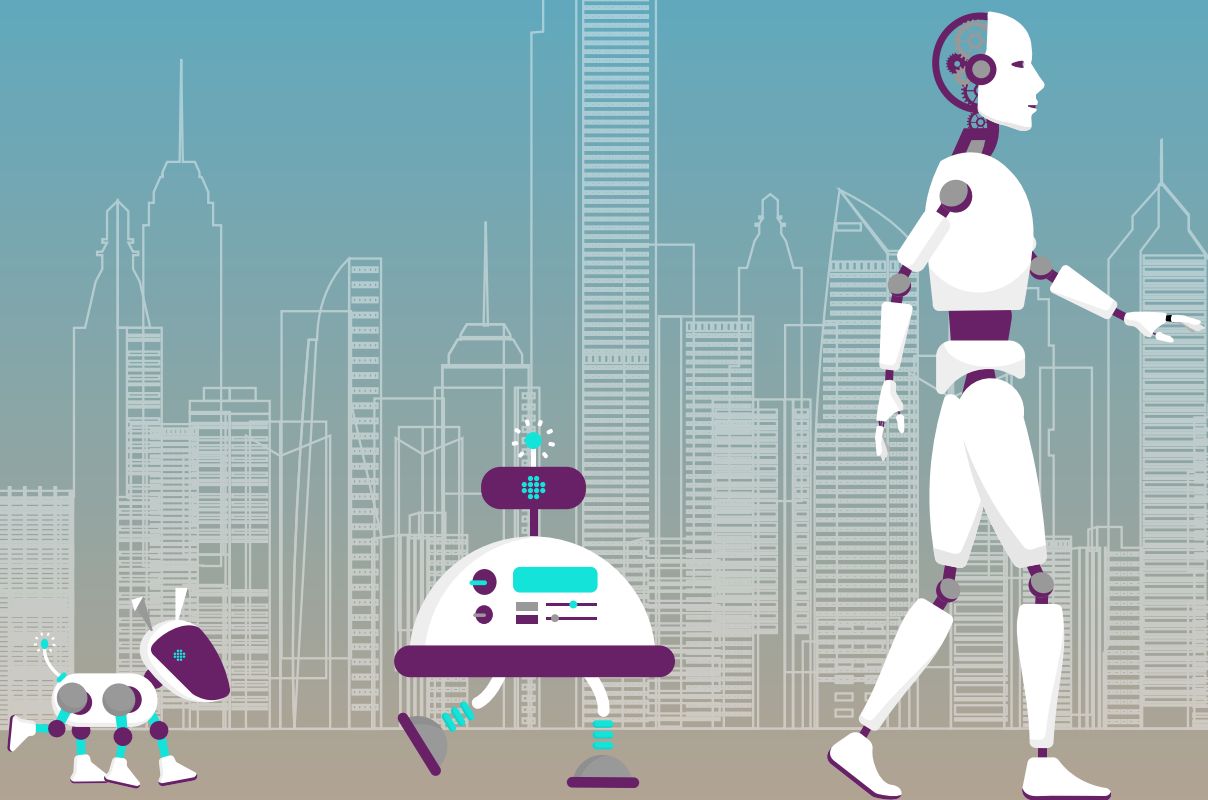


The Next Stage of Digital Evolution



When investing for the future, businesses must ensure they are using technology in a way that helps them achieve their organisational purpose. Leaders tell **Emma Carroll** how they are doing this by upskilling the workforce and building partnerships



The past 18 months have accelerated the Fourth Industrial Revolution. As part of this, businesses around the world have been forced to review their operating models and make decisions about technology, people and organisational agility.

At [Critical Eye's virtual CEO Retreat 2021](#), which was held in association with [Capita](#) and [Brewin Dolphin](#), business leaders discussed how they have invested in the future while bringing their stakeholders along with them.

Here are their five tips on leading a successful digital journey within your business:

1. Align Tech Investment with Your Purpose

Successful businesses have clung tight to their purpose while navigating the complexity of the past year. **Karen Reddington**, Regional President of FedEx Express Europe, says, "You must make sure you're not just following the latest trend, because a lot of words like digitisation and AI get thrown about. Instead, make sure that you're always tying your investment back to what you're trying to achieve as an organisation."

Gráinne Watson, Digital Centre of Excellence Director at Capita plc, also advocates a clear link between investment in tech and your strategy: "Everything you do should be leading towards your vision, so it's about assessing that and then asking what technology can help you achieve it. Technology can do what we ask it to – the problem is we don't always ask it the right questions."

