



Perspectives

Future tech investments must empower workers

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According to Cognizant's analysis of Economist Impact research, recent tech investments reveal three mindset shifts: the critical need for data insights, a desire to augment—not replace—workers and an eye toward democratizing the use of digital tools.

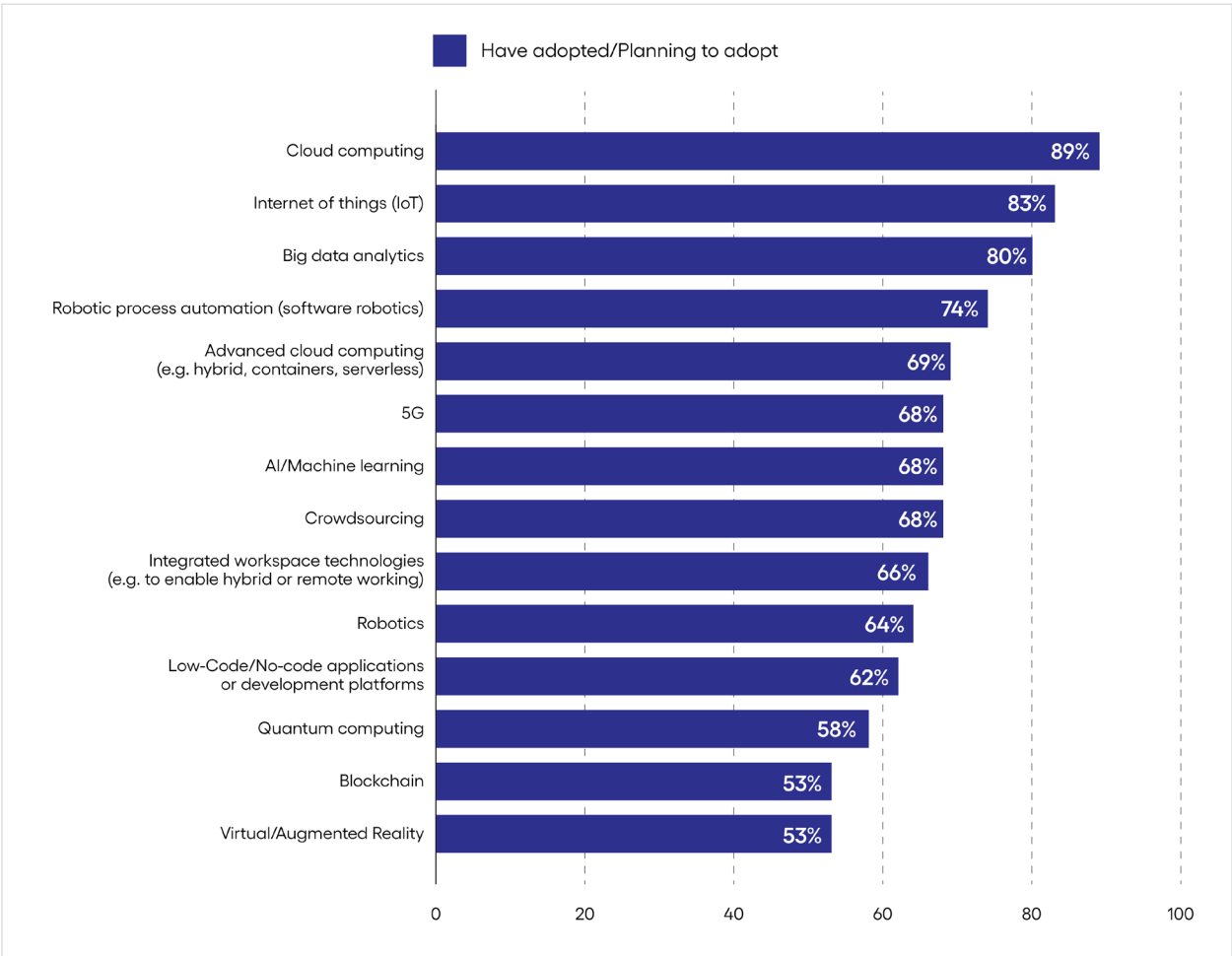


Investment in technology has continued unabated since the pandemic hit. At first glance, it might seem that execs are snapping up every technology in sight.

Indeed, in a recent Economist Impact study commissioned by Cognizant; respondents were ordering everything off the menu. The vast majority (80% or more) have adopted or plan to adopt the increasingly table-stakes technologies of advanced analytics, cloud and Internet of Things (IoT). Over 60% have ventured into the more advanced areas of artificial intelligence/machine learning, robotics, advanced cloud, robotic process automation, low-code/no-code, crowdsourcing, 5G and remote-work technologies. Meanwhile, over half of respondents chimed in on the emerging areas of blockchain, quantum computing and virtual/augmented reality (see Figure 1).

