



Summer 2021 Fortune/Deloitte CEO Survey

Building on hope: Bold plans

The Summer 2021 installment of the Fortune/Deloitte CEO Survey finds that CEOs have bold plans that evolved from their hope for 2021.

Building on hope: Bold plans

[In January](#), CEOs described 2021 as the year of hope. Six months later, the latest results from the Summer 2021 Fortune/Deloitte CEO Survey appear to show that their hope has evolved into bold plans for growth, innovation, digital transformation, and workforce and talent transformation, as well as persistent attention to the climate agenda, continued progress on DEI, and elevated concern for cybersecurity and all things talent.

In the latest Fortune/Deloitte CEO Survey, 110 leading CEOs representing more than 15 industries shared a perspective on the new shape of a CEO agenda that may lead organizations out of the pandemic.

A time for confident growth

While CEOs may be divided on the duration of pandemic business effects more generally, their bullish outlook on the future of their own organizations is remarkably in sync. Seventy-seven percent of CEOs say they expect their organization's growth to be strong over the next 12 months. About a third say "very strong," about half say "strong," and about a quarter expect only "modest" growth. Notably, no CEOs are expecting anything less ("weak" or "very weak").

CEOs are optimistic about the year ahead, expecting strong growth fueled by innovation and pent-up consumer demand. Key to achieving their growth goals will be an intense focus on sustaining the momentum of their digital transformations, as well as optimizing new workplace models to attract and retain a world-class workforce. All things tech and talent will dominate the CEO agenda throughout 2021 and beyond.

— Joe Ucuzoglu, Chief Executive Officer,
Deloitte US

CEOs' expectations for growth are consistent with their past expectations, as indicated in January 2021, when seven of 10 CEOs stated that their revenues and employees never declined, already recovered, or would recover to precrisis levels by June 2021.

What do CEOs expect to fuel their organizations' business success over the next 12 months? When asked to pick their top three drivers, more than half of CEO respondents give roughly equal credit to innovation or new products and to the application of technology (such as digital transformation or artificial intelligence (AI)). Just shy of 40% expect accelerated or pent-up consumer demand to drive business success this year, and one in three CEOs expect to reap the benefits of increased operational efficiencies (e.g., hybrid workforce). Fewer than 20% expect business success to come from M&A, price increases, increases in public spending, or geographic expansion.

A time to drive change

It's clear that CEOs have big plans for their organizations. Perhaps after a year of being disrupted by external forces, CEOs are ready to take control. On average, CEOs say their organization is undergoing or preparing for 3.26 concurrent transformations, reorganizations, or other large-scale initiatives.

Mirroring the expected increase in spending on technology modernization and AI, nearly three out of four CEOs say their organizations are undergoing or preparing for digital transformation. A close second, 71% of CEOs say the same for workforce and talent transformation.

Underscoring a persistent focus on the climate agenda—and consistent with the majority of CEOs who plan to increase their level of spending in sustainability—46% of CEOs say their organizations are undergoing or preparing for sustainability-focused strategy transformation.

A time to stay alert

CEOs have a responsibility to stay attuned to dynamic external forces that shape the environment in which their organizations compete—and mitigate the related risks. When asked about the relevance of various topics to their CEO agenda, at least half of surveyed CEOs indicate that social issues, fiscal policy, tax policy, climate change, and public health are all moderately or highly relevant.

The two extreme outliers? Cybersecurity at one end, with more than four out of five CEOs saying it is moderately or highly relevant to their CEO agenda; and, despite what recent news cycles may suggest, cryptocurrency at the other end, with the majority of CEOs saying it is not at all relevant.

A time to influence

How and when do CEOs decide to use their voice or stay silent? When asked to select the top three factors they use to decide whether or not to take a vocal stand on social or societal issues, more than four out of five CEOs say they consider alignment with their organization's strategy, purpose, and values—in contrast with about a third who say they consider alignment with their personal values and conscience. It's clear that surveyed CEOs consider themselves to be a conduit for the purpose of their organization, and not the other way around.

