Almost 30% of executives are in transition at a point in time, and 40% are likely to move again in the next two years. Transitions feel exciting and uncomfortable at the same time. This Gartner study unlocks the secrets of a successful transition for executive leaders navigating their new landscape.

Overview

Key Findings

- Twenty-eight percent of surveyed executives are new to their jobs, yet 40% state a high likelihood to change jobs within the next two years. An executive is more likely to seek a new role if the current transition was highly challenging.

- All transitions are challenging to some degree. The secret is to alleviate the difficulty of a transition by uncovering critical information during the search and interview processes.

- Forty-seven percent of those surveyed think that six to 10 months are enough time to transition from “new” to “successful” — well beyond the expectation of 100 days. But for those new to their jobs, the percentage jumps to 56%. The secret is to accelerate “time to impact” by delivering results in one-month increments.

- There are many assets at a new executive leader’s disposal, but they can be difficult to prioritize. The secret is to know what is available and to structure actions through the human and organizational lenses first.

- Reducing the time to impact is key to a successful transition, but many executives are unsystematic in their approaches. Transition plans are proven to be effective, and the secret is to know the predecessor’s performance prior to finalizing the full transition plan.
**Survey Objective**

The 2021 Gartner Secrets of a Successful Executive Transition Survey was conducted online from 29 March through 7 April 2021, with 93 members of Gartner's Research Circle — a Gartner-managed panel. Of these, 53 participants changed roles in the past two years and/or expect to change in the next two years. All participants are members of their organizations’ C-suites (in other words, they are the most senior in the organization or report directly to the most senior executive in the organization).

To learn more about the ins and outs of an executive transition and to unlock the secrets for a successful executive leader transition, see the survey conducted with Gartner Research Circle (and see the Evidence section for more information about this survey).

**Data Insights**

Over the course of a career, transitions are unavoidable. They are exciting as well as uncomfortable. A transition can be compared with trying to find your way in a dimly lit room where you can navigate but cannot see fully, preventing you from navigating most effectively. It is as if a secret code needs to be deciphered to cross the room and accomplish what you intended.

Almost 30% of executives are in transition at any given point in time, and this number has remained the same for almost a decade. What is new is that transitions are on the rise, and 40% expect to transition in the next two years (see Figure 1). Difficult transitions make executives want to move on, so this increase in the desire to move suggests an increase in difficult transitions. There are four secrets to overcoming or avoiding a difficult transition:

- Alleviate the challenge of a transition by uncovering critical information during the search and interview processes.
- Accelerate your time to impact by delivering results in one-month increments.
- Identify all assets at your disposal, and then structure actions through the human and organizational lenses first.
- Know your predecessor’s performance before finalizing a full transition plan.
Secret: Alleviate the Challenge of a Transition by Uncovering Critical Information During the Search and Interview Processes

Change is never easy, and the difficulty of a transition varies. All of the executives surveyed found their transitions to be difficult. In fact, the more difficult the transition was, the more likely an executive was to be planning another move within the next two years.

Role and corporate culture are the two most common changes. But if we take a broader perspective, company, organization size, industry and function round out the top six changes in this survey (see Figure 2).

Thirty-five percent of transitions were considered highly challenging. These are role changes within a company or industry and those transitions with cultural changes.
Another 45% of transitions were considered moderately challenging. These consist of a role change or a company change, followed by cultural changes or organization size.

**Figure 2: Types of Changes Experienced by Respondents**

![Diagram showing types of changes experienced by respondents]

When the new role is familiar, then the challenge is in learning the ins and outs of a new company and industry. If the entire executive team has changed, this presents an opportunity to forge an entirely new path, while building new, positive and effective relationships.

The most common preparation for a planned transition is a cursory search for public information and relying on recruiter insight into the company, industry or new role. However, to ensure your transition is as easy as possible, there are more specific actions to take before accepting the role that will make the transition less challenging and lead to fewer unpleasant surprises:
Use public sources of information for insight about the company, and then add to that insight by finding more information using personal connections and relationships. The objective is to create as holistic a picture of the company as possible. Pay particular attention to current press releases about the company and investor information. Research the executive team, and watch publicly available videos to learn about individual styles and perspectives. Leaders have a propensity to visualize how they will make an impact, so use everything learned to start crystallizing your strategy for the company and how you will contribute to the enterprise. Use storytelling as a technique to communicate your vision and ideas.

Meet with the CEO, test the ideas developed to date, watch for the CEO’s reaction, and incorporate ideas inspired by the conversation into a refined vision and story. Determine if you are still interested in the position, and then ask for additional meetings.

Request to network with key team members who will report directly to you. During this round of conversations, continue to test strategic ideas developed to date, including those that now incorporate the CEO perspective. Use these conversations to identify additional opportunities and potential operational gaps and to test the cultural fit with your leadership style.

Review your expanded perspective with the CEO, and request to meet with at least one member of the board of directors. Be prepared to discuss vision, risk and investment. Leave a positive impression with the board on your visionary ideas and insightful assessment of the organization. Start to shape the board’s thinking about what revenue opportunities are possible through business model opportunities. Test for the amount of autonomy you will have and if it matches your style. Establish a board cadence. Getting to this stage means you are a lead — if not the lead — candidate for the role, endorsed by the CEO.

Finally, request to speak with future colleagues within the organization. Test ideas once again, and use their insights to reshape your strategic vision and story and assessment of the organization. Ask open-ended questions designed to explore what will be easiest to accomplish, what should be accomplished first, and what will be most difficult to deliver, and begin to establish sponsorship for initiatives.

