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Featured Application

The Full-Stack CSS: Building Cisco's Customer Success Workforce for the AI Era

Cisco CX Customer Success | Networking Architecture | AMER

Overview

As enterprise infrastructure became more automated, data-driven, and AI-enabled, Cisco recognized that customers needed more than post-sale adoption tracking and renewal support. They needed trusted advisors who could navigate complex technical environments, connect technology decisions to business outcomes, and proactively drive adoption success.

Cisco responded by redefining the Customer Success Specialist (CSS) role through a **Designated CSS Full Stack** model that combined deep technical expertise, AI fluency, adoption leadership, and cross-functional orchestration. The transformation was built on four pillars: targeted technical upskilling, a Designated CSS model for complex accounts, grassroots AI innovation, and formal role redesign. Together, these initiatives created a scalable engine for workforce development and customer impact, resulting in measurable improvements in capability, engagement, and business outcomes including a shift from a nearly 100% reactive adoption model to one that is proactive, predictable, and outcome-focused.

Innovation: The Full-Stack CSS Model

The innovation behind the Full-Stack CSS is the deliberate redesign of customer success talent for a more technical, AI-enabled future. Historically, CSS teams could succeed by combining product knowledge, adoption guidance, and renewal awareness. That model is no longer sufficient. AI-ready infrastructure requires specialists who understand the network foundation, the emerging AI taxonomy, the customer's operational environment, and the internal Cisco resources needed to move from strategy to execution. The Full-Stack CSS model brings those capabilities together through four connected pillars:

1. Technical Mastery Through a Triad Learning Ecosystem

We created a practical learning ecosystem that combined AI literacy with deep infrastructure expertise through targeted learning paths across three platforms: Cisco U AITECH for AI fluency and customer conversations, eCornell AI Strategy for connecting AI to business outcomes, and Cisco Certified Network Professional-level training for advanced networking skills. The goal was not certification alone, but building the technical credibility and expertise needed for CSSs to guide customers through increasingly complex AI and infrastructure adoption decisions.

2. Proactive Orchestration Through the Designated CSS Model

For our most complex accounts, Cisco introduced a Designated CSS Liaison Model, elevating the CSS from support participant to technical adoption orchestrator. The Designated CSS owns customer context, anticipates adoption risks, and aligns account teams, architects, specialists, and customer stakeholders around a unified success plan. Rather than requiring expertise in every domain, the role succeeds by orchestrating the right expertise at the right time, demonstrating that customer success scales not through generalists who know everything, but through specialists who can precisely coordinate expertise to drive outcomes.

3. Grassroots Innovation That Turned Learning into Leverage

The team applied its growing technical depth to improve internal operations, building dashboards, automations, and reporting mechanisms that made adoption work more visible, repeatable, and scalable. Two programs accelerated innovation at scale: the Customer Success (CS) Innovation Campaign, which generated 50 improvement ideas, and the CS Hackathon, which produced 46 submissions that transformed individual technical curiosity into reusable team capabilities.

A standout example was an AI agent built by a frontline CSS that searches SharePoint, Cisco Technical Assistance Center (TAC) case history, internal knowledge bases, and the web to deliver real-time technical answers, eliminating hours of manual research. Adopted organically by 562 unique users in its first three months along with 95 additional ideas generated across both programs demonstrated a workforce applying AI skills to drive measurable business value.

4. Formal Role Redesign for the AI Era

Cisco engaged Towers Watson and a cross-functional internal tiger team, including individual contributors, leaders, directors, and operations, to formally rewrite the CSS job architecture and competency model, embedding AI fluency and technical orchestration as core performance requirements. Running in parallel with all other transformation

efforts, this gave the workforce initiative institutional permanence, not just momentum. This effort also bore a new "Technical Leader" title for our most senior grade CSS.

Customer Impact

A More Unified, Expert Cisco Experience: The Designated CSS workflow gives customers a single point of orchestration across product, architecture, adoption, and renewal motions, replacing disconnected conversations with a coordinated engagement model. CSSs who understand both the infrastructure foundation and the emerging AI content around it can move beyond renewal management to provide relevant guidance on adoption blockers, technical dependencies, and long-term architecture readiness.

Better Adoption and Renewal Outcomes: Networking customers furthest along the lifecycle — those who had reached "Green" adoption status — delivered a 30.3% renewal rate improvement under the Full-Stack model. This outcome validates the core thesis: deeper technical orchestration drives the most durable customer relationships.

Trusted Advisor at the Moment That Matters Most: At a large public sector account, a multi-million-dollar data center modernization stalled. The Designated CSS re-engaged through interactive support, personally investigating a months-long product defect alongside Cisco's support teams until it was resolved. From the customer "*His patience and perseverance is simply incredible. He is transparent, knowledgeable, and very personable. Without him, we wouldn't be as far along in these upgrades as we are today."* The effort restored confidence and de-risked a $2.1M renewal.

Business Impact

Dimension	Result	Detail
Certification Output	+514% YOY	86 certifications in first 6 months of FY26 vs. 14 in all of FY25 — the single strongest signal of workforce transformation
Technical Depth	68% hold 2+ certs	Significant concentration of CCIEs, CCNPs, and AI Technical Practitioners
AI Readiness	67% AITECH certified	Bridges traditional networking knowledge with AI-expertise
Role Advancement	Technical Leader Role	A deliberate new title for our most senior CSS; defines strategic adoption frameworks, leads technical conversations, and champions AI
Customer Sat	96% avg CSAT (FY26)	Up from 91% (FY23), 90% (FY24), 94% (FY25); sustained, not incidental
Account Coverage	35% of top accounts	Where implemented, +2.2% in quarter renewal rates. other architecture benchmarks
Renewal Impact	+30.3% (Green tier)	Networking customers in "green" delivered strongest renewal improvement

The Full-Stack CSS model proves that workforce investment is business investment. The +514% certification surge is the headline, but the downstream effects — higher-quality customer engagement, stronger renewal performance, and measurable account-level differentiation — are the outcome that matters.

Reflections & The Road Ahead

- **Grassroots learning beats mandated training.** Upskilling works best when employees connect learning directly to customer impact. The team's strongest momentum came from meaningful learning paths paired with the freedom to apply new skills to real work.
- **Future-ready does not mean knowing everything.** The Designated CSS model proved the most effective CSS is an expert orchestrator: technically credible, deeply familiar with customer context, and skilled at bringing the right expert to the right conversation at the right moment.
- **Internal innovation turns skills into scale.** Certifications built capability. Dashboards, automation, and structured workflows turned that capability into scale. A future-ready workforce needs both technical depth and operating leverage.
- **Formalizing change matters as much as starting it.** The Towers Watson engagement ensured this transformation is embedded in the job architecture — outliving any single program cycle or leadership change.
- **Proving the model is just the beginning**. The Designated CSS model has delivered measurable results and established a proven foundation for scale. With the job architecture formally updated and the model deployed across 35% of high-value accounts, Cisco now has a sustainable framework to expand across the remaining AMER architecture portfolio. The path is proven; scaling is now a matter of investment and execution.

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