



# Get back wasted time:

## Executive strategies to grow your business

### CHAPTER 1: Introduction

#### How do you measure up as a business leader?

As a business executive your time is incredibly valuable, right? And if you aren't maximally time efficient or productive then you – and your business – will soon fall behind. It's a fact of life in today's highly-competitive digital marketplace.

But how do you stem the flow of lost time? And how are other leaders making the most of this scarce resource so they can be as efficient, productive and valuable as possible?

In this global report, based on data gathered from real-world business leaders explaining how they perform tasks on a daily basis, we look at how business managers can step up from operational tasks and focus on work that will propel their business forward.

#### We will:

- Touch on the priorities of what could be termed 'accelerated business leaders': those decision makers leading their industries forward in a way that harnesses emerging technologies and agile new ways of working.
- Examine the key factors that hold businesses back and limit business growth.
- Explore the technologies that can drive operational agility and scale.

This report – produced by Sage in partnership with leading technology publication CIO -- enables readers to see what their peers are doing, how they're working smarter and how they too can start working smarter, and begin to truly drive business change.

By Arif Mohamed

## Identifying your problem areas

As one of today's business leaders, you need to stay on top of your game but you face many hurdles to doing so.

You want to become smarter, more resourceful and use your time as effectively as possible. Your desire is to be sufficiently productive and facilitate business change that will propel your company forward.

But for many leaders the reality is that both they and their businesses end up wasting valuable time on things you don't need to – with this ultimately restricting both growth and profitability.

So, how do you maximise your time and gain back time to grow the business?

### The answer lies in:

- Identifying your problem areas
- Utilising people, processes and technologies more effectively
- Automating and integrating low-level tasks and manual and siloed operations

Strategic business leaders recognise they can only step away from mundane, repetitive, time-consuming activities by embracing business collaboration, industry partnerships and technology that can do much of the heavy lifting: automating, integrating, unifying and connecting their business operations.

For instance, IT automation and predictive analytics can help leaders to speed up processes and learn more about their organisations, faster than they could do manually. In addition, cloud-based financial management, reporting, and data administration solutions have the power to transform business departments across the organisation and are therefore becoming vital tools for accelerated leaders.

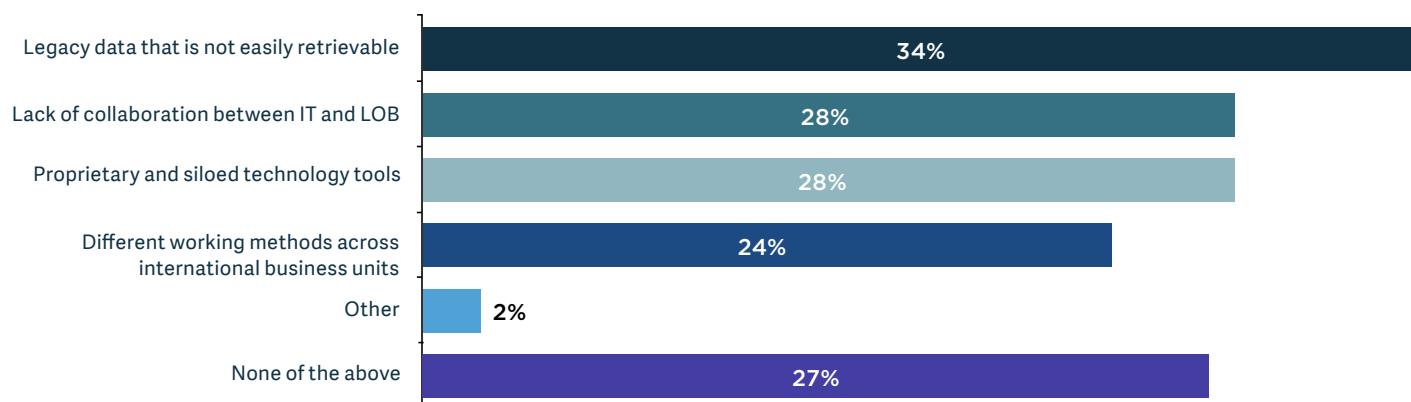
## Our research on strategic business leaders

The main purpose of our research was to explore issues of efficiency and growth and get a clearer picture of the business challenges leaders face. We also wanted to find out their top priorities and explore the tools and technologies that could help them gain back time and drive digital transformation.



