9 Actions for Winning Through a Recession

A 2022-2023 Playbook
Gartner research showed that only a very small number of companies broke away from the pack during the Great Recession (end-2007 to mid-2009) and sustained their performance for the subsequent decade.

As the threat of another downturn looms, it’s timely to revisit lessons learned — in particular, that outperformers win because of the decisive actions they take at the beginning of contractionary periods.

Outperformers:

• Commit before the downturn to the differentiating elements of their strategy to position themselves to power through uncertain times, not simply respond to them.

• Effectively balance top- and bottom-line growth across business conditions. Focusing only on cost-cutting has historically come at the expense of top-line growth.

Unique headwinds further complicate today’s operating environment, but the differentiating decisions clearly hinge on digital.

Among CEOs, 94% want to maintain or accelerate the already intense pace of digital transformation sparked by the pandemic, and 70% of CFOs expect digital technology to get more funding.

The imperative for organizations is placing the right digital bets at the right cost.

**Winners Break Away in the Turns**

Earnings before taxes, interest, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA), 2003-2017

![Graph showing earnings before taxes, interest, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA) from 2003 to 2017 for post-turn winners and average control peers. The post-turn winners show a steady increase in earnings, while the average control peers show more fluctuation.]

$n = 60$ (30 post-turn winners* and 30 control peers)

Source: Gartner

*30 companies from the Fortune 1000 that had 1) consistent year-over-year revenue and margin improvement and long-term growth that exceeded their industry peers in the 20 years from 1994-2014, and 2) sustained that outperformance through 2017 (the last year for which full-year data was available at the time of the analysis).
Navigating Recession Now Would Be Much More Difficult Given the Triple Squeeze

The Triple Squeeze
3 compounding pressures that most executives have likely never experienced

1. **Persistent high inflation**
   69% of CFOs still believe nonlabor input costs will rise significantly.

2. **Scarce, expensive talent**
   47% of CFOs find it difficult to find and hire enterprise talent.
   50% of CFOs still see a significant wave of workforce resignations.

3. **Global supply challenges**
   48% of CFOs believe supply chain volatility and shortages will last beyond 2022.
What Failure Sounds Like During Recession

What we hope you don’t have to tell the board in 2024:

“**We cut costs too far** and could not keep pace with demand when it returned.”

“**Our costs kept increasing with inflation;** now our margins are unattractive to investors.”

“**We continued to spend aggressively on digital,** but we did not capture the value like competitors.”

“**Higher product pricing led to permanently losing market share.**”

“**Competitors out-innovated us** with digital products and services.”

“**Other companies secured great digital talent at a discount.**”
Goal: Make the Right Trade-Offs to Improve Profitability While Funding Faster Digital Acceleration

CFO Plans for Digital Technology Spend (July 2022)
Percentage of CFOs and finance leaders, cross-industry, $50M – $100B in revenue

- **Increase**: 69%
- **Maintain**: 28%
- **Decrease**: 3%

> “I’m telling my teams to fund digital acceleration by finding savings and inefficiencies.”

> “Our business leaders will need to live in an environment of trade-offs, which we haven’t had to do for a while.”

n = 154 CFOs and finance leaders
Q: Q8 from CFO Recession Planning Poll: Which spend categories do you plan to decrease/maintain/increase for the next 12 months?
Top Chief Audit Executive Questions We’re Tackling for Clients

1. How are other audit department budgets changing in response to this environment?

2. What are my must-do investments to digitalize the audit department during the next 12-24 months?

3. How are other audit leaders deciding whether to change the balance of co-/out-sourcing work?

4. How can I restructure or reallocate resources to improve the cost-efficiency of my department?

5. How are other audit departments staying on top of key enterprise and emerging risks amid the volatility?
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<th>Manage spend</th>
<th>Secure talent</th>
<th>Accelerate digital</th>
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<td><strong>1</strong> Create a prioritized list of the trade-offs you will make in your budget, with a story about why.</td>
<td><strong>4</strong> Fundamentally rethink the way your company leverages humans (locations, hours, part- vs. full-time, in-house vs. outsource).</td>
<td><strong>7</strong> Develop a future vision of the customer and employee to accelerate the right digital investments for 2025.</td>
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<td><strong>2</strong> Accelerate movement to the cloud, while paying attention to shifting pricing strategies from software providers as prices rise.</td>
<td><strong>5</strong> Clarify your employee value proposition (EVP) so you are positioned to attract and retain the right digital talent.</td>
<td><strong>8</strong> Invest in predictive and autonomous digital projects that will make the organization faster and leaner.</td>
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<td><strong>3</strong> Radically challenge workflows and processes to make them faster, simpler and more agile for the long term.</td>
<td><strong>6</strong> Aggressively source key digital talent that will shake loose and help accelerate your digital plans.</td>
<td><strong>9</strong> Narrow the metrics you use to measure and manage digital initiatives to the few that align to outcomes.</td>
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Gartner’s CAE Playbook for Navigating Recession

Sample research, benchmarks and other resources for winning in this period. Let us help you plan your unique step-by-step path.

Step 1: Benchmark Spend
- Gartner Budget & Efficiency Diagnostic for Audit
- Identify Sustainable Cost Savings with Gartner Research
- Inquiry with a Gartner Expert

Step 2: Assess Efficiency
- Benchmark Audit Department Structures and Responsibilities

Step 3: Restructure or Reallocate Resources
- Audit Score Diagnostic
  - Get Insight on the Top Priorities of Peer CAEs

Step 4: Prioritize Investments, Set New Success Measures
- Audit Plan Hot Spots
- Aligned Assurance Implementation Guides

Step 5: Optimize Assurance Coverage and Anticipate Risks
- Inquire with Gartner Advisors and Analysts
- Learn from Peers at Gartner Events

Step 6: Pressure Test your Plans and Make Trade-Offs

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U.S.: 1 855 811 7593
International: +44 (0) 3330 607 044

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