

The AI-empowered CIO

What it takes to succeed as a CIO in the age of AI



Ashwin Ballal
CIO,
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Wendy Turner-Williams
Former Chief
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Introduction

Today's CIOs are expected to be innovation and strategy leaders, not just great stewards of technology and engineering. As AI and automation start to permeate every function of business, organizations from top to bottom are increasingly turning to CIOs for direction.

In this guide, we've gathered insights from four CIOs and tech leaders about what it takes to succeed in these critical roles. One core belief of Ashwin Ballal, CIO at Freshworks, is that in an AI-obsessed world marked by endless complexity, the power of subtraction—reducing the complexity of the tech stack, IT services, and employee experience—might be a CIO's new secret weapon.

The hard truth is that your employees and customers don't care about your AI apps and capabilities—only the outcomes and experiences they provide. As Ballal notes, delivering on those expectations requires a human-centered approach to AI and leading with empathy, not just leading-edge technology.

CIOs today are arguably the lead architects of employee experience, not the tech stack. Each of these leaders demonstrates that in the AI era, outcomes and experience matter more than perfect implementation, and prioritizing human needs over technological capabilities should be a governing philosophy.

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Empathy is a leadership strategy in the age of AI



Ashwin Ballal

CIO of Freshworks

Ashwin Ballal has enough experience outside of IT to give him “more empathy for other functions than most folks who grew up within IT,” he says. That’s because his unconventional career path took him through sales, marketing, engineering, and general management before becoming CIO at Freshworks. Today, he calls himself the “accidental CIO.”

Ballal’s journey equipped him with a rare perspective. Having worked across multiple business areas, he genuinely understands the daily frustrations and challenges of every department his technology serves. This people-first mentality isn’t just about being nice—it’s about being effective.

“If I can provide great experiences through the systems and services that I provide internally, that gets an employee excited to provide great customer experiences externally,” Ballal explains, drawing a direct line between employee experience and customer outcomes. By putting himself in users’ shoes, he’s able to identify and eliminate pain points that technically-minded CIOs might never notice.

This empathetic approach becomes especially crucial when implementing AI solutions. While many IT leaders are quick to deploy sophisticated AI technologies, Ballal emphasizes understanding the human element first. “AI is often a solution looking for a problem,” he says.

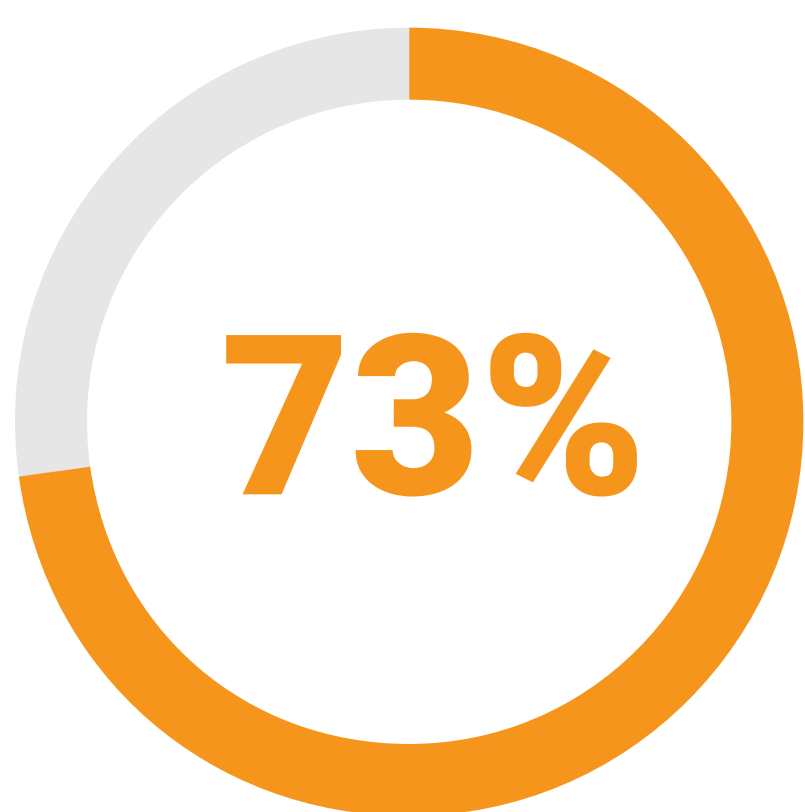
“The human mind has the tendency to make it more complex than it has to be. So I always say, let’s go back to the basics. Let’s keep it simple because that’s what everyone knows.”

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AI is often a solution looking for a problem.