**Revenue Drivers:**  
Small and medium-sized business executives would spend most of their time driving new revenue streams if they had ten extra free hours each week.

### Legacy processes slowing down business



We spoke to 300 CEOs and senior business, finance and IT executives in small to mid-sized businesses (SMB) employing between 50 and 499 people across a range of industries that include financial services, business services and consulting, IT-related services, real estate and legal. Our respondents head up businesses in Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Spain the United Kingdom and the United States.

### Tackling today's business challenges

SMB leaders face a whole host of challenges to growing the business, many of them stemming from the growth of the company itself. Unless the organisation has embedded digital processes from the beginning it's likely to have developed numerous manual and independent processes and systems. These will have worked fine when the firm was smaller but often become siloed and unwieldy as the business grows its operations, employee headcount, customer base and geographic reach.

As a result, most SMBs are in need of transformation for their legacy IT and siloed data, as well as better collaboration and communication across the business. They now have too many people and are generating too much information to carry on the way they always have. It also means there is a pressing need to connect and digitise processes to meet rising demand from customers, employees and partners who expect a fast, round-the-clock business response.

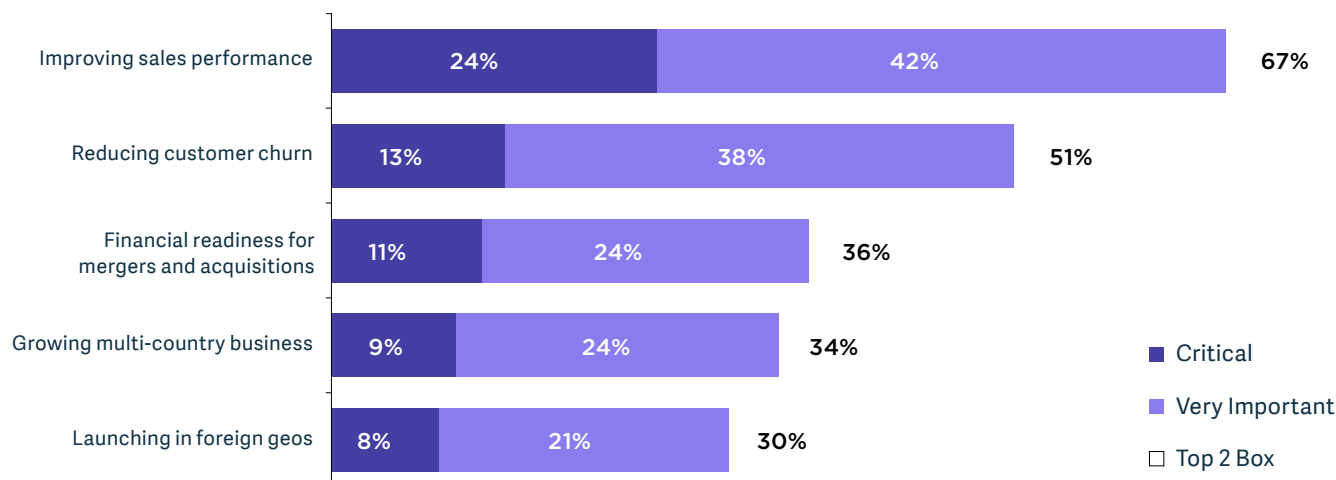
#### Our study found that:

- Improving operational efficiency and internal processes is a high priority.
- Legacy technology and inefficient data processes are acting as a drag on growing SMBs.
- SMBs have an appetite for technology that can deliver automation and efficiency.
- The average SMB uses financial management solutions to automate processes across approximately 2.5 departments spanning everything from finance and sales through marketing and HR.
- This gives them a strong starting point from which to expand their usage across the business.

