Forbes insights

Accelerated Enterprise:

Leading And Winning With The New Hybrid Workforce

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Introduction

The global pandemic has upended traditional workforce models—perhaps forever.

With many employees now permanently in remote or hybrid situations, business leaders must adapt to and drive growth in a new environment. A survey—conducted by Forbes Insights and Adobe—of 505 senior digital and technology executives (known collectively as chief information officers, or CIOs) from North America and Europe shows that mastering employee- and customer-facing workflows may be the most critical success factor.

Most organizations have used workflow automation programs in some form or another for years (such as the enterprise resource planning and customer relationship management systems of the 1980s and 1990s), but the Covid-19 pandemic has thrust them into the limelight as a solution to a burgeoning problem: a near-complete transformation of the workplace. Businesses have always had remote or virtual workforces, but they were never as widespread as they are now—or as likely to pose challenges to security, collaboration and innovation.

This report summarizes our key research findings on CIOs' current and future use of digital workflows, their priorities and their role in driving transformation and the strategic growth of the enterprise. The report identifies a subset of organizations with behaviors and characteristics that lead to superior performance outcomes, such as higher productivity, better collaboration, more efficient operations, improved customer experience metrics and higher security.

"It's critical that organizations are prioritizing systems and business processes that improve employee experience as we transition into a hybrid digital workforce," says Cynthia Stoddard, senior vice president and chief information officer at Adobe, "since happy employees and satisfied customers lead to overall business success."
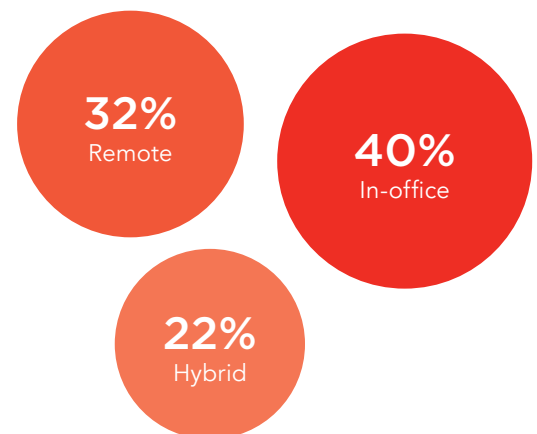
Positive Impact Of Workflow Automation

At their most basic level, workflow programs automate manual tasks that can be time-consuming, such as data entry, allowing employees to focus on higher-value tasks.

These programs also contain features to improve communication, collaboration and productivity, as well as enhance the employee and customer experience. For example, common employee-facing processes that can be digitized through workflow solutions include document signatures and approvals, purchase orders and expense claims. More advanced systems are frequently seen on the customer side, such as mobile payments, online shopping platforms, omnichannel experiences, assisted service through chatbots and smarter customer service using artificial intelligence (AI).

The CIOs surveyed said only 29% of their company's workforce is currently working in-office, compared to 60% in 2019. Nearly half of their workforce currently works from home, and, in two years, executives expect their workforce to be a mix of remote (32%), in-office (40%) and a hybrid of the two (22%). Nearly nine out of ten CIOs see workflow solutions as very important to succeed in managing a hybrid work structure, with 32% saying they are critical to success.

Organizations that have substantially adopted digital workflows see a highly positive impact on productivity, security, revenue and engagement. Perhaps the most visible performance improvement is the result of customer and employee-facing workflow programs. For most organizations, employee-facing workflow programs have helped improve insight into employee workflow efficiency, adoption of workflows, productivity and engagement. Customer-facing workflow programs have had a similar impact by reducing transaction or service times, improving customer satisfaction and increasing revenue.

Nearly half of their workforce currently works from home, and, in two years, executives expect their workforce to be:

32% Remote

40% In-office

22% Hybrid

Nearly nine out of ten CIOs see workflow solutions as very important to succeed in managing a hybrid work structure, with 32% saying they are critical to success.

