

A smiling man in a dark suit and striped tie is shaking hands with another person whose arm is visible on the left. A laptop is open on a table in front of him. The background is a bright, out-of-focus office setting. The image is overlaid with a large, semi-transparent diamond shape and a grid pattern.

5 TRAITS OF THE NEW RIDICULOUSLY SUCCESSFUL BREED OF CIOs



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It's not enough for today's CIOs to oversee IT and IT alone — they need to network throughout the company, looking for ways to make IT a business function, not an afterthought. These five traits are the ones CIOs need to be ridiculously successful.



1 INNOVATIVE

It's a word you hear often — but when it comes to CIOs, what does it really mean? Some ideas: Open minded, they look for the unexpected, they have a pragmatic view of ROI while still looking for new solutions, they're comfortable with failure.

2 STRATEGIC

Reducing costs and boosting efficiency have long been IT's role. Successful CIOs are focused on giving IT a business role in helping support and retain customers. CIOs need to change the way they — and other business leaders — think about IT and what it can do for the organization.

3 COLLABORATIVE

For most professionals, collaboration is a valuable skill absolutely required for success. CIOs in particular must be able to work effectively with people in a variety of levels, departments and positions. Successful CIOs are good listeners, are empathetic and are eager to find solutions that work for everyone.

4 PEOPLE-FOCUSED

Successful CIOs take their role as leaders seriously. They value people on their teams and want to help them succeed through development and advocacy. They anticipate the future needs of the teams they're responsible for as well as those of the company.

5 TECH ADVOCATE

CIOs need to be able to see big-picture events and circumstances that others don't, and then zoom in to identify tech solutions.

Today's successful CIO is more than just an order-taker at the executive table. In fact, America's most admired and successful companies are crushing their competitors by leveraging technology as a competitive differentiator rather than merely as a collection of "me too" productivity enhancements and cost-reduction solutions.

Any CIO still focused heavily on cost control, empire building and political point-winning is a dinosaur and will surely perish over time.

Wise CEOs have reshaped expectations of the CIO from that of productivity hunters, cost-reduction czars and service bureau order-takers to critical innovators of strategy, client experience and product creation. The new CIO is leading the way on developing high-stakes, high-visibility projects that help transform the whole enterprise and client experience and consequently contribute mightily to the company's success relative to its less-enlightened competition.

However, this transformation of expectations, focus and results is not for the meek.

That C in their title must also stand for confident. "You need to not only be confident in your own job, but also proficient in the business you're providing IT services for. You need to learn that business as best you can," says John Baldoni, chairman of leadership development at N2Growth, an executive leadership consultancy that often works with CIOs.

This new generation of IT leaders must be able to influence stakeholders throughout the organization, manage talent effectively, have a vision and communicate well. No longer are CIOs simply the go-to

tech experts — they are active, engaged leaders who drive business results through technology.

Do you have what it takes? This guide will look at the five traits CIOs need to be successful in this new paradigm.

A HUNGER FOR INNOVATION

It's a word bandied around often in tech circles, but for the modern CIO, what does innovation really mean?

For John Bandy, CIO at Data Recognition Corp., it's about being attracted to "messy situations" and wanting to make them better. It means being able to face ambiguous situations and find a way forward. "A successful CIO has to be able to live with uncertainty; nothing is black and white," Bandy says. "You have to take risk. The ability to adapt as you go is critical to success."

This pursuit of innovation applies to both internal and external customers.

Joe Topinka, CIO at SnapAV, says that when he was at a major shoe manufacturer, his team visited 30 stores across the U.S. to see how staff waited on customers and to learn more about the product line and how technology enhanced or hurt engagement. During those visits, they noticed something: When a store was out of stock, the manager would send a broadcast email to about 500 other stores asking if they had the product.

The customer would stand there, waiting for someone to respond. "We said 'this is silly,' and worked to get every store inventory in a database searchable by ZIP code," Topinka says. One month later, the company rolled out the database, immediately enhancing customer service — and improving the relationship between front-line retail workers and corporate staff.



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– JOHN BANDY, CIO at Data Recognition Corp.

STRATEGIC THINKING

Reducing costs and boosting efficiency through tech solutions have long been part of IT's role. But the CIOs of today are focused on more than streamlining back-office functions. They're rethinking what IT can do for the entire organization, including sales and customer service.

Successful CIOs keep the enterprise's strategy in mind with every decision, Bandy says. "They need to be business-savvy and tech-savvy at the same time," he says. "Long term, you have to watch the industry of IT and the business industry to keep your strategies current and relevant. You have to stay nimble and agile."