His empathy-first philosophy helps separate valuable AI use cases from technological novelties—a distinction that's particularly important as many IT organizational budgets have remained static. In response, his team has become more innovative in optimizing their technology environment to free up funds from other areas, such as by not renewing certain software licenses, in order to invest in AI initiatives that deliver genuine, predictable value with no surprises. Ballal notes that this financial constraint imposes a necessary discipline that many organizations currently lack.

For CIOs navigating the AI landscape, Ballal offers a path that begins with human understanding rather than technical specs. Empathy allows leaders to recognize which AI solutions will quickly and meaningfully improve employee and customer experiences versus those that merely add complexity. In an era obsessed with building more, the leaders who will thrive are those with the emotional intelligence to understand what users actually need—and the courage to build less, but better, creating uncomplicated solutions that deliver on their promises.



Nearly three-fourths of employees say they trust their IT team to ensure their AI delivers quality results.

[Freshworks Global AI Workplace Report](#)

Takeaways:

- Diverse experience cultivates the empathy needed to build technology that solves real problems, not just technical puzzles.
- Empathetic systems create engaged employees who deliver exceptional customer experiences—technology with heart drives business results.
- Empathy separates AI that serves genuine needs from solutions searching for problems, especially when resources are limited.

Resources:

- [Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less](#) by Greg McKeown
- [Subtract: The Untapped Science of Less](#) by Leidy Klotz
- [The Emotionally Intelligent Leader](#) by Daniel Goleman

Make AI adoption a collaborative, team effort

Jess Evans

Vice Chancellor & CIO,
Maricopa Community Colleges



In a landscape where vendors slap “AI-powered” on everything from chatbots to coffee machines, CIOs must take a critical eye to every new technology, and create guidelines that will keep the organization safe and align to its goals.

“If we’re not careful, we risk falling into AI-washing—where AI is more of a marketing tool than a practical asset,” says Jess Evas, vice chancellor and CIO of Maricopa Community Colleges and longtime technology leader in higher education.

The key is to establish rules and processes for responsible AI implementation and innovation. CIOs should establish clear verification processes for AI outputs rather than treating them as definitive answers, she says. It will help to implement systems to identify and correct AI errors before they become embedded and create biases. Finally, ensure your data teams understand both structured and unstructured data management, as data quality directly impacts AI performance.

Evans also stresses the importance of cross-functional collaboration when implementing AI. By partnering with business units to understand their specific challenges, CIOs can identify strategic applications that deliver rapid impact without unnecessary complexity.

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Responsible AI means verifying outputs, correcting errors, and training teams to see the big picture.

This people-first approach requires training teams not just on technical skills but on understanding the interdependencies between systems—what Evans calls “knowledge complexity”—to anticipate how AI implementations might affect different parts of the organization.

By adopting these responsible innovation practices, organizations can harness AI’s potential while maintaining control over its implementation—moving quickly but thoughtfully toward solutions that amplify human capabilities rather than attempting to replace them or create unintended consequences.



#1 outcome from investing in responsible AI practices is enhanced customer experience.

[PwC’s Responsible AI survey](#)

Takeaways:

- Establish rigorous verification processes for AI outputs to avoid “best guess” results from AI systems.
- The quality of your structured and unstructured data directly impacts AI performance and prevents cascading biases.
- Partner with business units to identify where AI can deliver rapid impact and ensure teams understand system interdependencies.

Resources:

- [AI Ethics \(MIT Press\)](#), by Mark Coeckelbergh
- [Trustworthy AI](#), by Beena Ammanath
- [Trust](#), by Dominique Shelton Leipzig

Without governance, AI stalls out



Wendy Turner-Williams

Former Chief Data Officer, Tableau

Even the most powerful AI isn't much good when your team hits execution snags. Wendy Turner-Williams, who has navigated this landscape since the early 2000s from Microsoft to Tableau and now as CEO of TheAssociation.AI, says that approximately 85% of data science initiatives never reach production. The culprit isn't usually technology limitations but something more fundamental—inadequate governance frameworks.

"There are major risks, not just for a specific company but across entire populations," warns Wendy Turner-Williams, CEO of TheAssociation.AI and former Chief Data Officer at Tableau. "Unfortunately, regulations and legal systems are lagging behind innovation. It's going to take something major to really spotlight what needs to be in place."

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When you're implementing AI, you don't just declare 'we're AI-ing the company.'

New risk landscapes—from algorithmic bias to copyright issues—require governance approaches that many boards aren't prepared to address.