90%

32%

Figure 1

How CIOs rate the success of employee-facing workflow programs on each of the following criteria:

(% of CIOs rating "highly successful" or "extremely successful")

Employee adoption
of workflow — **81%**

Improved insight into efficiency
of employee workflow — **76%**

Greater cybersecurity — **75%**

Improving employee
engagement — **75%**

Increasing productivity — **75%**

Increasing revenue — **74%**

Reducing complexity by
leveraging integrations — **73%**
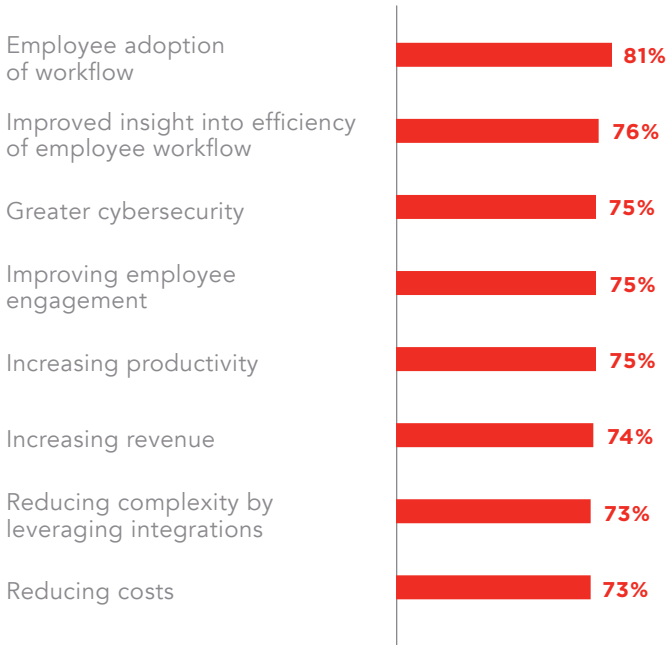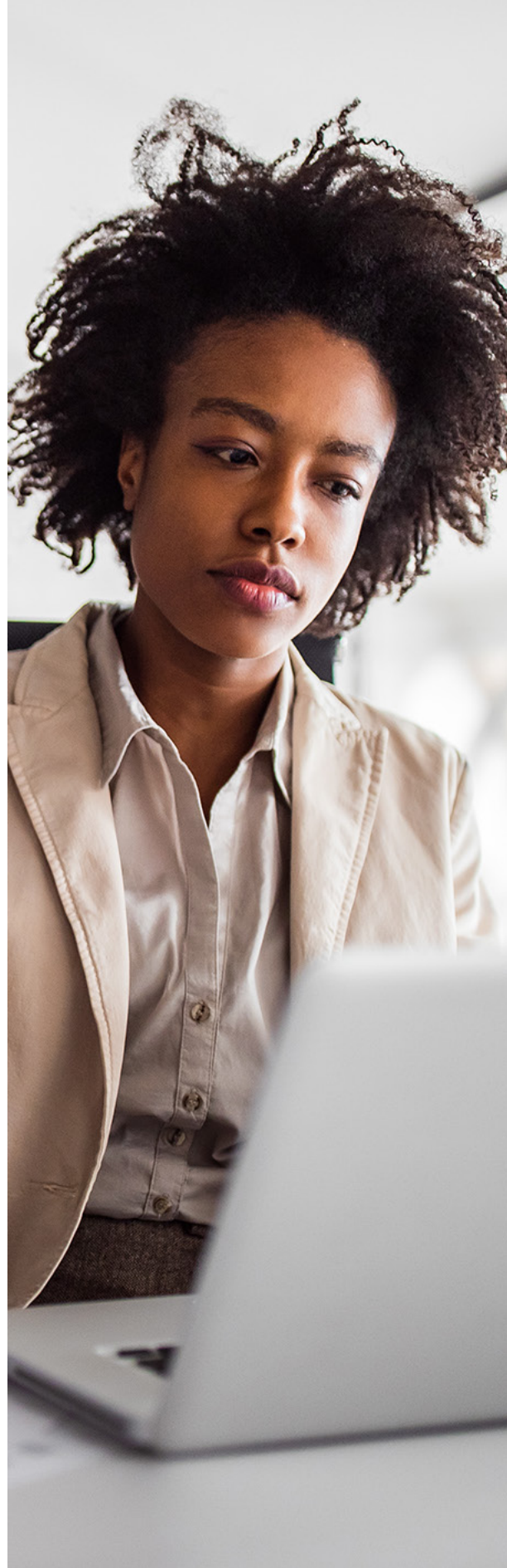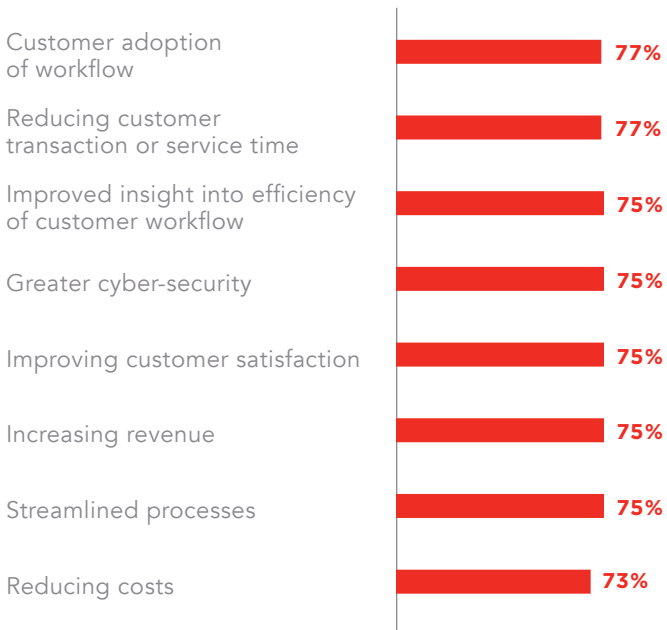
Reducing costs — **73%**