Great CIOs help the enterprise wake up to the power of converged IT and business, Topinka says. They identify the strategy inherent in every IT project, pinpointing how it affects the top or bottom line, he says. "That's when magic happens. Otherwise you're just an old-school dial-tone IT organization that looks at nothing more than making sure the email is working," Topinka says.

ENTHUSIASM FOR COLLABORATION

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"CIOs have the unenviable task of providing things for people who want it right now," Baldoni says. "They have to be good communicators. They have to be patient and be able to communicate what needs to be done and when it can be delivered."

Bandy says he makes an effort to listen more than he speaks. "I recognize good ideas and solutions can come from anyone, and try not to limit the ability for others to contribute and participate even if it's not their job," he says.

It can be easy to point fingers in today's business environment, but CIOs must avoid doing so and instead focus on identifying and implementing solutions.

"When you're shopping a particular complaint around the office, that's not what leaders do," Topinka says. "Instead of judging a situation, I try to lead it. If you see a problem, instead of taking it from one office to another, offer suggestions or help."

Bandy says being able to relate to others — having empathy that shows you can listen and find solutions that work for everyone — is key for CIOs. In addition, emotional intelligence and an ability to build trust can help ensure success across all levels and departments.

Sometimes collaboration means supporting a tough position, Topinka says. He was faced with this situation when the person who hired him in his current role stepped down a couple of months after Topinka took the job. When the new CEO came in, he let the marketing and operations chiefs go. "He told me he was keeping me, but that I wasn't on the executive team anymore," Topinka says.



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Topinka’s response may shock some people. “I understood; he was in the driver’s seat. I told him that he had my complete support to change what he needed to ensure we were successful in the marketplace.” Two months later he was brought back on the executive team. “Sometimes you support and don’t debate the decision. When you do, you can get surprising results,” Topinka says.

ENTHUSIASM TO LEAD PEOPLE

Successful CIOs take their role as team leaders seriously. They value the people on their teams and want to help them succeed through development and advocacy.

While successful CIOs are looking for ways to help steer their enterprises, they also are looking for ways to manage their own teams more strategically. Putting the right people in the right place is one of the key ways strong CIOs take a strategic role in the company. You need the right staff with the right talent, Bandy says, and sometimes that means outsourcing some tasks. “The successful CIO looks for ways to stay focused on core competencies of the business.”

Leadership is a skill that must be developed like any other, and it’s not just for extroverts. Bandy describes himself as a fairly reserved person who needs to make a deliberate effort to be outgoing. “Everyone is going to have personality traits that may be viewed as a weakness to some of the characteristics of success,”

he says. “That doesn’t mean you can’t learn different behavior when you need to use it.”

One way to do this is to seek out a mentor, Bandy says. “If you see someone that succeeds, watch them, listen to them, emulate them,” he says. “Be teachable. Find ways that you can be more self-aware. You have to know yourself before you can change yourself. Don’t expect others to do it for you.”

CHAMPION FOR THE POWER OF NEW TECH

Above all, great CIOs are advocates for technology and its power to transform business. “You have to be a bilingual IT leader — someone who speaks business first, and then speaks the language of technology,” Topinka says.

CIOs need to be able to see big-picture events and circumstances that others don’t, and then zoom in to identify tech solutions. “If you’re a CIO, you’ve got to be able to spend time in the marketplace, interact with customers and bring information back to the organization in a way the CFO and CEO can understand,” he says.

For example, Topinka says, his company is rolling out a cloud-based platform that lets customers manage SKUs across the product line from a smartphone. “Getting to that level of understanding and seeing how the pain point comes alive in the marketplace — that’s key,” he says.

Successful CIOs also need their whole IT team to have that same dedication, working together toward common goals. “No matter how strong you are or your teams are, they will perform better if they are in the same cadence with each other,” Bandy says. “Think of team sculling — all the rowers in the boat have to have the same cadence or they don’t move forward as fast as they could.”

In this role, CIOs must trust themselves as the experts, Baldoni says. “You’re not an order-taker — you’re a strategic leader, so act like one.”

CONCLUSION

Enlightened CEOs have entirely different expectations of what it means to be a successful CIO and a valued member of the executive team. These changing expectations have shone a spotlight on how the traits of CIOs have had to change over the years. The role has evolved to one of true strategy and innovation, and will never return to one of merely mastering technology, lowering costs and keeping the lights on.

In today’s business environment, the traits discussed in this guide will help today’s CIO achieve success for their departments, the enterprises they work for and, ultimately, themselves.

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476 Robert Street North

Saint Paul, MN 55101

651.556.1200

