



Unlocking the CIO's Strategic Potential

By Chris Potts



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Three independent surveys into the role of the CIO highlight some keys to unlocking the CIO's contribution to corporate strategy.

I've been comparing the data and conclusions from three recent, authoritative and independent surveys concerning the role of the CIO. They are: CIO Magazine's 2009 "State of the CIO"; IBM's "The CIO Profession: Leaders of Change, Drivers of Innovation"; and Deloitte/Cranfield's "Realising the Value From a CIO: Navigating the Silicon Ceiling".

Amongst all the useful findings about perennial subjects such as reporting lines, business priorities, CIO tenures, and so on are some nuggets of data and commentary that offer the more forensically-minded CIO some valuable insights on her potential strategic contribution, and how to unlock it.

Here are six of the best:

- The CIO role is widely misunderstood, and varies in accountabilities and scope between organizations. Therefore you have the opportunity to innovate in the true purpose of your role and how you want to achieve it. Do it your way.
- Most people still think that the CIO role is primarily about IT, often not differentiating it from the CTO. Yet there are some CIOs who have no accountability for IT. The presumption that CIO equals IT may be widespread, but it is not cast in stone. There is, after all, no "T" in CIO. Unearth for people the non-technology, strategic aspects of your role, and make them central to your business contribution. Enterprise Architecture – in its true business form – and Investment Portfolio Management are usually the two most valuable examples.
- It seems that many, many people are still trying to overcome the 'hurdle of business IT alignment'. Break the deadlock by helping people to see that this is based on a flawed model, so no wonder it is difficult. "The business" is not a single, fully aligned unit, with "IT" separate and uniquely misaligned. Instead, help to pinpoint any damaging misalignments in the business as whole, and work with the CEO and other executives to prioritise and fix them. If you and your staff are involved in corporate decision-making and leadership, 'alignment' will take care of itself.

- There is a huge mismatch between the kinds of value that organizations are planning to achieve with their IT-related investments, and what CEOs actually expect. Instigate a review of the organization's strategy for exploiting investments involving IT, in collaboration with the CEO. The difficult economic climate makes this essential. Not a penny of investment should be wasted on the wrong kind of value, or on value that your organization's strategies and business plans don't truly need.
- The CIO role is becoming a leader of change. In one survey, 70% of CIOs said that 'strategic thinking and planning' is a critical competency in the CIO role, yet only 42% said that 'collaboration and influence' are critical, and 'change leadership' only 30%. By comparison 45% said that 'expertise in running the IT function' is a critical CIO competency. Your strategic contribution is about leading business change through collaboration and influence, not just strategically thinking and planning, and not through running IT.
- The CIO role may well be temporary, lasting only until the organization has embedded information and technology into its strategies and management. Plan now for a much more influential executive position if the CIO role diminishes in importance, and execute that plan in every decision and action. The hints and leads tucked away in surveys, such as the examples I have chosen here, offer you the potential foundation for success.

One of the surveys prompts a particular word of caution about how you articulate strategy. It lists four CIO competency areas: Leadership; Business Strategy and Process; Innovation and Growth; Organization and Talent Management. To assume and portray such a tight coupling between Strategy and Process can be very damaging to your prospects, and your strategy, depending on the culture of your organization and the focus of your CEO. What if your CEO regards Leadership as the key to Strategy, not Process? Strategy can easily be about any of the other three areas highlighted in the survey, and more not listed.

Rather than typecast yourself as appearing to think that all corporate and business strategies are about the same thing, keep Strategy as a distinct competency and adapt its tactical focus depending on the context.

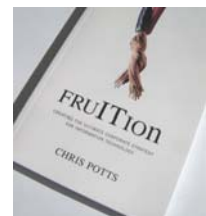
Also, make sure you separate Corporate Strategy from Business Strategy in everything that you do, and make it clear which one is your primary strength. Are you a corporate strategist or a business strategist? How does this obviously manifest itself in the way you define and execute your role today, and in your strategy for the future?



Chris is a Corporate IT Strategist and CIO Futurist,
an award-winning speaker and author of the business novel

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Write to him at: cdpotts@dominicbarrow.com

Visit his website at: www.dominicbarrow.com

You'll find the three surveys here:

http://computerworld.com.edgesuite.net/cio/pdfs/2009_state_of_the_cio_highlights.pdf

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