

LIKE A BOSS

As the top job in an enterprise for those with a career in technology, the role of CIO seems like a natural progression for the IT manager. But many struggle to make the leap from head of IT management to the head of IT strategy. *Arabian Computer News* speaks to existing and aspiring CIOs to work out where the main challenge lies.

By Ben Furfie

As the top job in an organisation, at least from an technology perspective, it's little surprise that many within the IT department set their career goals around achieving those three letters against their name. They are, of course, CIO.

In the past, when the technology department fell under the financial side of the business, and the chance of attaining the role of CFO was slim to none, the top position in most organisations for those making their careers in the technology space was IT manager.

But with the coming of the information age, businesses began to integrate technology in ways that fundamentally changed the relationship between the management and IT. Hence, the position of the CIO or chief information officer, came about. The need to anthropomorphise what can be a high technical part of the business, as well as introduce someone who could essentially translate

between techno-babble and business-speak were two of the main motivating factors behind the move.

However, it's the because of the juxtaposition between the role's two major requirements – a sound business sense and the ability to communicate, contrasted against the sometimes reclusive nature of 'the IT geek' – that most of the confusion about who is best for the job springs forth.

The result has been the establishment of two ideologically opposed schools of thought. From the technology side, there has been a tendency to believe that the role of CIO is by some quasi-sense of entitlement, a 'birth-right' of those with a background in IT. There have been several documented cases throughout the years where an 'outsider' being handed the reins of the IT department has met with a test of their technical knowl-

edge: a sort of fraternity initiation. Fail it, and the CIO can find themselves ostracised from the IT department's daily workings – a sure-fire recipe for being fired.

Equally, there have been several instances where board members have rallied against bringing in someone with a perceived lack of business knowledge; largely because IT is seen as a cost centre, rather than a revenue generator.

Thankfully, recent years have seen this mentality subside a little as IT managers have found themselves becoming less and less specialised and taking on more and more business responsibilities. This has been largely down to them being positioned as the enforcer of the IT department's goals.

As CIOs have moved IT away from being a service department towards being innovation and enablement centres, IT managers

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Newly promoted CIOs have to be careful they don't get involved with day-to-day IT management.

have found themselves becoming the people expected to take the plans drawn up by the board and CIO, and make them a reality. This exposure to business practices has dulled some of the concerns raised by the board about lack of business exposure. However, despite the vitriol having been toned down, there is a significant split between those who believe the role can only be successfully filled by someone with a technical background, and those who believe a solid business acumen will always come out top.

"In my opinion, the most important background for a CIO is a technical one," asserts Fiaz Mansha, IT manager at Gatehouse IT, and an MBA student at Cass Business School. In the other corner is Kamal Tarazi, principal analyst at Booz and Company. "A technical background is only a plus today, whereas a deep understanding of the business is fast becoming a must for any aspiring CIO," he argues.

The different viewpoints are somewhat tempered by those already in the role of CIO. "The CIO has always straddled the line between technology and business," says Sanjay Mirchandani, chief information officer at global technology giant EMC. "But today, they have an opportunity to elevate the

IN NUMBERS

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The average age of CIOs in the US and Canada according to a recent survey into senior IT management across North America.

role of IT in helping to meet the company's strategic goals."

It's a point echoed by two of the region's leading IT bosses, Lamyia Altabtebai, executive manager of IT at Kuwait International Bank, and Ian McKenzie, head of IT at Emirates College for Advanced Education.

"A successful CIO can be best described as the ambassador of the business world to the land of IT, not the other way around," states Altabtebai. "They need to talk both languages fluently, and strive to achieve the business' goals with the available IT resources. A CIO is more valuable to an organisation as a business strategist responsible for aligning IT strategy accordingly."

McKenzie adds: "It depends on a couple of factors; what is the business of the compa-

ny, and what resources the CIO has to draw upon, but the simple answer to whether a CIO should have a technical or business background, the only answer is both."

