FIVE WAYS

CIOs Can Become Better Business Partners

SERVICE EXPRESS

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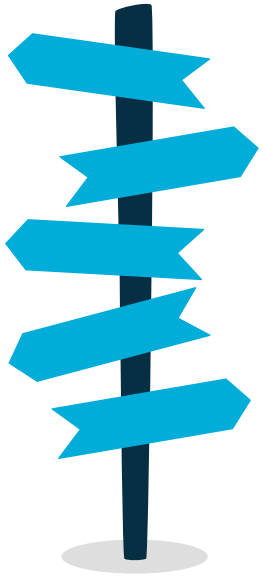
Technology plays an integral part in all areas of an organization.

To improve technology outcomes, Information Technology (IT) departments must work closely with each business unit to understand their objectives and the operational plan to achieve their goals. This is a tall order. IT teams already face the challenge of providing support and expertise for current technologies, while striving to stay a step ahead of any new technology that a department wishes to roll out. To help organizations adapt and thrive in the world of constant change, CIOs must also shift from the singular role of service provider into an expanded role of strategic business partner to the C-suite.



NUMBER ONE

Drive Change Rather vs. Maintaining The Status Quo

CIOs are traditionally expected to maintain the internal technology environment of an organization. This expectation comes with an emphasis on cost reduction and efficiency, and CIOs excelled in this role. Today, however, organizations demand more insight into results and revenue, and technology is critical in providing this data. To align with the push to maximize revenue, it is crucial that CIOs develop a robust external focus, driving result-producing changes wherever possible. This external focus requires IT to ask what value they bring to the customer. The CIO should understand the pain points of the customer and offer better, faster or more advanced options to reduce or resolve customer challenges.

To add customer value, the CIO often must engage internally. IT is no longer the "go-to" for other departments since technology is better understood by today's average employee vs. a decade ago.

Within an organization, team members seek out new software and hardware to tap into greater efficiencies and improve performance. The CIO and his team should proactively identify areas of improvement along with viable solutions, rather than waiting on a request for IT's help in finding a technology solution. Who better to look for solutions than the team that understands how new technologies will fit into the entire IT ecosystem?

Operating with a proactive mindset requires a holistic understanding of the organization's business processes and insight into how processes impact customer pain points. It is imperative that the CIO dedicates time and effort cultivating this mindset within IT and helps IT employees take a more comprehensive approach to support. It is the CIO's responsibility to create and sustain an externally focused IT culture.

NUMBER TWO

Build Accountability Into Tech Innovation

Every year organizations make significant investments in new technology. Deployment and management of these technologies put CIOs in a unique position to hold the rest of the C-suite accountable for the return-on-investment (ROI) of said technology. In this role, a CIO needs to understand what each technology investment should achieve and take the initiative to follow up on results.

For example, if IT were directed to implement the newest million-dollar "got-to-have-it" marketing technology, would the CMO want IT to alert her that only a handful of people were using it effectively? Of course. With this information, the CMO has the opportunity to make changes to how the technology is being used to achieve the desired results.

CIOs can no longer be technicians who emerge from the data center when there is an issue; they must be business partners who are willing to challenge the perceptions of their colleagues with viable and relevant data.

By ensuring the organization invests in results-driven technology, not only is the CIO eliminating waste, but also (and much more importantly) identifying where the organization can improve. By coming alongside other leaders to capitalize on technology spend ROI and to cultivate a level of transparency in the C-suite, the CIO is a key player in helping the organization better leverage its resources.

NUMBER THREE

Train Departments With A Focus On Results

The CIO's team has a unique 360-degree perspective of technology and how it fits into the broader technology ecosystem. With this expertise and insight, the IT team trains end users on the technical capabilities of a hardware or software solution. But a more inclusive training incorporates a business focus; it teaches not only the technical aspects of a tool but also how the tool will improve the productivity of the end user. The end user should know what to anticipate as their proficiency grows – whether that is increased speed, improved reporting, or better customer service.

Expanding the focus beyond tech capabilities will require a significant investment of time and resources, but if a tool is not launched (and supported) well, the chances are great that it will be underutilized and will under-deliver.

In addition to maximizing the potential for the user, the technology, and the organization, the CIO's investment in training with a business focus can uncover and mitigate security concerns. Users are the greatest security threat within an organization and are often unaware of the risk they create. By understanding how teams utilize tools, IT staff can train users on safe practices and help identify unsafe ones. Security is a priority for every C-suite member, so avoiding risks and providing peace of mind is one of the surest ways a CIO can become a better business partner.

NUMBER FOUR

Develop IT Employees To Align With Business Objectives

It is not enough for only the CIO to understand the business side of the organization. To align with all business units successfully, all IT employees must possess a thorough understanding of business concepts, vocabulary, and tactics. As noted earlier, IT teams need to understand the business objectives to find needed technologies and communicate how those technologies are best used – but how do IT professionals learn about these relevant topics?

CIOs can enable their teams by implementing periodic training on the business basics. IT employees should come to understand the business model, value propositions, and sales cycles. Development should include reviewing business plans, relevant annual reports, operations schedules, and marketing strategies. Terms such as “product mix,” “COGS,” and “channel management,” to name a few, should be discussed on a routine basis.

Investing in broader business-related training requires a considerable commitment. With careful planning and execution, the investment will develop the IT team’s capacity to successfully meet departmental and organizational demands.

NUMBER FIVE

Be Agile

In a business environment that is rapidly changing, opportunities must be acted on immediately to capture a competitive advantage. In the past decade, the most successful organizations were able to scale with ease. Being an adaptable organization hinges on the CIO's ability to be agile and swiftly equip an organization so that it can pursue opportunities.

Consider becoming a more agile CIO in the following ways:

MENTALITY

CIOs need to embrace a mentality that not only accepts, but also keeps pace with change. This can mean frequent course corrections and quick action. Hitting a moving target can be challenging, but tolerating all the reasons a project cannot be done is not an acceptable role of an effective business partner. Agility starts with a mindset prepared for challenges, open to new objectives, and communicating realistic and innovative solutions.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND PLATFORM

Behind any agile CIO is an agile infrastructure and platform. Opportunities are missed if the IT infrastructure or platform is not able to remain secure, scale swiftly or incorporate new technologies sufficiently. CIOs should be able to describe what this agile IT environment will look like. Detailed questions must be answered, such as: Is it cross-platform? Does it utilize flexible vendors? How much is outsourced? How is the architecture written?

TALENT

CIOs should consider building agile talent pools, to match an agile infrastructure and platform. The CEO does not want to learn that the IT team is incapable of delivering a critical project. While consultants can dispense needed project knowledge, their investment and understanding of the organization is limited. CIOs should instead close the IT talent gap by hiring individuals whose skills and strengths can meet the current and future IT needs.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Agility is also found in flexible project management. CIOs should question what is absolutely necessary to the three- or five-year plan. All other projects should be on shorter six-month, one-year, or 18-month plans. Utilizing shorter plans more often builds in greater flexibility so IT teams are better able to support new opportunities.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There is a great deal of change, innovation and determination involved in becoming a better business partner. Each shift comes with its own set of challenges, so practice patience. Regardless of your long-standing focus as an IT leader or the current status of your IT team, you can take steps today to increase your value, strengthen your impact and build a highly capable IT department.