Regarding legacy processes, our research found that the biggest factor slowing down the business is legacy data that is not easily retrievable and as a result can't be understood or used effectively. This was an issue for more than a third of SMB leaders we surveyed.

Second to this is a lack of collaboration between IT and Line of Business (LOB) departments which is holding businesses back. Proprietary and siloed technology tools presented the joint-second biggest problem, with different working methods across international business units also featuring as an issue. Both of these difficulties have inbuilt inefficiencies and are prone to error as business units do things in their own way at home and abroad and find it hard to harmonise their part of the organisation with the others.

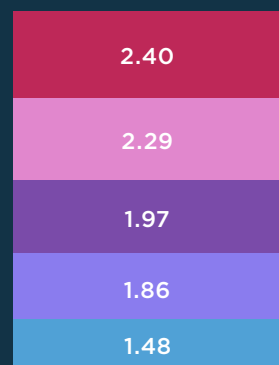
### Importance of factors driving revenue growth



We also asked business leaders what the biggest limitation to growing a business was for them. The overwhelming majority said limited human resources - in other words a lack of skills and staff - was their top challenge. Almost a third said that lack of time was their biggest limitation with others citing legacy IT infrastructure, insufficient capital and a limited customer base as being problematic for them.

In these cases, strategic leadership is required to overhaul time-wasting and long-established legacy processes so that the organisation can compete effectively in the digital marketplace and win back valuable time.

### How business would spend 10 extra hours per week



- Drive new revenue streams
- Improve internal process
- Focus on strategic objectives
- Improve our customer experience
- Product development

## CHAPTER 2: Business priorities

### Driving revenue growth

American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin once said, "Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning." At the end of the day, businesses rely on revenue growth to exist. Understandably then, revenue growth topped the list of priorities for the business leaders we surveyed with respondents telling us that if they had ten extra hours each week to devote to a particular task they would focus their attention on driving new revenue streams.

The leaders we spoke to prized revenue growth above actions such as improving internal processes, focusing on strategic objectives, improving customer experience and product development.

At the heart of their revenue growth were a number of efficiency plays that business leaders considered to be essential. Improving sales performance was the highest-ranked activity which was deemed either 'critical' or 'very important' by 67%.

Just over half said that reducing customer churn was the next most important thing at the heart of their revenue growth. A significant minority of respondents attached additional importance to financial readiness for mergers and acquisitions, growing a multi-country business and launching in foreign geographies.

**69% of executives say that managing data security and risk are their most important considerations when looking to improve the company's agility and flexibility**

### Improving operational agility and flexibility

The second greatest priority for SMB leaders is improving operational agility and flexibility by modernising internal processes. This is almost as important for leaders as driving revenue growth, with reducing costs coming in as a close third. These three concerns are likely to be key drivers for accelerated business leaders who continually interrogate their business operations and data so they can find improvements and fine-tune the business.

There are many ways in which you can improve operational agility and flexibility with many of them relying on technology to connect independent processes and automate manual ones so efficiencies can be realised. For the majority our survey respondents the most important factors for improving operational agility and flexibility were managing data security and risk (69%) and improving collaboration across departments (64%).