Figure 2

How CIOs rate the success of customer-facing workflow programs on each of the following criteria:

(% of CIOs rating "highly successful" or "extremely successful")

Customer adoption
of workflow — **77%**

Reducing customer
transaction or service time — **77%**

Improved insight into efficiency
of customer workflow — **75%**

Greater cyber-security — **75%**

Improving customer satisfaction — **75%**

Increasing revenue — **75%**

Streamlined processes — **75%**

Reducing costs — **73%**

Connected Employee And Customer Experience

The majority of CIOs say both employee- and customer-facing workflow programs are important for increasing operating efficiencies and productivity over the next two years.

Executives also agree that both programs have a positive impact on each other. Nearly three-quarters of CIOs say that an improved employee experience with digital workflows translates to better customer service.

In its quarterly Voice of the Enterprise survey, 451 Research asked respondents which aspects of their work could be improved with automation. The top five responses were: integration of applications across workflows, surfacing information when it is needed, assigning people to projects based on their skills and availability, reporting the progress of work against goals and automation to improve the creation of documents, spreadsheets and slides.

"What we're ultimately seeing is that the employee experience and the customer experience draw on these five parallel themes," says Forrest. "We've seen this for a much longer time in the customer space. When I go to my favorite website that I have an account with, it presents relevant ads.

"Employee experience is really the new customer experience and vice versa."

CONNER FORREST
senior research analyst,
451 Research, a part of
S&P Global Market Intelligence

The same is starting to be true in the employee experience when we serve up relevant work tools. There is an impact on the employee when you invest in the customer. And vice versa: When you invest in the employee, that has an impact on the customer as well."

CIOs understand that workflow solutions may have been undervalued historically, but the Covid-19 pandemic has underscored their importance going forward. Executives expect to increase investment in both employee- and customer-facing workflow solutions for future success: 87% plan to increase their budget for workflow solutions in the coming year.

Where to make that investment, however, is a difficult decision. "There could be hundreds of different use cases where different workflows are needed," says Simon Longbottom, vice president of creative cloud, strategy and services at Adobe. "It's really about trying to understand what the biggest pain points are and solving them. We've typically found that problems fall into the two main buckets of employee or customer. I think what we want to do is understand the pain point and then try to help with a very simple solution."

This approach most commonly involves automating forms and signatures, such as those a healthcare provider or car dealer may require. This gives employees more time to perform higher-value activities, including spending more time with customers.

"The workflow stitches together multiple steps into a really seamless end-to-end journey or experience," Longbottom says, "which is what we all want either as customers or as employees."