“You must make sure you're not just following the latest trend, because a lot of words like digitisation and AI get thrown about”

2. Think Long term

If organisations invest in a tactical way, rather than thinking strategically, the results can be suboptimal with islands of disconnected digital capability and poorer returns in the long run.

Gráinne explains: "The main issue I see is short-term decision making from the C-suite. They are thinking about two or three years rather than five or six. That means you are putting fires out, but not seeing what ignited the fire."

She continues: "If you start looking for the accelerant, you can see that those fires exist across your estate and it tends to be one accelerant that's making it happen, such as bad processes.

"Before we undertake any digital work, we use [a] process and task planner to view the landscape before we touch any of it. Because the C-suite is looking from 30,000 feet, they're not getting into that level of detail."

However, when thinking long term, it is still important to have smaller wins along the way to bring people with you. "The beauty of digital is you can undertake a large five-or-six-year transformation plan, but you will start to see return on investment extremely quickly," **Gráinne** says.

3. Invest in the Right Skills

There are some skills that are set to command a premium in the digital world. **Gráinne** explains: "Data, automation and DevOps* are the three skills that every organisation needs more of. If you're doing any kind of transformation journey, those digital skills are the glue that will get you from where you are today to where you need to be."

Gráinne says that upskilling your own workforce is the best way to gain these abilities. "When we started our transformation journey at Capita, we quickly understood that we had to start training people in what automation was and how it would help them. We trained automation champions in every part of the business and they trained other people."

These shared skills can help build a culture of innovation in your business. "We're trying to create citizen developers," **Gráinne** says. "That means teaching everyone who works for you one of these additional data skills. >



You start with power BI [business intelligence], then machine learning, and finally you move on to AI.”

To thrive in the longer term, CEOs must prioritise their people strategy. “Ask what your organisation is going to look like five years down the line,” **Karen** advises. “You must bring in your CHRO and make sure you are planning the workforce together.”

4. Build Partnerships

Think widely about where the best tech solutions can come from.

Matthew Blagg, CEO at Criticaleye, says you shouldn’t try to solve everything in isolation. “You need to pull external thinking into your organisation, whether it is through building partnerships, learning from experts or benchmarking with your peers,” he states.

Better collaboration is crucial *within* organisations too, especially complex, global ones, and can help you respond to issues at pace. “Collaborative video tools, chat tools and applications like Teams have allowed us to connect quickly across the globe,” **Karen** says. “If there’s something happening in China or Europe, we have the ability to quickly get everybody on a call or have open streams of information and be able to connect with each other.”

The past year has established some ways of working and behaviours that businesses won’t want to reverse. “When I look back and see how we’ve dealt with issues in the past, the last year was different because of the higher level of collaboration and the ability to connect much more easily,” **Karen** says.

“Everything you do should be leading towards your vision”

5. Don’t Forget the Human Touch

While the power of digital is unquestionable, it needs to be paired with in-person interaction. **Alistair Phillips-Davies**, CEO of energy business SSE, says that while leaders can operate well virtually, they still miss out on the subtleties provided by body language in the physical world.

“It’s important the Board feels [it] can go out and touch and feel an organisation. Virtual works transactionally but it isn’t as good for getting those personal relationships so that [NEDs] really feel they can know and understand a wider range of people, particularly below the executive,” he says.

SSE has used innovative ways of learning from the frontline at a time when social distancing has limited travel. “We’ve done things like safety visits to an onshore windfarm, where people can wear headsets as they climb up and do basic maintenance, while we can see what they’re doing. We are able to hear and interact with them,” **Alistair** says.

Matthew acknowledges an eagerness to get back to the physical workplace. “I don’t think there is an executive in the world that thinks strategic debate is as strong virtually as it is when executives can meet in person,” he says. “Leadership teams must get back together as soon as they can and debate the pressing issues around alignment, pace and what hybrid working will look like in the longer term.” ■

* DevOps is the combination of culture and practices that allows businesses to develop and deliver new tech services at pace.

You can view Criticaleye’s latest CEO Research 2022 results [here](#).

Key findings include:

- 67% of CEOs feel isolated in their role
- 77% of CEOs say more time should be spent on long-term planning
- 93% of CEOs say mentoring improves executive performance

Featuring Commentary From:



Matthew Blagg
CEO
Criticaleye



Alistair Phillips-Davies
CEO
SSE



Karen Reddington
Regional President
FedEx Express Europe



Gráinne Watson
Digital CoE Director
Capita plc

Contact the contributors through:
www.criticaleye.com