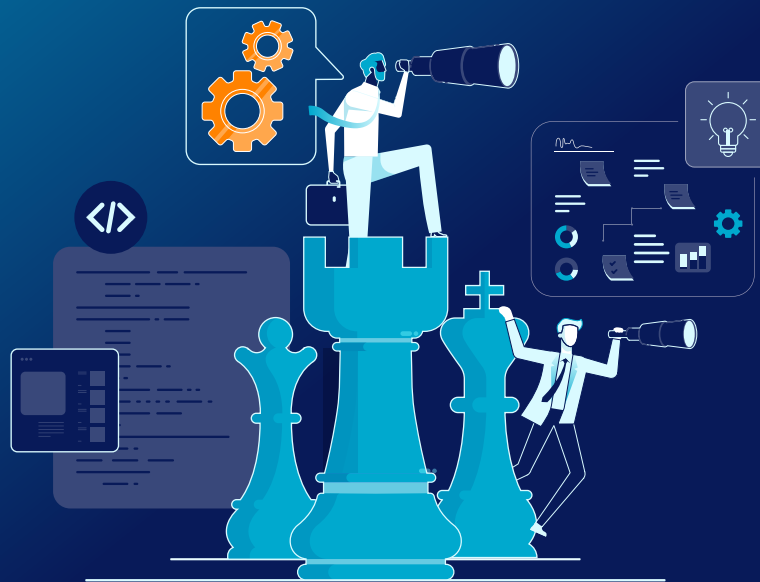
**“** I’m starting to see a backlash to AI—it’s so easy for the big consultancies to come in and advise on AI integration, but in most cases it doesn’t lead to the kind of efficiencies [CEOs] want.”

Susi O’Neill, Founder, EVA

**“** You have to be aligned with business metrics, because your relationship with the CEO will be based on how relevant and impactful your function is. 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





## Conversation six: The IT Estate



### What CEOs think

The core role of the IT department is to manage, run, and take responsibility for the IT estate, from hardware to applications, but there is significant variance in the degree of CEO involvement.

Some CEOs are happy for their CIOs to lead this domain and drive the agenda on infrastructure upkeep and improvement. However, other CEOs will want complete oversight, as with other core business systems and processes. More than most areas, this conversation will depend on the CEO's knowledge and comfort with technical matters.

For some company leaders, there's a sense that IT infrastructure—and even the wider IT function—is a “black box” that they don't understand. Sometimes they feel their CIO doesn't enable or allow them to peer inside it, which can cause suspicion and frustration, especially at a time when AI is turbocharging the rapid evolution of legacy systems.

## What CEOs want from CIOs

Whatever their level of involvement in IT infrastructure, CEOs said they generally want three things from their CIO. First, they want transparency. When things go wrong, they want CIOs to be upfront and direct. The worst thing, from a CEO's point of view, is a nasty surprise they discover has been bubbling along for a while.

Second, they want proactivity. That means embracing change and having the courage and vision to make strategic calls that can be transformational. In an era of AI, there is an expectation of thinking big and being bold. Sometimes even relatively small fixes can have an outsized impact on improving operations.

Third, they want practicality. As with the innovation conversation, CEOs don't want to hear about "new toys" for the sake of it. They want sensible ideas that are clearly evidenced and thoughtfully presented. When it comes to the most critical infrastructure, they need to feel assured that the CIO is reducing the chances of disasters happening, and presenting solutions, not problems, when anything does go wrong.

CEOs told us that they want CIOs to think longer term about infrastructure planning—looking out across the next 10 years, not just the next 12 months—and ditching a defensive "if it ain't broke" mindset. Especially in today's AI context, infrastructure should be an evolving and enabling asset that underpins organizational productivity and growth.



“

### Conversation starter tip

**Our current infrastructure limits our agility more than it enables it. I'd like to walk you through a modernization path that creates more flexibility, security, and cost control.**

”

“The best way for them to frame challenges is transparently. Don’t bullshit the system, you know, justify your paycheck? Just tell me what the problem is, we’ll get it fixed.”