Greater Integration And Collaboration

CIOs are concerned that a hybrid work environment has a negative impact on various functions throughout the enterprise.

Survey respondents believe effective team collaboration (39%) and security (36%) are most prone to underperformance or failure. Cyber risk (23%) and increased IT costs (22%) are the greatest technology-related challenges in a hybrid environment, along with overstressed IT staff (13%).

Collaboration is a concern for employees as well, says Forrest.

"The challenge of communicating and collaborating with co-workers continues to build in terms of friction," he says. "So if you're thinking about new tools or ways to approach how to integrate work across those applications, you should maybe look for tools that prioritize integrating data from multiple applications."

Application programming interface (API) integration has a significant impact on how effective a particular solution is. Tom Rodden, senior vice president and CIO at Varian Medical Systems, believes that the success of a workflow program is best gauged by how much it reduces the need for human intervention.

Providing integration is an important competitive advantage for system vendors, adds Rodden. "One of the keys to maintaining your position, I think, is establishing that API integration and being a seamless solution. There's a lot of value to a centralized managed integration hub for workflows," he says.

"The primary purpose of a workflow system is integration. When your workflow is well designed, cross-application integration becomes seamless to your users—your cross-application integration really sings and dances, and the need for human intervention drops significantly."

TOM RODDEN
senior vice president and CIO,
Varian Medical Systems

Intelligent Workflow Ecosystems

Advanced workflow programs based on AI, machine learning or robotic process automation are still not widespread.

On average, they are performing only 15% of the work being done today, a share that is expected to increase to 17% in the next two years. But as workflow technologies become more sophisticated, systems will become more unified and allow for greater collaboration across all types of applications and workforces.

"How can we help our customers be more successful with the tools we provide so that they can create even better things? We invest a lot of time and effort in making sure we're integrated with the right tools," Longbottom says. "For these workflows to work nicely together, they've got to flow seamlessly across different applications."

In the future, workflow solutions will function as integrated ecosystems that offer a holistic space for creation and cross-functional collaboration. The research firm IDC calls this "an intelligent digital workspace," according to Holly Muscolino, research vice president of content strategies and the future of work at IDC. This type of workspace, she says, would be a hub of device- and location-independent technologies that are essential to a hybrid workforce.

"Many organizations started to ramp up technologies like robotic process automation, putting together automation centers of excellence, even before the pandemic," she says. "Such centers of excellence can serve as a source for not only deploying technologies but also for best practices across the organization."

Looking Ahead: Digital Workflow Maturity

More than three-quarters of CIOs indicate they have made solid progress in meeting their company's goals for employee- and customer-facing workflow automation, with about a third indicating they have fully completed their efforts (39% and 34%, respectively).

But challenges persist. Information technology team bandwidth (18%) and maintaining cybersecurity (17%) are the greatest barriers to increasing transformation using workflow solutions. Implementation across organizational silos (11%) is yet another obstacle.

"To be successful, organizations should experiment with and evaluate new ways to leverage automation in order to enhance employee experience, and free teams to tackle work more efficiently and strategically," says Stoddard.

In a maturity model developed from the survey—based on CIOs' progress toward achieving their company's goals around employee- and customer-facing workflow automation—a group of leaders (18% of respondents) emerged who have fully completed automation of both employee- and customer-facing workflow solutions. More than half of leaders say workflow solutions are critical to success in managing a hybrid structure, compared to less than a third of other CIOs. In fact, 53% of leaders are increasing their budget for workflow solutions by 10% or more in the coming year, compared to 30% of everyone else.

"In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, there was a knee-jerk reaction to get systems installed as quickly as possible," says Muscolino. "Organizations now need to go back and evaluate what's worked and what hasn't to make sure they're fully leveraging these technologies. It's possible to simply digitize a manual process, which doesn't mean that you're fully leveraging digital technology."

Muscolino adds that organizations now have a unique opportunity to examine what systems may need reengineering and what should be eliminated altogether.

"Workflow solutions should be codified so they're not just an ad hoc solution to a crisis," she says. "They need to be designed into an organization's infrastructure and plans going forward."