Perhaps a more appropriate question isn't so much should a CIO have a technical or business background, but whether or not they should have a deep understanding of the technology they're buying.

"Having a technical understanding of technology is important," argues CEO of UAE-based IT service provider eHosting Datafort Yasser Zeineldin. "However, technology keeps changing quickly, so it is more important for a CIO to have a large amount of relevant IT experience than it is to have deep technical knowledge – especially as a foundation to their ability to carry out the decision making that a CIO is responsible for," he adds.

Altabtebai agrees, adding: "Having a technical background will also grant them the team's trust, which is important for effective leadership."

While the need for a technical background is desirable, there is agreement across the board that an ability to understand things from a business perspective is tantamount. However, there are differences between how those skills are achievable.

"Surveys and studies of various C-level executives have shown that leadership skills can be fostered with the right level of coaching," states Tarazi. "Being taught to think like a business leader and evaluate technology propositions in terms of their value to the organisation is a must."

It's a point echoed by Mansha. "Most of what a C-level executive needs can be taught if he or she has the right background, and is willing to change and learn." However, he warns that it is crucial that newly promoted CIOs keep in touch with the shop floor, but that they don't allow themselves to continue to be absorbed in the day-to-day running of the IT department. "The challenge that most IT managers face is that they prefer to remain hands-on and not are prepared to change from being techies.

"The CIO needs to have a hybrid set of skills, including marketing, business strategy, accounting, HR compliance and so on. The skills are a core subject area that can be taught in most MBA courses," he adds.

However, McKenzie is less sure that you

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Being the CIO is more about IT strategy than it is about IT management, say experts.

can simply be 'taught' how to be a good business executive. "I think that with anything people can be taught to improve, but only to a point. Obviously, there are physical limit. Take athletics for example: it might be possible to teach a person techniques that will enable them to run 100 metres a second or two faster, but unless they were born with a natural athletic talent, they're unlikely to ever run that distance in under ten seconds.

"The same goes for being a CIO," he continues. "I believe that individuals can be

taught to improve their abilities substantially in both technical and management areas, but people may be handicapped by mental limitations, or ingrained perceptions they have of themselves, which shape their confidence and ability to take on new challenges."

Zeineldin goes even further and states

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You're doing it wrong.

THE RISING TIDE

While it's not unheard of for someone from the financial or logistical side of the business to be named as CIO, it is uncommon. However, it's almost unheard of for anyone from the IT side of the business to be named as anything other than CIO, and even then, a distinct number of employees from the technology side of the business never progress beyond the role of IT manager.

We asked four professionals in senior IT positions, some already CIOs, others on the cusp of becoming one, what they thought the secret to being a successful CIO was.

All agreed that the most important trait to develop was communication. "Talk half as much as you listen," states McKenzie. "IT managers are often focused

on the technology itself, rather than what businesses users around them are saying," adds Tarazi.

Altabtebai stresses that it is important to develop communications skills, if only to avoid "patronising" staff who lack a similar understanding of technology. "That is the key to success of IT in an organisation."

Another aspect many of them agreed upon was the need to grasp the business, and address them as business manager with an in depth understanding of IT, rather than a specialist trying to speak in business terms. "Aspiring CIOs must show a greater understanding of the business, the role, and its interaction with other departments," says Mansha. "There is a far greater focus on numbers, such as budgets, costs, impacts to profit and loss and so on."

IN NUMBERS

43%

More CIOs spend time managing costs than they do focusing on IT according to a recent survey of senior American and Canadian IT professionals.

that being a CIO can't be taught. "It is gained through experience."

Both Altabtebai and Mirchandani both agree that with the right attitude though, it is possible to succeed in making the transition from IT manager to CIO. "There is no question that you need to be skilled in your chosen profession, but you must also have the dedication and passion to drive your career, to explore new opportunities, and to inspire your team to excel," argues Mirchandani.

Altabtebai adds: "Successful C-level executives are those courageous enough to choose to accept change, and lend themselves to what they have learnt." **ACN**