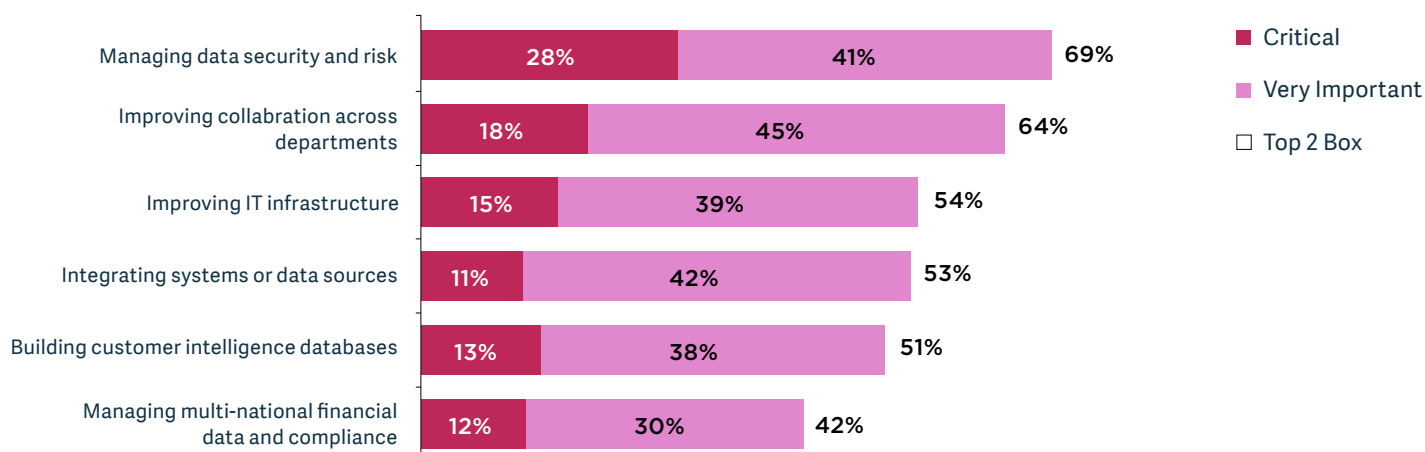
These two priorities were far ahead of any others, and highlight the data-centric nature of today's businesses where it is vital to protect and secure valuable information and also make it possible for employees to share information across the organisation.

On the former point, data protection legislation such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) mandate the secure storage and handling of personal and sensitive information in order to protect customers as much as the business itself. At the same time, growing businesses rely on the ability for trusted teams to collaborate and share data freely and securely which requires the business to offer secure and sophisticated information-sharing capabilities. Hence managing data security and risk are at the top of the list when it comes to improving operational agility and flexibility.

Close behind security and collaboration was the ability to improve the IT infrastructure (54%), integrate systems or data sources (53%) and build customer intelligence databases (51%). Over two fifths of our business leaders felt that their operational agility relied on them managing multinational financial data and compliance (42%) which hints at a strong involvement in international markets amongst SMBs.

These findings indicate that correctly managing data security and risk and having a robust and agile IT infrastructure in place are essential building blocks for leading SMBs, with collaboration and data integration on a par with them.

### Importance of factors improving agility and flexibility





These are fundamentals – “table-stakes” if you like - that strategic leaders simply must have in place before they can move on to secondary concerns such as building customer databases to help them identify their most valuable customers and address customer churn, important though that is.

Overall, the fact that business leaders are concerned with improving the business’ operational agility and flexibility highlights a healthy appetite amongst them to implement change. Indeed, with fierce competition from new digital disruptors and digitally-transformed rivals, SMBs are only as strong as their operational capabilities so it is essential to hunt down and eliminate weak links in your operational chain. Introducing process and technology innovation should therefore become a routine activity for accelerated leaders.

### Upgrading IT infrastructure

Along similar lines, IT systems modernisation is an area where forward-thinking leaders can make a real difference to their business operations. This is why a huge number of businesses both large and small have adopted cloud-based IT applications and services. Between 2011 and 2018 the global SMB cloud services market grew steadily from \$34bn to \$169bn, according to [statistics portal Statistica](#).

Our survey found that infrastructure is a major focus for business, finance and IT leaders and was considered very important or critical for more than half of the people surveyed in terms of its impact on operational agility and flexibility.