Technology adoption shows no signs of slowing down

Respondents were asked what technologies and methodologies their business has already adopted, or is planning to adopt. (Percentage of respondents who advised they have adopted or are planning to adopt each technology)



Response base: 2,000 senior leaders

Source: Economist Impact Survey 2022

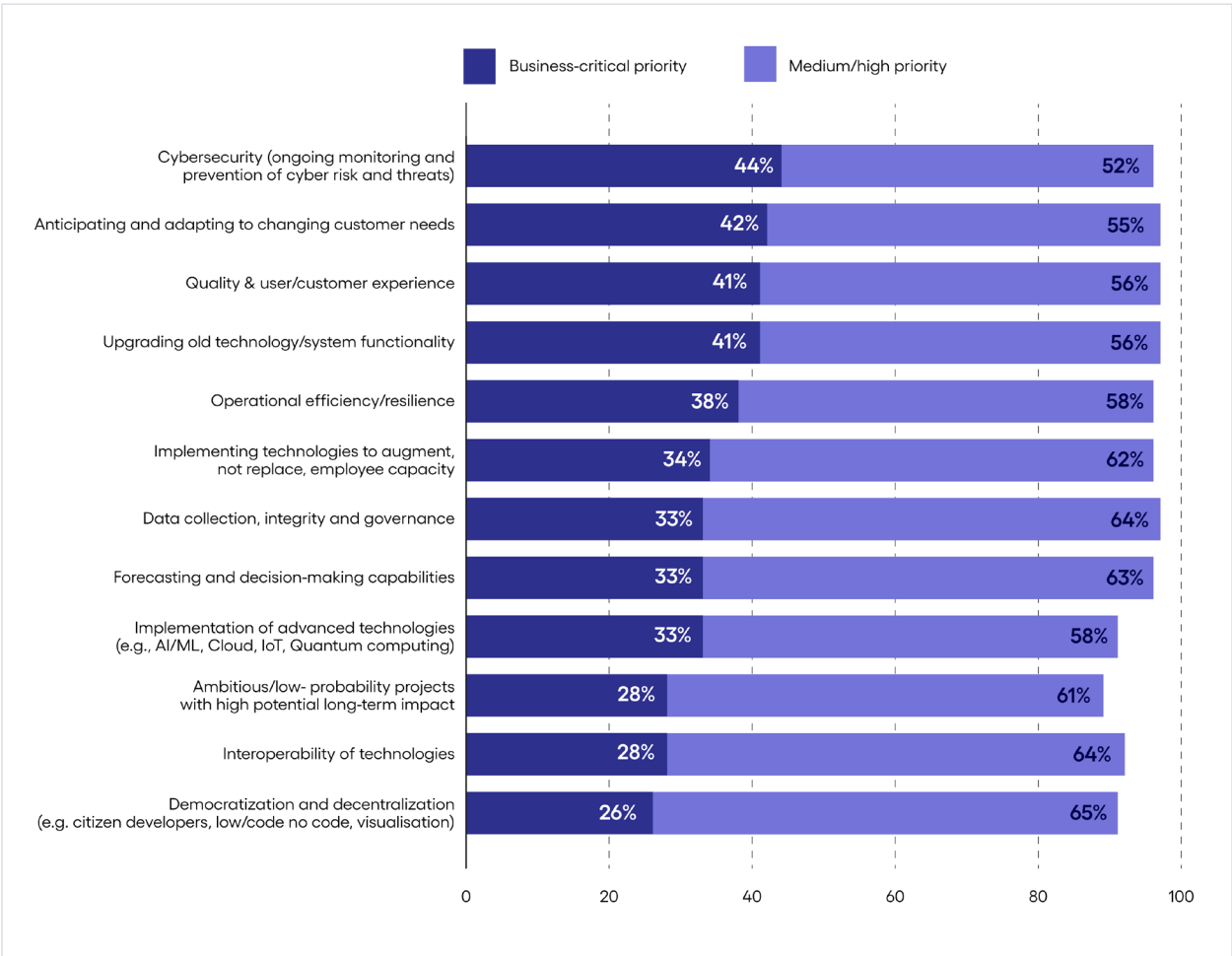
Figure 1

On closer inspection, this spending spree is less haphazard than it might initially look. When we asked executives to rate the extent to which their digital strategy prioritized 12 key imperatives, nine of these imperatives received business-critical attention from at least one-third of respondents, and all were deemed, at the very least, a medium/high priority by over 89% of respondents (see Figure 2).

By digging a bit deeper into the responses, however, we can spot three critical shifts that will fundamentally alter the nature of enterprise technology in a modern business. All three shifts are driven by a critical need for data insights, a desire to equip (not replace) workers with digital tools, and the knowledge that—increasingly—employees need to feel in control of the technologies they’re using to add value to their business and their jobs.

