Quick Answer: How to Build a Champions Network to Scale the Digital Workplace

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Organizations with low workforce digital dexterity are looking to a champions network to help employees use technology. To address a common question, this research helps IT leaders responsible for digital workplace build and maintain a champions network to scale digital workplace enablement.

Quick Answer

How do I establish a champions program?

- **Recruit champions.** Champions must be willing participants recruited or chosen based on availability, and desire and ability to make an impact.

- **Empower champions.** Coach and enable champions to help promote and support the use of technology within their line of business. Cultivate collaboration among champions and with IT for a two-way feedback loop.

- **Evaluate champions.** Engage end users and managers, using technology adoption and usage reports to determine what works and does not, and adjust accordingly.

More Detail

The 2020 Gartner Digital Workplace Research Circle Survey highlighted several opportunities to improve execution of digital workplace initiatives (see Figure 1). These opportunities included the need to motivate employees, support process improvement, understand employee and business needs, and direct organizational change. One of the quickest ways to improve all of these is to build a champions network.
Champions serve as information conduits between IT and the business that promote and socialize digital workplace technology with peers and stakeholders. They are tech-savvy employees within the business who partner with IT and receive special training, engagement and support to help scale the adoption and appropriate use of digital workplace technology. Champions explain the rationale behind technology decisions, contextualize its use within their departments, and act as influencers in organizational change management activities. Their peers recognize them as experts and look to them to provide resources, answer questions and explain how technology can improve work. This is great, considering that the 2021 Gartner Digital Worker Experience Survey confirms that 46% of employees prefer (as their first option) to get help from peers or self-service over seeking help from IT. Champions communicate best practices, successes, and challenges with other champions and IT to help improve workforce digital dexterity. They also provide feedback on what is and is not working at the employee level.

Recruit Champions

The best champion candidates are highly engaged and motivated employees who want to learn new technology and support its adoption. They may already be supporting technology use by owning a SharePoint site, Slack channel, Yammer Community or Microsoft Teams.

Seek volunteers with the following attributes:
To recruit and inspire volunteers, many organizations make earning the role a competition. Conduct interviews and require interested candidates to articulate their desire and ability to help. To generate interest, explain that the role is a visible way for an employee to help colleagues, learn new things and expand their collaboration network. As such, it could pave the way for a transfer (into IT, perhaps) or a promotion.

Empower Champions

Champions can promote multiple digital workplace technologies or focus on a single application or service. They are most valuable with new or significantly changing technology that other employees may not understand or be aware of its capabilities. It must be made clear to champions and their managers that their additional responsibilities may take time away from their primary job. During ramp-up phases, for example, special training and recurring meetings with IT and other champions may consume several hours a week. Managers must endorse these additional duties and should include them in job descriptions and performance reviews. Champions should be recognized and rewarded for their service and feel part of an extended community.

Enablement agents coach champions to be more effective in their role. Enablement agents often come from IT and HR and provide training and resources to help champions identify how they can apply technology in their own roles, in addition to helping their peers and stakeholders. Enablement agents establish rapport with champions, and promote awareness and knowledge of technology capabilities and change management practices though recurring engagement (e.g., monthly networkwide meetings and frequent check-ins). They must also listen intently and respond to the feedback that champions report from peers and stakeholders.

Evaluate Champions

When evaluating champion performance, IT should:

- Availability and willingness to go beyond the standard job duties.
- Ability to learn, teach, identify resources and communicate. Former teachers are typically a good fit for the role.
- A connector mentality, connecting team members with the resources they need to pursue individual digital dexterity learning paths.
- Problem-solving skills to promote technology solutions for business challenges within their own teams.
- Trusted by their department and able to influence change.
- An overarching desire to make an impact.
Solicit feedback from managers, peers, stakeholders and other champions about their effectiveness. Ask about the frequency of engagement and the value of their assistance.

Capture all measurable improvements resulting from improved technology adoption, including the time employees save from improved technology proficiency.

Ask managers about increased digital dexterity across their team and any other business benefits.

Track references to and celebrate the champion's efforts if internal social or reward and recognition platforms are used. Use technology usage reports to evaluate patterns and the impact that champions are having on driving adoption.

Evidence

- 2021 Gartner Digital Worker Experience Survey was conducted online during November and December 2020 among 10,080 respondents from the U.S., Europe and APAC. Participants were screened for full-time employment, in organizations with 100 or more employees and required to use digital technology for work purposes. Ages ranged from 18 through 74 years’ old, with quotas and weighting applied for age, gender, region and income, so that results are representative of working country populations.

- 2020 Gartner Digital Workplace Research Circle Survey was conducted online from 28 April through 11 May 2020 with 131 respondents from Gartner’s Research Circle Members, a Gartner-managed panel.

The survey was developed collaboratively by a team of Gartner analysts and was reviewed, tested, and administered by Gartner’s Research Data and Analytics team.

Recommended by the Authors

- Adapt the IT Operating Model to Deliver Indispensable Digital Workplace Services
- Observe, Measure and Assist: Three Emerging Ways to Drive Workforce Digital Dexterity
- Maximize Digital Dexterity by Cultivating Citizen IT
- Resources to Build and Support Connector Managers
- Case Study: Microsoft Office 365 Adoption in a Midsize Enterprise (Davines)
- Open Source Change: Making Change Management Work
- Leverage Business Models to Guide Digital Business Transformation