Turner-Williams says effective AI governance requires a framework that addresses three critical dimensions:

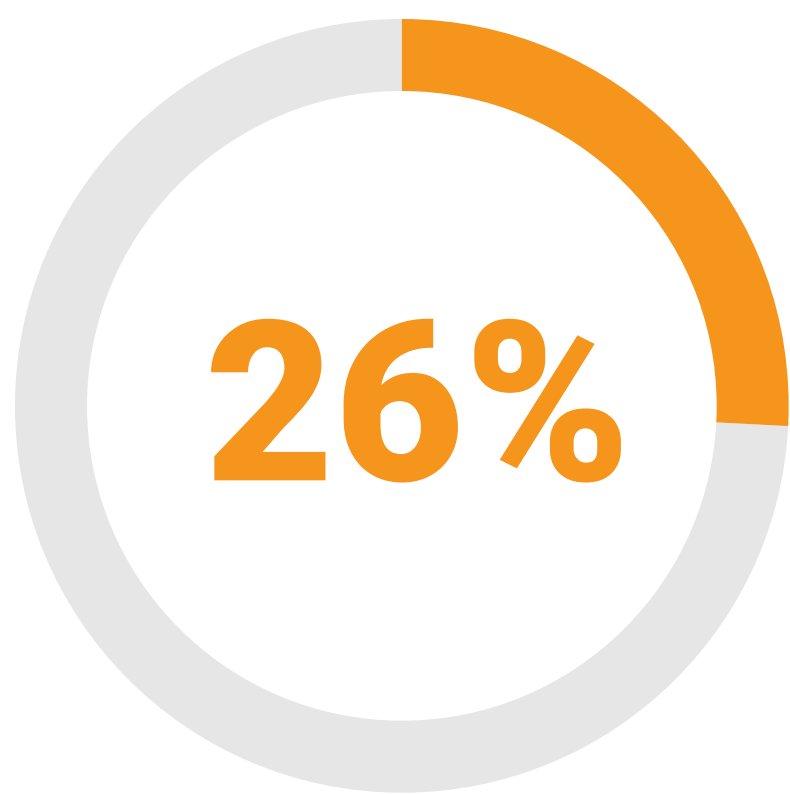
- **Cross-team collaboration:** Bring technical and business stakeholders together and establish clear ownership and desired outcomes. This eliminates translation errors when handing a project from one department to another.
- **Data quality fundamentals:** Evaluate where the organization genuinely has sufficient business process maturity and data reliability. Identify specific use cases where AI can deliver measurable value within weeks rather than years.

- **Transparent parameter setting:** Establish clear guidelines for data usage and model outputs upfront. This creates accountability and transparency, building confidence with both practitioners and stakeholders.

"When you're implementing AI, you don't just declare 'we're AI-ing the company,'" she says.

"You identify where your existing strengths in processes, data quality, and infrastructure can deliver consistent outcomes quickly."

By focusing governance on enabling rather than controlling, organizations can transform their relationship with AI from theoretical future state to practical business driver. This leads to implementation timelines measured in weeks instead of quarters, with value flowing to both employees and customers without hidden costs or complications.



26% survey respondents said their data wasn't subject to quality control or maintenance, hindering their ability to use AI.

AI Governance Survey,
Deloitte

Takeaways:

- Create clear ownership, decision rights, and accountability across business and technical stakeholders to prevent the silos that typically derail AI projects during handoffs between departments.
- Before implementing AI solutions, assess your organization's data maturity and ensure you have reliable, representative data that can deliver consistent outcomes and avoid ethical pitfalls like bias.
- Enable teams through clear ownership, targeted use cases, and transparent guidelines to transform AI from theoretical possibilities to practical business value.

Resources:

- [The Age of Invisible Machines](#), by Robb Wilson
- [All in on AI](#), Tom Davenport
- [Redesigning AI](#), by Daron Acemoglu

Focus on outcomes with AI—and quick wins



Pawan Satyawali

Head of Digital Services, Signify

In boardrooms across the world, CIOs are discovering an uncomfortable truth: nobody cares about your technology stack.

“At the end of the day, every decision should answer one question: 'What’s in it for the business?’” says Pawan Satyawali, former CIO of Tata Consumer Products and now head of digital services at Signify. “How do I either help on the top line, bottom line, on the compliance scores, or on customer satisfaction?”

While many CIOs struggle to secure buy-in for digital initiatives, Satyawali sees a strategic opening in the current AI revolution. “We’re living in disruptive times,” he says. “The faster you identify use cases for AI and implement them, the more successful you will be.”

This rapid impact mentality stands in stark contrast to multi-year implementation timelines that have plagued enterprise IT for decades. By focusing on quick wins with AI that deliver measurable business outcomes, CIOs can transform from cost center managers to strategic value drivers.

“Ensure that you keep the business first and business outcomes first,” he says. CIOs must map every technology initiative to measurable business value, never discussing AI capabilities without directly connecting them to tangible outcomes.