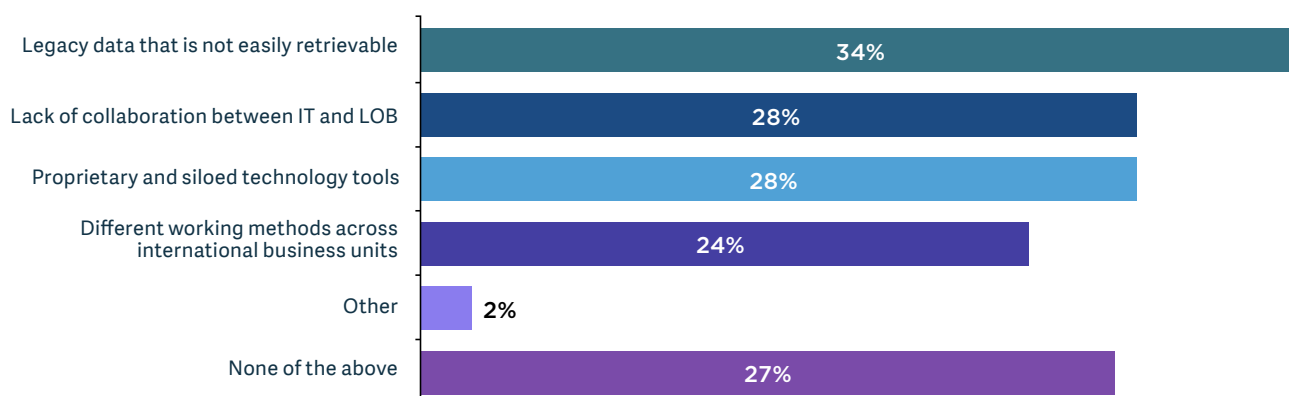
Leaders also recognised that their legacy processes and technologies are slowing down the business, as mentioned above. Just over a third (34%) have a problem with accessing legacy data with others citing difficulties with proprietary and siloed technology tools (28%), a lack of collaboration between IT and line of business (28%) and different working methods across international business unit (24%).

Coupled with a desire to lower IT operational costs, the urgent need to overhaul legacy technology and inefficient data processes is also behind the business world’s mass migration to cloud-based IT.

Cloud has become an essential strategic pursuit partly down to its ability to replace or integrate with traditional technology platforms, applications and databases, and partly because it brings new, efficient and innovative digital processes and ways of working. Ones that carry lower IT expenditure, ease of use and access, greater application integration and the prospect of scalability as and when required.

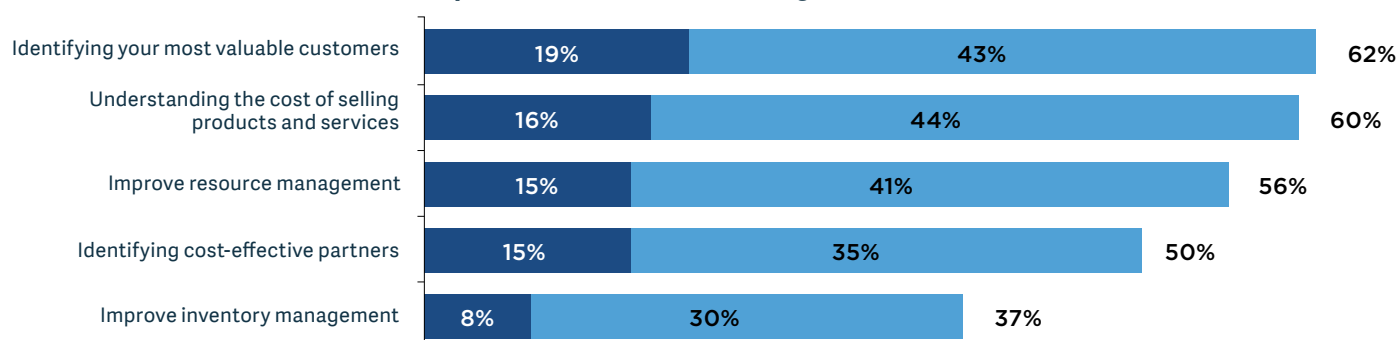
Consequently, SMB leaders have very few reservations left about adopting cloud technologies. This indicates that the upward trend is likely to continue until the vast majority of businesses have upgraded their IT infrastructures and moved away from legacy computing.