CEO, U.S., Apparel/Fashion

“CIOs need to have an understanding of what’s going on. Need to understand why you can’t host things in a certain country and so on.”

Paul Armstrong, Founder, TBD Group

“Infrastructure is foundational, whereas innovation and AI are at the top of the pyramid. But it’s super-important that CIOs are knowledgeable and savvy about infrastructure, and spend time focused on it. Otherwise the rest of the IT pyramid doesn’t work.”

David Smoley, former Global CIO, AstraZeneca and Flex

“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

# The last word: How CIOs can shape better conversations

Across the six crucial conversations outlined here, we can see consistent themes that will help CIOs conduct a more effective and influential dialogue with their organization's leadership.

## Speak the language of business value

CIOs must consistently frame their contributions in commercial terms. This includes acting as tough financial gatekeepers, using outcome-focused language that ties technology decisions directly to value creation, ROI, and strategic goals, and simplifying metrics down to core business questions: Is it working? Is it on time? Is it on budget?

Instead of

“

“We’ve upgraded the infrastructure to the latest cloud-native architecture.”

“

“This system has high availability and fault tolerance.”

Say

“

“We’ve reduced operational overhead by 25% and improved scalability.”

“

“This ensures 99.999% uptime, protecting revenue and customer experience.”



## De-risk and gatekeep innovation

CIOs should present risk/reward decisions as structured options with business implications, tailored to their CEO's risk appetite. And they need to embrace a “rational innovation” mindset that prioritizes pragmatic adoption over hype. They can do this by providing roadmaps and placing small bets that de-risk innovation, clearly articulating purpose, implementation, and benefits.

Instead of

“

“This is an exciting new technology we should explore.”

“

“We should run a pilot and see what happens.”

Say

“

“We’ve identified three adoption paths aligned to risk appetite and ROI.”

“

“We propose a phased pilot with a clear definition of success, letting us validate our hypothesis early.”

## Lead with credibility, clarity, and candor

CEOs expect CIOs not just to be operators, but trusted lieutenants. To fulfill this role, CIOs must be transparent and proactive, especially in areas like infrastructure and risk—ensuring there are no surprises. By displaying strategic foresight and calm authority, they can build trust across the C-suite and beyond. And by translating complex technical realities into clear guidance and actionable insights, they'll reassure their CEO.

Instead of

“

There was an outage but the team handled it.”

“

This is a complicated issue and we're working on it.”

Say

“

We had a brief disruption due to a misconfigured patch, resolved in under 15 minutes. We've since put in place a preventive safeguard.”

“

The root cause is narrowed to three variables. We'll have a recommendation and next steps by Friday. No immediate customer impact.”

## Drive transformation that's AI-powered and people centric

CIOs should champion both human and machine productivity by leading the integration of AI into core workflows, with an eye on cost-efficiency and talent evolution. They must treat behavior change and system adoption as critical success factors, maximizing existing tools before advocating for new investments. And they need to become more comfortable engaging with people strategy, including reskilling, performance metrics, and ethical AI deployment.

Instead of

“

We're rolling out new AI tools to boost productivity.”

“

Let's train staff on the new system.”

Say

“

AI is reducing onboarding cycle time by 40%, while we reskill managers.”

“

We're launching a change program, with tailored learning tracks and adoption KPIs.”



# 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.

Visit [www.netskope.com](https://www.netskope.com) for more information.



Interested in learning more?

Request a demo

Netskope, a leader in modern security and networking, addresses the needs of both security and networking teams by providing optimized access and real-time, context-based security for people, devices, and data anywhere they go. Thousands of customers, including more than 30 of the Fortune 100, trust the Netskope One platform, its Zero Trust Engine, and its 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. Learn more at [netskope.com](https://www.netskope.com).

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