Key drivers of tech investments

Respondents were asked to select their company’s digital/technological strategic priorities.
(Percentage of respondents advising each strategic imperative is of either business-critical priority, or medium to high priority)



Source: Economist Impact Survey 2022

Figure 2

Getting data-powered insights into people's hands

The volatility of the past two-plus years has left businesses reeling from unpredictable market shifts, changing consumer habits and black swan events. Learning from this experience, many are focused on shoring up data governance and investing in tools to bring decision-making to new levels. Over one-third of respondents (33%) believe data collection, governance and evolving forecasting and decision-making capabilities are business-critical, and nearly all (97%) place at least a medium priority level on these activities.

It's clear why executives are eager to push data and insight generation higher up the business agenda. Consider the recent supply chain challenges caused by post-pandemic disruptions: the large cargo ship clogging up the Suez Canal, industrial action stymying the flow of freight from industrial hubs. Leaders with robust supply chain data and strong analytics capabilities have the tools to start designing workarounds and contingencies to minimize impact. They can forecast and model the impact of business and market changes, highlight areas of risk and prioritize measures that de-risk and optimize.

Beyond this, executives are focusing even more on leveraging data and insights to anticipate and adapt to changing customer demands—and then developing the customer experience to deliver on them. In fact, anticipating customer demands was second only to cybersecurity in terms of the number of respondents naming it as business-critical (44% for cybersecurity and 42% for anticipating customer needs). A quality customer experience followed closely, with 41% of respondents deeming this business-critical. New touchpoints with customers, employees and suppliers are now essential survival tools, and any business armed with deft, data-driven capabilities and dashboarding views has a head start for surviving the turbulent times ahead.

Augmenting, not replacing, people

An impressive 96% of respondents are prioritizing technology investments that augment, rather than replace, their workforce, and a sturdy 34% said this was business-critical. This is good news; dystopian tropes such as robot overlords are being replaced by a more realistic understanding of the future of work. And even with 38% of respondents making operational efficiency a business-critical priority, the idea is not to eliminate workers but to augment them to perform at higher levels.

Leaders and workers alike are beginning to recognize that the future relies on humans and machines working in collaboration. Both become greater than the sum of their parts through closer integration—with new tools multiplying workers' efforts and channeling valuable data and insights to power better decision-making.

Take the hypothetical example of how a modern field-based utility workforce might operate. Armed with a wealth of data and an augmented-reality-powered heads-up display, they could envisage pipelines in the ground underneath their feet. Machine learning algorithms rifling through pipeline data could predict tiny cracks based on pressure drops. This data could be fed to workers, helping them home in on defects and streamline maintenance and repair processes.

The tech isn't replacing the worker; it's augmenting their capabilities, driving greater productivity and enhancing the employee experience.

Providing workforce autonomy

The renewed zeal for people-powered and human-centric technology investment unleashes a new trend: the democratization of technology, named by 91% of respondents as a priority (26% as a business-critical priority). We can see the push to decentralize ideation and development in an effort to give workers greater control and input over the technologies they use daily.

This approach is born from a growing recognition that bringing those who work with technologies closer to selection and implementation is beneficial. In particular, employees are far more likely to engage with technologies they have had a hand in implementing.

This boosts the return on value of technology investments, which has often been held back by adoption challenges. In fact, our analysis of the Economist Impact research shows respondents face a value challenge: Of those respondents that had implemented each of the technologies in the study, almost half say they are not achieving significant value from their technology investments. Greater adoption could change that ratio for the better.

Take automation as an example. When the workers most aligned with processes and touchpoints are brought into the selection process, they can highlight areas in which the technology offers the most value. This not only improves the value of the tech investment but also reassures employees that the initiative is intended to augment the value they bring to the organization, not to replace them.

A related technology investment to watch is the increased popularity of no-code/low-code platforms, which 62% of respondents say they've adopted or plan to adopt. These tools enable business users to develop solutions with little or no background in software development, which allow the people closest to the customer or the problem to take a direct hand in solution development.

This is a shift we will see develop considerably in coming years, particularly as leaders strive to build technology environments that empower workers rather than displace them.

Empowering the workforce with data, tools and control

In a world of rapid technology acceleration, it is little surprise that businesses are ramping up investment in technology—whether to power a new insight engine or to replace creaky technologies.

While technology may form the cornerstone of investment strategies, the overarching goal is to bring the data and insights to employees to help them deliver better results. The future must bring humans and technology closer than ever, so they can respond intuitively to the changing world around them.



To learn more, read our report on “[How to be fit for the future](#)”, or [contact us](#).

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