### Legacy processes slowing down business





### Importance of factors reducing costs



### Understanding business data

Joining up both the supply chain and LOB departments by upgrading the IT infrastructure needs to be part of a strategy that also leads the business to understand its processes and data and to improve collaboration across the organisation. Efficiency for its own sake will only get you so far. Industry leaders and so-called digital disrupters are the ones who know how to get the best value from existing data repositories and the endless data that businesses generate every day.

Strategic leaders appreciate the many advantages that come from understanding and better utilising this business data and sharing it across business units. These include identifying new business opportunities, markets and revenue streams, speeding up time-to-market and improving customer experience and customer service.

As a result, in an information-centric marketplace, understanding business data is another key priority for leaders and underpins most serious cost reduction strategies.

Our respondents highlighted a number of 'very important' or 'critical' factors that can help to reduce cost in their companies, many of them centring on understanding and using data more effectively.

The top factor was identifying the most valuable customers (62%). This is something that cloud-based tools and systems like CRM and sales-force automation have helped to revolutionise over the past two decades in order to drive down customer churn, maximise customer value and identify and grow new customer segments.

Also important to leaders was the ability to understand the cost of selling products and services (60%), being able to improve resource management (56%), identifying cost-effective partners (50%) and improve inventory management (37%).

In many ways, today's strategic leaders are spoilt for choice when it comes to applications that can help to mine and visualise business data, whether it's customer and sales information, or stock and inventory. The latest generation of finance and accounting tools, for example, offer powerful analytical facilities, graphical interfaces and dashboards that give business managers a bird's eye view across the organisation's real-time data.

Accelerated leaders make sure they have the tools available to help them interrogate and understand their data because this is what gives them the edge over their competitors, and helps them to move quickly in response to customer demand or emerging business events.

As the 16th century statesman Francis Bacon put it, "ipsa scientia potestas est" - "knowledge itself is power".



**34%** say that  
legacy data is slowing  
their business down

## CHAPTER 3: How to gain back time to focus on those business priorities

### Automating manual processes

Today's technology solutions have the power to successfully address these business challenges and priorities of driving revenue growth, improving operations, updating legacy IT and exploiting business data. The business leaders we surveyed told us they are particularly interested in automating their financial reporting and data administration functions.

The manual processes most in need of automating are financial reporting (40%) followed by data entry and administration (34%). Business leaders were also looking to automation to assist them with customer service and management (34%) and accounts payable and invoices (31%). Other areas that would benefit from automation were sales and purchase orders (29%) and inventory tracking (20%) said survey respondents.

Businesses that bring automation to these areas stand to see huge differences across the organisation in terms of staff and process efficiencies, accuracy, data management and integration. Automation specifically addresses the issue of insufficient staffing levels, with automating processes like financial reporting and data administration freeing up limited human resources for value-added business or customer-centric tasks.

Business leaders also told us that over the next 12 months they were looking to implement IT process automation (67%) which tells us that automation has truly moved from hype to reality. IT automation is an important element in freeing human resources and gaining back time.

### Data analytics and intelligence

Alongside automation, predictive analytics has grown in popularity as a means through which to modernise the business and help leaders win back valuable time.

Approximately 63% of business leaders said they were pursuing predictive data analytics capabilities in their financial software this coming year, with three in four saying they wanted real-time access to financial information.

In fact, access to real-time business intelligence is becoming an essential part of agile, modern business strategy, with leaders perceiving that the automation of processes like financial reporting and data administration is entirely achievable and advantageous.

**40%**

of executives  
are looking to  
automate financial  
reporting through  
new technologies



The majority of leaders said they need real-time data to effectively serve their customers (59%), with 52% saying that predictive data analytics will also benefit their company. In essence, predictive analytics gives business leaders the organisational capability to discover meaningful patterns in the company's business data then allows them to predict trends, improve business performance, recommend actions and strengthen their decision-making.

As a result, predictive analytics lets accelerated leaders move beyond relying on historical information and look ahead, so they can identify live emerging trends, analyse key variables and carry out what-if scenarios being both strategic and timely in their responses. In fact, real-time business intelligence can transform business operations across the board, from the supply chain through to product development, sales, marketing and customer support, making it a powerful tool for accelerated leaders.