A time to prove commitment to DEI

[In June 2020](#), 62% of CEOs said they planned to make policy changes in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. In January 2021, the CEO commitment to DEI still appeared strong. At that time, 94% of CEOs agreed that DEI was a personal strategic priority, 90% of CEOs agreed that their organization aspired to be an industry leader in DEI, and 72% of CEOs planned to disclose DEI metrics to the public.

Fast forward to June 2021, and CEOs are already claiming victory on a few items. More than half of CEOs say that they have completed the following: building DEI into their strategic priorities and goals as CEO; incorporating DEI into corporate strategy, not just talent strategy; setting measurable targets for progress toward DEI goals as an executive team; and disclosing DEI metrics to their employees.

The challenges ahead (it's all about people)

When asked about the biggest challenge they face today, CEOs named one above all others: talent, in nearly every form. Attracting, hiring, retaining, developing, growing, and engaging talent; succession planning; the war for talent; and more constituted one out of every four responses.

The remaining responses covered the gamut of issues from social responsibility to regulatory environment to supply challenges, with some notable clustering around the challenges of multistakeholder management and time management, both of which have come to the forefront during the pandemic.

Considering the full set of responses across the survey, perhaps CEOs are reflecting a more profound appreciation of the connection between technology and talent. With technological advancement and digital disruption in mind, CEOs are setting their sights on multiple possibilities for transforming their organizations. But their desired outcomes may only be achievable with a transformed workforce: one that is even *more* highly skilled, diverse, agile, and engaged and prioritizes well-being and purpose more than ever before.

A year and a half into a devastating global pandemic experience that still hasn't quite ended, CEOs are clear: the challenge ahead is *us*.

View key highlights from the [survey](#)

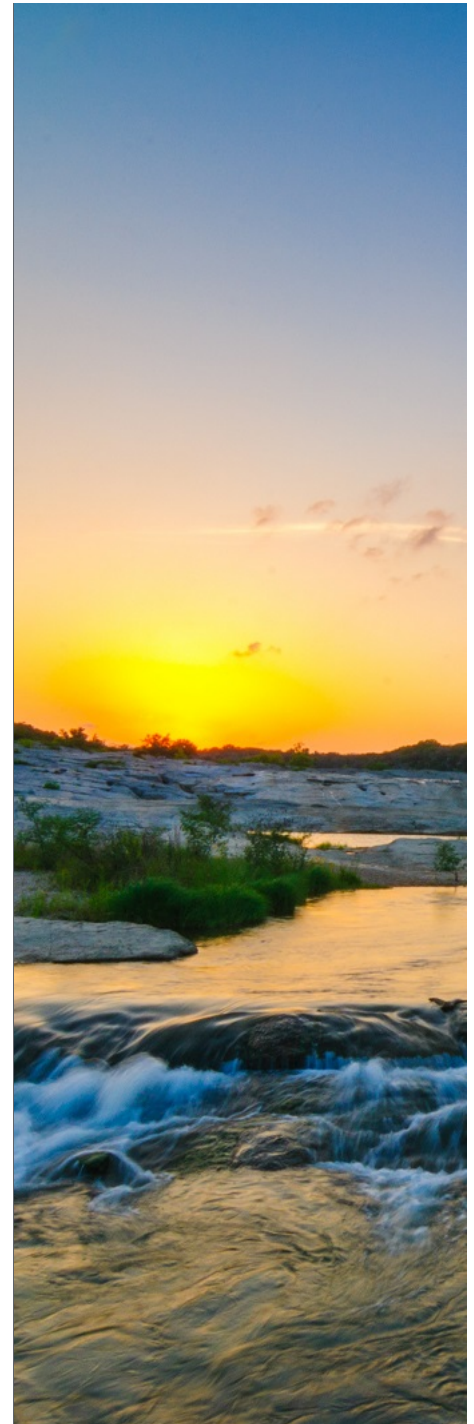
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