



# TECH LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF ECOSYSTEMS

Become an ecosystem leader to help your organization achieve faster growth in a more complex environment with fewer resources.



**KORN FERRY**

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In this paper, we explore the increasing importance of ecosystem leadership in tech and the qualities necessary to become an ecosystem leader. We discover how tech organizations can thrive through disruption by creating horizontal and vertical partnerships—and the leadership progression tech executives must undergo to make these transformative partnerships possible.

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# 01

# THE TECHNOLOGY LANDSCAPE IS EVOLVING FROM ENTERPRISE TO ECOSYSTEM

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Tech leaders are under increasing pressure to deliver growth beyond traditional organic and inorganic strategies, by tapping into complex ecosystems that offer enormous upside but come with uncommon risk. This is creating a premium for ‘Ecosystem Leadership,’ which is a counter-cultural capability in many companies that have built extensive vertical capabilities and walled gardens that were designed to keep other organizations out, not welcome them in.

According to the Chief Strategy Officer at a large, publicly traded technology company “The field of play is

changing dramatically. When even the biggest in Big Tech can’t win alone, it puts a huge premium on finding productive ways to influence those outside your direct control.”

These **business ecosystems** are networks of organizations cooperating to design, develop or deliver a product or service. Ecosystem participants include customers, community, suppliers, distributors, competitors and more.

**By leveraging existing ecosystems, companies can generate growth more quickly, with fewer internal resources, and by tapping into new capabilities.**

For technology companies, ecosystem growth happens vertically and horizontally. Vertically, PaaS companies are teaming up to give customers broader access to advanced platform services, like AWS’s partnership with Salesforce and Microsoft Azure’s collaboration with IBM Red Hat. Horizontally, tech and non-tech companies are partnering to accelerate product innovation, like Google teaming up with Boehringer Ingelheim on quantum computing and pharma R&D.

# 02

# ADVANCED ORGANIZATIONS ARE INCREASINGLY PRIORITIZING ECOSYSTEM LEADERSHIP

These changing business dynamics are having an impact on how tech CEOs are evaluating their leadership talent and building their leadership teams. According to a **recent Gartner survey**, 60% of tech CEOs say ecosystems are driving new customer interactions, sales and distribution channels, but only 15% of leaders possess the qualities needed to thrive in a disruptive business, so perhaps it's unsurprising that 67% of investors believe traditional and legacy leadership is unfit for the future.

In our work with many of the world's leading technology organizations, we have observed how the most sophisticated companies are prioritizing development and advancement of leaders who can foster strong partnerships that drive growth. A leadership maturity curve has emerged, where leaders transition from specialists to generalists, from tacticians to strategists, from business unit to **Enterprise Leaders**, and ultimately to Ecosystem Leaders that can do all this both within their organization and across an external ecosystem.

We have identified the following three interconnected lenses of ecosystem leadership that can help you evaluate and finetune your approach:

## LENS 1: STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

Ecosystem leadership requires foresight, vision, collaboration and intentionality.

Leaders need to create a compelling vision for the future serving as a rally cry to attract, motivate and retain investors, partners and top talent.

Strategic planning needs to incorporate complex ecosystem dynamics and perspectives and include contingencies for many unknowable variables and risk. This is meaningfully different in form and approach to building strategy in a single organization or even enterprise, which is what most leaders have excelled at during their careers.

Strategy implementation requires that leaders can create the foundational conditions and momentum required for immediate and more sustained success.

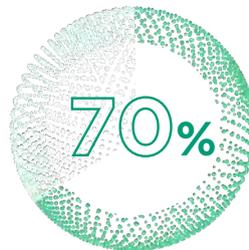
## LENS 2: SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

70% of C-Suite executives say their role involves influencing others without formal authority over them—and it's even more pronounced within ecosystems. Effective leaders understand situational leadership and can influence key stakeholders in different ways. They can showcase deep technical expertise to get product and engineering talent on board, leverage their position of power to secure resources in their own organization, build trust and confidence broadly in ways that expand their followership, and where necessary, rely on their interpersonal and relationship-building skills to overcome inevitable challenges with other ecosystem players.

## LENS 3: SUSTAINED AGILITY

Engaging a broad coalition is a critical first step, but sustaining momentum becomes increasingly challenging amongst competing stakeholder priorities. Many issues will be new, unfamiliar and require different solutions than those within a single organization. The natural response for most executives is to try and control what they know, which is why many struggle. What sets a successful ecosystem leader apart is their ability to **think and act with agility**. They learn from experiences and apply these learnings to perform successfully under new or first-time conditions.

A leader's willingness to take risks and face potential setbacks is key to managing a broader ecosystem, and rare endurance is required as in practice, the majority of alliances underperform expectations. The best are willing to listen, to learn from their mistakes, and to keep themselves and others motivated and committed to a shared purpose.



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# 03

# A PERSONAL CHECKLIST FOR ECOSYSTEM LEADERSHIP

No company exists within a bubble anymore, even the very largest. Today's leaders are challenged to think beyond their organization's immediate success. This includes the role they play in building a healthy business network to promote not only their organization's interests but those within the broader ecosystem.

Tech leaders who recognize their future growth is intricately linked to the success of others will be positioned to win long-term. If you want to achieve faster growth with fewer resources, you must be prepared to do so in partnership with others.

To help you, we've developed a checklist that you can use on your leadership journey:



Are you committed to both running the business and changing the business?

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Have you identified the best external partners to help you access capabilities you can't develop internally or tap into a new customer base you can't reach on your own?

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Have you created a compelling vision to attract, motivate, and retain top talent as well as external partners, collaborators, and investors?

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Are you comfortable using influential power to build and maintain coalitions?

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Are you able to think and act with agility?

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Can you sustain shared purpose among multiple stakeholders in the face of recurring setbacks?

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Are you prepared to foster a network that will promote ecosystem interests, so everyone wins together?

### **Let us be a part of your success story.**

Find out how Korn Ferry's technology capabilities can support your business success and build you a pipeline of ecosystem leaders.

# OUR TECHNOLOGY EXPERTS



**PAUL DINAN**  
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# READY TO BECOME AN **ECOSYSTEM LEADER?**

Korn Ferry's Global Technology Market works in all aspects of the talent continuum across the industry to partner closely with our clients to develop custom strategies to enable tech organizations to hire, develop, and retain ecosystem leaders.

**Business advisors.**

**Career makers.**