**57% of the surveyed leaders said it was vital that they can access real-time accounting information at anytime, anywhere and on any device.**

### Improving accessibility

Improving the accessibility of applications and systems is something that has brought significant benefits to organisations in terms of saving time and improving operational efficiency. For example, 57% of the surveyed leaders said it was vital that they can access real-time accounting information at anytime, anywhere and on any device.

Access and ease-of-use are key criteria in enabling business professionals to be agile and responsive with leaders citing a range of considerations when choosing an accounting system for their business. The factors that leaders considered important in improving productivity and operational efficiency included web and mobile accessibility giving employees access “whenever,

wherever, whoever” with ease-of-use being the next important accessibility feature. Other elements are data visibility through visual dashboards, greater collaboration, more detailed reporting and automating low-level tasks for enhanced business productivity.

Cloud-based computing has made accessibility available to mainstream businesses, also offering deep integration with other software systems. For example, Financials provides integration with the world-leading Salesforce CRM platform, also offering dashboard facilities and visual access to real-time data.

Cloud-based accounting platforms are ideally placed to begin automating low-level tasks, improving financial visibility and enhancing collaboration across the organisation with leaders outlining a number of areas where accounting systems are improving their businesses.

For those who have implemented accounting platforms, 49% now have more detailed financial reporting and 41% are streamlining processes and improving internal collaboration. Their financial management platform offers a single unified view of the business according to 35%, with 33% saying they can now automate low-level tasks for enhanced business productivity. Others have been able to connect front and back office systems for better interoperability (27%) and around a quarter have been able to significantly reduce costs (24%).

### Security and cloud computing

Although not something that enables leaders to gain back time to drive digital transformation on its own, security repeatedly came up in our study as a fundamental business necessity and when coupled with cloud computing strategic security technologies can really make a difference to the organisation as a whole.

As mentioned earlier, for the clear majority of leaders (69%), managing data security and risk is at the top of the list when it comes to improving operational agility and flexibility.

For the strategic business leader, strengthening security goes hand-in-hand with improving the accessibility of applications and systems. Our research underlined the reality that security and IT infrastructure are on a par with goals such as data and systems integration and good collaboration across departments.

However, for some, security presents a barrier to migrating applications to the cloud with a sizeable 58% citing it as a concern when it came to implementing cloud-based accounting systems. This was by far the greatest issue ahead of cost (30%), levels of service support (24%), integration and interoperability with other solutions (22%) and importing and exporting data (20%).

In reality, today's cloud systems are frequently as secure as on-premise IT environments with cloud service providers required to adhere to stringent data protection and regulatory standards as well as industry-specific regulations for example in health or banking.

Cloud infrastructure service providers often implement encryption security in the data centre right across the board from processor level, up through the hypervisors and virtual machines, across networking operations, and up to application access and endpoints. From the customer's perspective security is relatively seamless as a result and easy for businesses to implement with the onus resting more on the service provider to deliver adequate security and data protection.

Business leaders are therefore less wary of cloud systems than they were even two years ago with some sizeable and influential industries leading the charge towards cloud adoption, whether public, private or hybrid cloud (the latter using a mixture of cloud and on premise). Sectors that are leading the charge towards cloud include technology and IT services, advertising and marketing, biotech and pharmaceuticals, retail and construction.

Although healthcare, financial services and education are more reluctant to move to cloud and still rely heavily on their on-premise IT systems, many have been using piecemeal software-as-a-service cloud services for several years particularly for communications, sales, marketing and HR. Experts predict that these more conservative sectors will therefore experience a relatively quick transition to the cloud having experienced its benefits over time.

### Integration and partners

Interoperability has been a buzzword in the IT industry for a couple of decades now, with both end-user businesses and IT vendors pursuing the goal of application and systems integration and unity. Partly driven by the open source movement and a desire from companies to move away from proprietary technologies, integration with third-party solutions gives businesses greater choice in terms of the technology they can adopt.