Figure 3 shows direct responses from transitioning executives about what these strategies looked like in practice for them.
From these steps, identify the coaches and mentors who will be available to you on an ongoing basis. Use them to assess the culture, identify additional stakeholders and continually answer questions about the landscape:

- **Access to “insider’s knowledge”**
- **Work that is underway**
- **Organizational challenges**
- **Benchmarking data**
- **Recent historical information and reports that will point toward successes and opportunities**
This level and depth of proactive engagement can be risky — it may even cost you the position. But it is riskier for the company and for you to make a mistake. Use this time as an opportunity to ensure there is a good match on both sides.

Secret: Accelerate Your Time to Impact by Delivering Results in One-Month Increments

“Time to impact” is defined as the time between the arrival of a new executive and the point at which the executive has comfortably transitioned into the new executive leadership role.

For decades, executives were given 100 days to make an impact, but the accelerated pace of business change has created a new norm of 90 days or less to move from being “new” to “successful.” This is true, regardless of the difficulty of the transition. However, executives report needing much more time in today’s complex business environment to transition from feeling new to feeling successful. In fact, 47% of those surveyed think that six to 10 months are enough time to transition from new to successful, but for those new to their jobs, the percentage jumps to 56% (see Figure 4).
Because the pace of business change requires a different, faster cadence, delivering visible results in one-month increments is an effective strategy for managing these new timelines and nuances (see Figure 5). Each 30-day increment reinforces the personal reputation of the executive leader that was established during the interview process, and is designed to improve the performance of the enterprise as a whole. Based on what was tested and learned during the interview process, continue to nurture stakeholder relationships by testing ideas and expanding the network, regularly updating the CEO and board using the cadence that was established.
Use the information gathered and the strategic story created and refined during that process to continually assess the enterprise capabilities, especially those within your control, to achieve the business growth targeted by the enterprise. Continue to cultivate relationships throughout the new organization, using the story and asking questions that refine the story and create a meaningful path forward that can be delivered in 30-day increments.

Secret: Identify All Assets at Your Disposal, and Then Structure Actions Through the Human and Organizational Lenses First

Eighty-two percent of executives surveyed rank human and organizational assets as the most important to a successful transition — more important than tangible, intangible or technology assets (see Figure 6).
An executive leader who is new to the role needs to uncover all assets available (see Table 1), using the human and organization lenses first. Most important is access to:

- The team delivering work
- The C-suite leaders who are sponsoring initiatives
- Human resources onboarding the new executive
- Coaches and mentors who can provide insights into the existing corporate culture, the company and its ways of working, expectations, issues left by the predecessor, and how to establish trust
### Table 1: Range of Enterprise Resources Available to Executive Leaders in Transition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tangible Resources</th>
<th>Intangible Resources</th>
<th>Human and Organizational Resources</th>
<th>Technology Resources</th>
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Source: Gartner

**Secret: Know Your Predecessor’s Performance Before Finalizing a Full Transition Plan**

Knowing how a predecessor performed is important, because it helps determine how easy or difficult the transition will be. Surveyed executive leaders new to their roles said:

- 10% followed a person who was very successful
- 25% had no predecessor
- 35% followed a person who performed adequately
Gartner research has identified four types of predecessors in an executive role, and this survey retested the four types. For each type, specific actions can accelerate transition time and improve success. Uncover the performance of your predecessor, and use these keys to shape your new role and transition plan (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Predecessor Types and Associated Keys to Success**

<table>
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<th>Predecessor Type</th>
<th>Keys to Success</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Breaking Ground (25%)</strong></td>
<td>• Clearly define role responsibilities and objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gain an understanding of the stakeholder universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jump-Starting (35%)</strong></td>
<td>• Quickly understand the industry, organization, and dynamics of the new team</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Actively use existing networks and teams to socialize and drive change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Following a Train Wreck (20%)</strong></td>
<td>• Create a clear vision for the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Forge new relationships and repair those damaged by predecessor underperformance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Replacing an Icon (10%)</strong></td>
<td>• Clarify the role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Forge relationships to legitimize and advance new agenda</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Transitions are risky — for the company and for the individual. Yet executive transitions are very common — if you have not yet encountered one, you likely will at some point. They come in many forms: role, company, organization size, culture, industry, function, geography, department and country. The parameters of an executive transition can be narrow or broad. A transition can be familiar or more challenging than envisioned. The actions required for a successful transition are driven by the difficulty of the transition and the type of leader you follow. The secrets for successful transitions can be easily unlocked with planning prior to accepting a position, taking action when in the position, and using everything at your disposal to shape the future that you and your enterprise need to be successful.
Evidence

The 2021 Gartner Secrets of a Successful Executive Transition Survey was conducted online from 29 March through 7 April 2021, with 93 members of Gartner’s Research Circle – a Gartner-managed panel. Of these, 53 participants changed roles in the past two years and/or expect to change in the next two years. All participants are members of their organizations’ C-suites (in other words, they are the most senior in the organization or report directly to the most senior executive in the organization).

The survey was conducted to explore the differences in types of executive transitions (small, medium and big transitions) and how newly transitioned executives can use the enterprise assets at their disposal to accelerate their success and the success of the enterprise.

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.

Note: The results of this survey are representative of the respondent base and not necessarily the market as a whole.

Recommended by the Author

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

Infographic: Fastpath Executive Success With a Strong Transition Plan
Quick Answer: How Much Time Does a New Executive Have to Make an Impact?
How to Manage Your Personal Brand
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