



The real view from the top:

The CEO needs a level head and a steady hand to navigate the latest tech

Resistance to technological change is a feature – or a bug – of many organisations. But our new research of 1200 European IT influencers supports the perception that the larger the organisation, the stronger the resistance. What causes this effect and is it possible, or even advisable, for larger organisations to become more nimble and open to new technology adoption? ¹



Figurehead and lightning rod

» CEOs, owners and presidents of organisations (“CEOs” from now on) tend to be well-paid – exceptionally so in some cases – and are also the most prominent individuals in any company. Their names and photographs are used in internal and external communication and they are consulted on all major business decisions. Depending on the jurisdiction, the CEO can be held legally responsible for some, if not all, of an organisation’s actions.

So they can’t afford to make any big mistakes. One of the biggest potential errors, the kind that can and does destroy companies, is to make the wrong investment in technology. And opinion on the subject of what this means can be starkly divided:

Face extinction

If you are not willing to embrace new technologies like [the] Internet of Things and blockchain to face those new threats, you are, maybe subtly, at some point... going to extinction.”

- Fred Smith,
[Chairman and CEO of logistic giant, FedEx](#)³

Emerging tech is unproven

Don’t be seduced by new technology. Often times, emerging technology can lead you down a dead-end road, and more companies have failed by going too fast with a new technology than too slow.”

- Jamie Siminoff,
[CEO and founder of Amazon’s smart doorbell, Ring](#)⁴

OR



Rash decisions regretted

- » To use the metaphor of the ship's captain, the CEO's job is to navigate the company through fair weather and foul, calm and rough seas. And there are icebergs out there. Choosing the wrong route, by making the wrong technology choice, can sink an organisation due to loss of productivity, malinvestment and damage to staff morale.

You might therefore expect that CEOs have a different take on technology adoption failure than senior management and the IT people on the ground – and you'd be correct. Our research shows that out of all the people in the company, the CEO is the least likely to blame "Employee behaviours towards the technology". Instead, CEOs place the bulk of the blame on internal business processes, the same amount of blame assigned to this category by IT directors.

In fact, of all the people interviewed, CEOs were the most likely to blame processes and the least likely to blame people.

Don't rock the boat

At first glance this seems an odd state of affairs. After all, CEOs do have significant control over business processes. Apportioning a large chunk of blame to such processes is akin to apportioning blame to themselves. However, CEOs do not have sole responsibility for business processes – senior management will handle most of them. In other words, this blaming of processes could be taken as an indirect sideswipe at the failures of senior management.

However, there are other possible explanations. Companies – especially companies that want to be seen to be good places to work – have become keen to promote the idea that their people are their greatest asset. Although this is undoubtedly true for pretty much any business, organisations that actively demonstrate it, both internally and externally, are more likely to be believed and taken seriously – which is good for recruitment and productivity.

For this reason, any self-respecting CEO is likely to be extremely reticent to blame employees for anything, and especially not the failure of technology adoption that could potentially make or break the company. That would be bad PR and also bad for staff morale. This factor may explain some or all of the discrepancy of blame.

Blinded by fog

There's another possible explanation, one that's less flattering but perhaps more likely. CEOs may be less willing to blame people for technology adoption failure due to their own technological ignorance. Outside of the IT sector, and sometimes even within it, CEOs are not usually specialised or even particularly knowledgeable about technology. Most of them realise this and accept it, since the mark of a good CEO is understanding strengths and weaknesses in themselves as well as in others.

This could explain much of the blame discrepancy, due to the way people tend to behave in relation to their specialist knowledge:

- People who know about a particular subject tend to blame others for failure.
- People who think they know about a particular subject are also likely to blame others for failure.
- People who know and accept that they don't understand a particular subject are less likely to blame others.

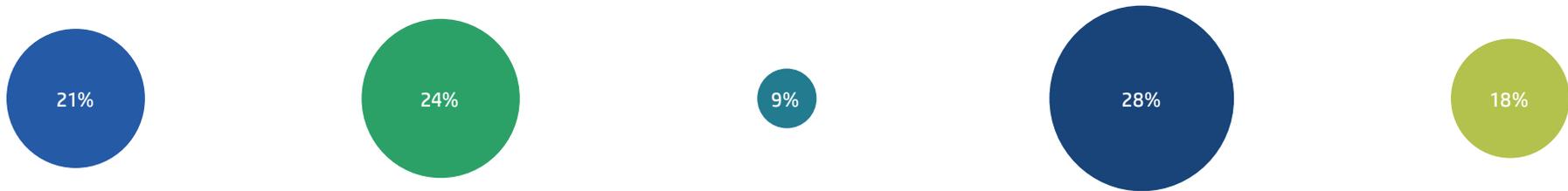
CEOs are likely to be in the third category, while senior IT management are – to generalise – perhaps more likely to be found in the first two categories.



What is the biggest obstacle preventing companies from adopting new technologies?²

- Our internal business processes
- Employee behaviours towards the technology
- Don't know
- Actions of senior management regarding implementation
- Lack of understanding about the technology

Owners, CEOs and Presidents



VPs of IT and CIOs





From the depths, looking up

» So much for the theories. What about the view from the other direction? What do IT staff on the ground think about their CEO's involvement in technology adoption? Some of the quotes from a separate study we conducted provide an interesting perspective. For example:

“At my current job, my CEO doesn't really understand technology whatsoever but she also wants us to try new ‘buzzy’ things and demands that our Hard- and Software is state of the art,” said one IT Service Provider from Germany.

Network Administrator from the US added: “Our CEO loves to be at the forefront, but mostly with his personal tech (that we support).”

What's interesting is that most of the feedback from IT footsoldiers isn't actually directed at CEOs. The majority of the people interviewed in our research instead focused the blame squarely on senior management. It appears that, to simplify the picture somewhat, the real battle of blame is between senior management and the people who actually implement and manage the technology in a company.

The CEO is mostly out of the firing line as far as both groups are concerned, seen as someone to be indulged in some respects but without any significant influence over day-to-day technology adoption decisions. That's understandable, since a good CEO will delegate decisions to the people most capable of making them, maintaining a hands-off approach.

Sailing onward

To continue the maritime metaphor, a ship's captain shouldn't run around getting involved in arguments and discussions about the right way to move forwards. Their job is to oversee the people who keep the ship running smoothly. Any captain who blamed his crew for failures of leadership and direction wouldn't last long in command. So it is with CEOs.



Further insight

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David versus Goliath:

Why are smaller companies more nimble than larger organisations when it comes to technological change?

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People, processes, or tech:

How to overcome the primary obstacles preventing the adoption of new technologies

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Appendix

1. Spiceworks conducted research on behalf of HP to 1200 IT influencers with job titles ranging from helpdesk to CEO, in companies ranging from under 50 employees to over 5000 employees, from UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Nordics, Benelux. 10% of dataset (a total of 120) were Owner/CEO/President.

2. Research looked at respondents view on six of the hottest IT trends – blockchain, cognitive computing, Edge computing, Internet of Things, immersive experience and quantum computing. This chart presents an aggregation of all trends apart from quantum computing as the technology isn't ready yet.

3. <https://www.coindesk.com/fedex-ceo-adopt-new-tech-like-blockchain-or-be-disrupted>

4. <https://www.virgin.com/entrepreneur/why-even-tech-ceos-need-be-wary-new-technology>

5. Spiceworks conducted a separate study on behalf of HP which polled IT professionals' views on this part of the research asking if they agree that senior management is to blame. Pull quotes included in this report are sourced from their open-ended responses.

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