Among the advantages of having third-party integration are the ability to choose best-of-breed IT solutions, bring disparate databases and applications together under the same platform so you can create a single view across the business, and gain the flexibility to meet business goals using the most appropriate tools. All of these can save time for business leaders and their teams as they bring the right technologies into play to solve specific problems. 53% of our leaders said that integrating systems or data sources was important to improving operational agility and flexibility.

Financials is an example of a cloud-based financial management software solution that has integration and interoperability at its core. Designed to help business leaders save time, create efficiencies and have the information they need to drive business growth, Financials is built on the Salesforce platform.

This enables businesses to link their sales, accounting, banking, invoicing, and payments with the world-leading Salesforce CRM. The solution can be customised even further by connecting to over 3,000 business apps on the Salesforce App Exchange to help run key areas of the business.

### How Financials can help businesses leaders

Besides integration with third-party solutions, working with trusted partners in order to have the right IT skills and solutions can also save time for business leaders and their business and technology teams. By working with Sage, for example, you are choosing a partner that has the accounting depth of knowledge and experience working with medium-sized businesses.



**44%** say  
that third-party  
integration is  
essential for  
their cloud-based  
accounting system

## Get back wasted time: Executive strategies to grow your business

A quarter of our survey respondents said they use cloud-based financial management software solutions that are hosted in the cloud, with 36% using on-premise systems and 38% favouring a combination of both for their finance and accounting software. Cloud-based finance software solutions are clearly popular amongst SMBs, with over a fifth of business leaders recognising Sage as a market-leading financial management cloud software company.

Sage Business Cloud has trusted solutions for managing your money, accounting, payments, people, payroll and so much more. As part of Sage Business Cloud, Financials is a cloud-based financial and business management platform for growing SMBs and is ideal for vertical sectors including Business Services, Financial Services, Technology, Professional Services and Not for Profits.

Financials saves time for business leaders whilst giving them powerful capabilities that enable them to gain visibility into their financial and business performance and turn raw data into insights for a 360-degree view of their customers and business performance. In addition, Financials boosts automation and productivity with streamlined workflows, improved collaboration and mobile support so you have time to focus on what you do best - running the business. You can also adapt Financials to your needs, connecting the front and back offices for collaboration across digital platforms in new and efficient ways which will limit downtime and leverage existing IT investments.

Meanwhile, we understand the importance of being able to manage your core accounting across geographic territories using intuitive tools and dashboards. Financials enables you to expand into new markets or geographies with multi-company, multi-currency, multi-language capabilities. After all, accelerated leaders always have growth in mind and an eye on the horizon.

### The path to digital transformation

Business leaders recognise they are wasting valuable time in the organisation and need to win it back to scale up and become real-time businesses. As we talked to leaders during our research, we discovered the main culprits that are stealing business time revolve around manual, repetitive and administrative tasks and limited human resources to carry out business operations.

Consequently, leaders are looking as much to operational efficiency and cost reductions as they do to revenue for future growth. In fact, improving internal processes is almost as important as driving revenue growth, our research found, with solving the issue of lost time and effort being of paramount importance.

Technology solutions, such as Financials, are available to help your business save time, be more effective and help the company to grow by having real-time business insights at your fingertips. Additionally, automating processes like financial reporting and data administration can free up limited human resources for value added tasks.

### In summary

- Growing businesses frequently waste time and resources on manual, administrative tasks which include accounting and financial processes.
- These monopolise their human resources and limit their ability to scale and operate efficiently.
- However, there are many ways in which accelerated leaders are saving time and improving productivity.
- These include: advanced connectivity between front and back office systems, cloud-based collaboration, real-time reports, business intelligence and dashboards, and round-the-clock mobile access.
- In doing so, they can confidently drive revenue growth, improve operational efficiency and flexibility, improve systems accessibility and compete more effectively in a highly competitive digital world.

Sage has experience in transitioning companies of all sizes to cloud-based services across all industry sectors and in giving them the powerful tools they need to grow. Financials can put you on the way to becoming a strategic leader, enabling you to drive business growth and transformation.

**For more information, click below.**