



Twists and Turns in recruiting a great CIO

One of the least understood and most underutilized positions is that of the chief information officer. Far too many CEOs and boards focus on recruiting a CIO who is a technical whiz in IT, while overlooking the role the most effective CIOs play as a business partner at the general management table. One of the wisest and most effective CEOs and board members I've ever known talked about hiring a CIO in the same manner a president would think about selecting a vice presidential running mate. It was his view that ideally, his CIO should be able to fill his seat in the event something happened to him. I'm not sure that every CIO needs to be an heir apparent to the CEO, but it does put the importance of this search in the proper perspective.

In any given company, regardless of its size, there are a finite number of seats in the executive committee room. It is critically important that each player in the room add significant value to the overall enterprise. Today the most effective CIOs are business partners to the CEO. They are strategic thinkers who help manage the business, complement their skills, and offer leadership; on top of their technical expertise. The ability to influence and collaborate with the CEO emerges as a primary skill for any CIO. To serve as an effective business partner, the CIO needs to be a strong strategic thinker. Experience in business units outside headquarters or the "ivory tower" is often the best way for aspiring CIOs to sharpen their leadership and strategic skills.

To enjoy real influence with the CEO, the CIO also requires credibility both inside and outside the company. This involves building strong relationships with investors and opinion-leaders, as well as the CEO's other direct reports internally. The most effective CIOs think outside the box, outside the industry, and certainly outside the departments for which they are personally responsible.

Great CIOs also understand the concept of relationship capital within their own organizations. Often viewed as the top corporate geek, CIOs must have the ability to form solid working and synergistic relationships with department heads throughout the organization. They must be viewed as partners with operations, R&D, marketing, sales, supply chain, and human resources to name a few, so that when they do have to use their veto power, they are not viewed as an impediment to driving revenues or improving business processes.

In recent years, the role of the CIO has expanded. Cyber security is now one of the biggest threats in modern day businesses and the CIO is often the top cop in this area. Technology is now at the very core of the customer experience so CIOs must collaborate with marketing, operations, and customer facing pieces of the business like never before. They must also be the organizational advocate for the most

effective use of information technology, acting as problem solver and solution provider to all members of the leadership team. CIOs are increasingly leaned upon to provide solutions that enable scale, process and effective decision making.

Interestingly, three of the most effective CIOs with whom I've had the pleasure to work were not very technical. Conversely, two of the worst CIOs I've known were technical whizzes, one appearing on the front cover of Computer Magazine. In the cases of the non-technical CIOs, none of whom could write a line of code, each new enough about technology to understand its most valuable uses. Each was viewed by their organizations as a strong leader, strategist and problem solver. One had come up through sales, accounting, finance and marketing and had been the CMO before he was asked to take the CIO role. The other two came up through non-technical leadership roles and had always had an interest in technology. The two technical whizzes were so enamored with the technology itself that they lost sight of the purpose of technology. We conducted a search to replace of these tech whizzes who had been on board for three years in a large academic medical institution. He had embarked on a mission to build twenty-seven custom applications no one had asked for, while hundreds of people in the organization were dissatisfied with their basic service. This same tech whiz suffered the organization's most serious security breach because adequate precautions hadn't been taken. Obviously, hiring a non-technical CIO in a startup without an existing technology team would be a non-starter.

The ability to deliver business results is a critical competence for top CIOs. Such leaders have a careful but entrepreneurial approach to systems. They can also talk about business models, rather than technospeak, and support their views with value indicators. And it cannot be all about the technology. The most effective CIOs, while executing flawlessly on the digital, systems, and side of the equation, are equally supportive of corporate initiatives that build goodwill with all stakeholders and fall under the category of just doing the right thing. Far too many information officers have difficulty seeing the "dollars and cents" value in investing in long term initiatives such as education, training, systems, and philanthropy.

Passion is an often-overlooked attribute of outstanding information officers. Because the CIO role demands a healthy dose of objectivity and scrutiny, it might seem like passion is an unlikely trait of these important players. Still, the most effective of CIOs have a love and a passion for their profession, their companies, and their industries. I am not advocating that a CIO must have in-depth knowledge of an industry sector when entering a company. I am saying that in order to achieve maximum effectiveness, the CIO must have a clear understanding and appreciation of the business in which they operate. They should find the business interesting and understand what critical success factors drive the enterprise.

Outstanding CIOs with all these skills and the right personal chemistry with their CEO can become his/her right-hand person. Ultimately, such CIOs become agents of change, creating smarter work patterns throughout their organization with insights that drive performance and help achieve better results. However, only the most talented information executives can succeed in such a demanding role.

It may seem like a daunting task since information leaders with these capabilities are in short supply. For those companies who want to harness the power of a strong CEO/CIO partnership, developing or finding such talent will be well worth the effort.