Figure 3

The Maturity Model:

The survey respondents were divided into four groups based on their progress toward achieving their organizations' workflow automation goals:

Group	Progress toward automation	Percentage of respondents
Leaders	Fully completed employee- and customer-facing workflow automation	**18%**
Fast followers	Significant progress toward employee- and customer-facing workflow automation	**32%**
In development	Some progress toward employee- and customer-facing workflow automation	**36%**
Laggards	Minimal to no progress toward employee- and/ or customer-facing workflow automation	**13%**

Based on analysis of the maturity model, it is evident that companies with greater workflow maturity are more likely to find workflow solutions effective in managing a distributed, hybrid work structure. More than half (52%) of leaders say workflow solutions are critical to success in managing a hybrid structure, compared to less than a third of other CIOs. Business outcomes are also significantly more positive for leaders who have experienced higher company revenue growth, an increased rate of product/service releases and improvements in customer metrics (see Figures 4 and 5).

Looking ahead, organizations that employ automation and integrated workflows will be better positioned to create a sustainable competitive advantage and long-term growth. The manual processes of the past achieved productivity but often at the expense of employee engagement and satisfaction.

Workflow automation boosts productivity without diminishing the employee experience, says Muscolino. "It benefits business continuity, digital resilience, adaptability and agility," she says. "And that will take us into the future."

