



Top 5 Things CIO's Should Know to be Successful

Let's face it- the role of CIO is no easy task. Not only do they have to understand the fundamentals of their environment, but also build relationships with people across the organization to drive a course of action.

The quality of the individual in the role CIO has the single largest impact on the overall effectiveness of the IT department. Remember, this person is usually responsible for one of the largest operations of the company, in terms of costs, and is the only operation that interacts with virtually every point in the organization.

One of the most difficult challenges facing CIOs is that the traditional path to promotion has been from inside the IT department. Nearly 70 percent of CIOs have a career background primarily in the IT area (CIO Magazine, October 1, 2004), but the skills and disciplines that make a top performer in IT operations are typically not the ones that best serve the CIO.

Based on our experience working in the trenches, here are the five most important things that CIOs need to know in order to be successful:

1. Focus outside:

CIOs tend to spend most of their time working with the talented professionals inside their IT group. That's only natural since so many CIOs "grew up" in the technology department and are often most comfortable talking shop with other IT professionals. However, it's very important that the CIO focus on his or her role as an ambassador of IT to the rest of the organization in order for the group to receive the respect and attention it deserves in the executive suite and boardroom. We recommend that CIOs spend at least 50 percent of their time in any given week speaking to individuals outside of IT, ranging from representatives of major suppliers to executives of other business units in the company.

2. Shift Work to Vendors:

IT vendors, such as consulting firms and systems integrators, build a lot of time into their workload for talking to customers and seeking to cultivate relationships. The CIO should compete for his or her share of this allotted time and make sure they are taking advantage of this built-in external resource. This is a great way to get help with strategic planning, development of tactical solutions to challenges and even professional connections to others who may be able to support the group.

3. Substitute Labor for Capital and Vice Versa:

We find that even the most accomplished CIOs will occasionally try to build a technology solution to a problem when a simple "people" solution would have done just fine - and then turn around and do the reverse in another situation. The fact is that it's sometimes easier to just deploy a human solution to a routine process for which you might be tempted to create an IT project to show your group's capabilities.

On the other hand, it's sometimes smarter to create an automated solution in order to reduce the need for staffing resources. A smart CIO will think about some areas where he or she may have fallen into this common CIO trap.

4. Speak Accounting and Get a Budget:

In any organization, you need to have a budget in order to define your place in the company; that's just a reality of corporate culture. As a result, some CIOs are unable to have an impact in the company because they lack an adequate and transparent budget. CIOs need to make sure they are educated to speak the universal business language of accounting so they can effectively interface with their counterparts in the C-suite and cement their role in the organization.

5. Remember what 'IT' is For and From Whence it Came:

It's easy to forget that IT wasn't even around as a corporate function until the 1970s. Compare this youth with disciplines such as Sales, Marketing and Accounting, each of which has been regarded as a central corporate operation from the earliest recorded days of capitalism. But remember this crucial point: the reason for the massive growth of IT is that it has proven its ability to reduce costs (through gains in efficiency) and increase revenues (through gains in product sales). IT has not soared in prominence because of the cool bells and loud whistles that have emerged through the proliferation of computers. When reporting to business executives, the CIO should never lose track of what IT is all about - focus on the simple two outcomes of either reducing costs or increasing revenues.

Conclusion

It's OK if a CIO is lacking in an understanding of some of these crucial things. The important thing is that he or she is pointing in the right direction, making a concerted effort to build relationships and enhance a more strategic view of the organization.

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