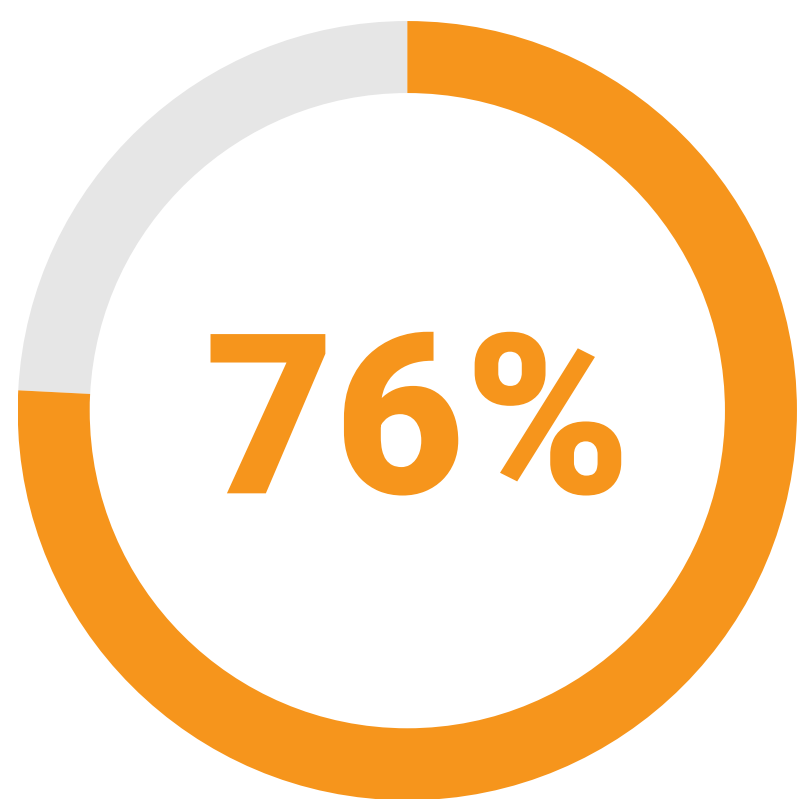
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The faster you identify use cases for AI and implement them, the more successful you will be.

Throughout his career, Satyawali has maintained that technology should enhance human potential, not replace it. His focus on work-life balance reflects this people-first philosophy, ensuring AI serves as a force multiplier for teams rather than creating additional complexity.

“While all of these things are happening, do enjoy your time with your teams and with your families,” he says. “Never miss that time.”

By ruthlessly eliminating complexity, prioritizing rapid impact, and focusing on how technology enhances human potential, today’s CIOs become indispensable strategic partners. When technology leaders speak the language of business impact through uncomplicated AI solutions, they secure the strategic influence they've long sought.



76% of CEOs expect AI to significantly change how their company creates value.

PwC CEO Survey

Takeaways:

- Frame AI initiatives in terms of their impact on top-line growth, bottom-line efficiency, compliance, or customer satisfaction—never leading with technical specifications.
- The speed at which you identify and implement AI use cases directly correlates with success. Focus on solutions that deliver measurable results in weeks, not years.
- Balance technical innovation with work-life considerations to ensure AI serves as a force multiplier for your team instead of creating additional complexity.

Resources:

- [The Future is Faster than You Think](#), by Peter H. Diamandis, Steven Kotler
- [Why Digital Transformations Fail](#), by Tony Saldanha
- [Gartner Research: “How to Demonstrate the Business Value of AI”](#)

Conclusion

The insights from these four technology leaders points to a singular truth: successful AI implementation isn't simply about tech know-how—it's about human intelligence, governance, and organizational clarity. Success won't come from who has the most advanced technology, but who can implement it with the greatest purpose and discipline. By leading with empathy like Ballal, establishing responsible frameworks like Evans, creating clear ownership like Turner-Williams, and focusing on business impact like Satyawali, technology leaders transform from technical experts into true business strategists.

In a world obsessed with adding more—more features, more systems, more complexity—the paradoxical path forward is subtraction. By removing unnecessary obstacles, focusing on quality over quantity, and ensuring technology serves people rather than the other way around, CIOs unlock the true potential of AI not as a complex addition to the enterprise, but as a powerful simplifier of work itself. The future belongs to those who understand that in an increasingly AI-driven world, the most powerful skill isn't building more complex systems—it's mastering the art of brutal simplification.

About Freshworks

Freshworks Inc. (NASDAQ: FRSH) provides people-first AI service software that organizations use to deliver exceptional customer and employee experiences. More than 68,000 companies, including American Express, Bridgestone, Databricks, Fila, Nucor, and Sony choose Freshworks' uncomplicated solutions to increase efficiency and loyalty. For the latest company news and customer stories, visit www.freshworks.com and follow us on Facebook, LinkedIn, and X.

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