Figure 4

How CIOs rate employee-facing workflow programs on each of the following criteria
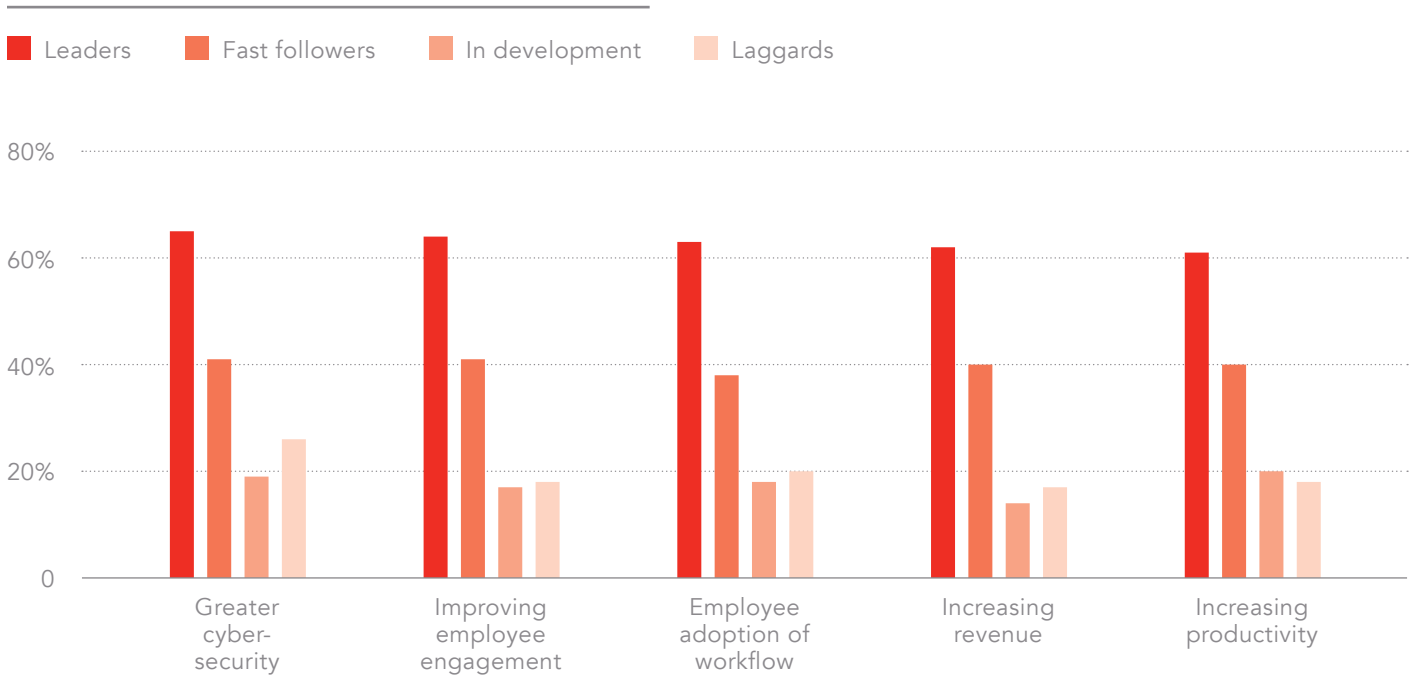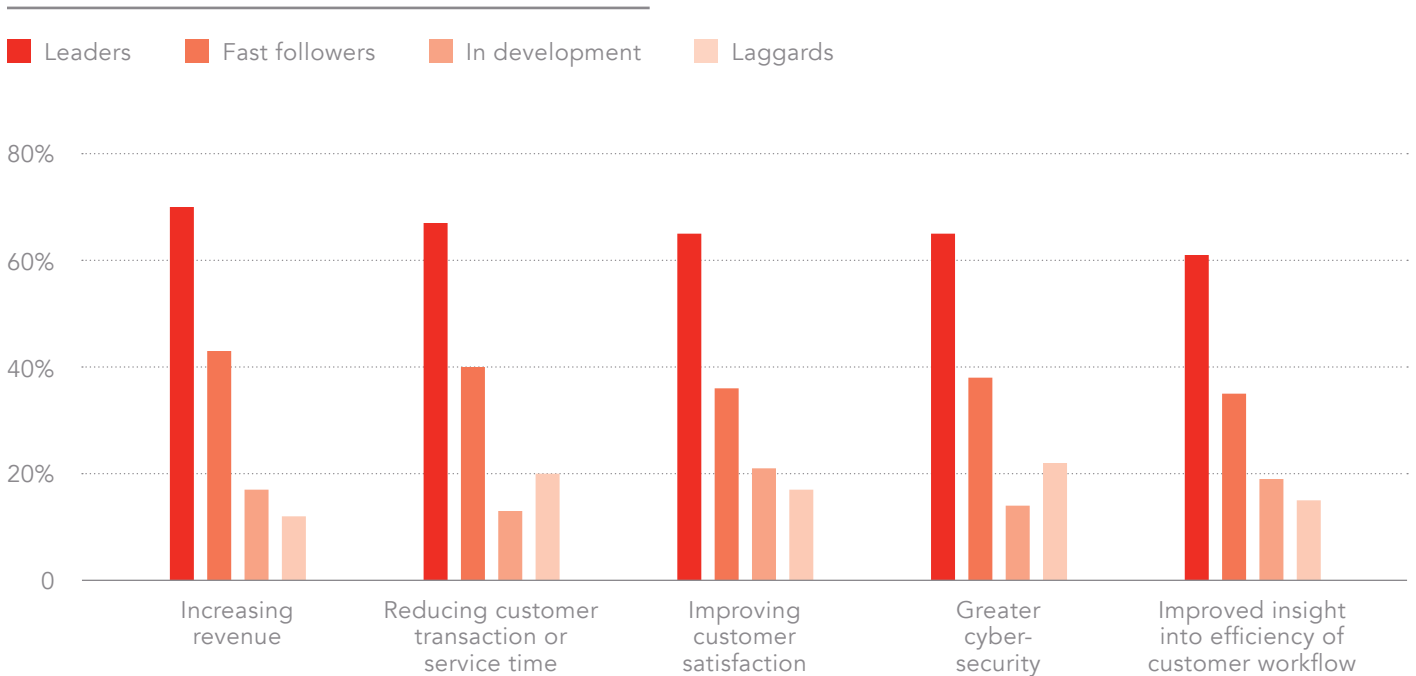
(percentage who say "extremely successful")

■ Leaders　　■ Fast followers　　■ In development　　■ Laggards

Greater cyber-security | Improving employee engagement | Employee adoption of workflow | Increasing revenue | Increasing productivity

Figure 5

How CIOs rate customer-facing workflow programs on each of the following criteria

(percentage who that say "extremely successful")

■ Leaders　　■ Fast followers　　■ In development　　■ Laggards

Increasing revenue | Reducing customer transaction or service time | Improving customer satisfaction | Greater cyber-security | Improved insight into efficiency of customer workflow

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