

The shifting role of the CIO

The role of the chief information officer (CIO) has evolved over the past few years, with CIOs no longer just the decision makers for IT systems.



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Indeed, they are now becoming a critical driver in achieving business goals, although this requires a distinct shift in mindset from being an operational partner to being a strategic partner within the organisation. The CIO has to become part of the key decision-making process within the company in order to succeed. But what exactly does it take to be a successful CIO?

According to Mark Walker, Regional Director for Africa of International Data Corporation (IDC), today's CIO requires a number of leadership skills in order to meet expectations and deliver results. "The modern CIO must have a clear vision and be capable of inspiring innovation, because it is impossible to drive forward while looking back," said Walker, who will be addressing this issue at the forthcoming IDC South Africa CIO Summit in March. "As such, the CIO must have a concise understanding of what needs to be done, where the organisation needs to be within the broader industry, and how technology can help it all happen. CIOs should also be asking themselves what technologies are available to make life easier for both internal and external resources, and they should lead the way in adopting these solutions. In addition, the CIO must become involved in any new projects right from the very outset, serving as a proactive business partner rather than a reactive implementer."

Walker believes the ability to build relationships is also critical. "While relationships are crucial in any environment, the CIO has to be able to have good relationships with various levels of people, such as peers, team members, suppliers, and other players in the industry," he said. "In addition, CIOs must have an intimate understanding of their organisation's strategic direction and be able to articulate their technology requirements in business terms, enabling them to influence their C-level counterparts. Another way of simplifying the process is by standardising technology and business definitions so that the IT team and the various lines of business all speak the same language. Industry relationships are also becoming increasingly important for gaining insights and staying ahead of the competition."

The impact on the business

Walker said that it is no longer about technology, but more about the impact on the business. "CIOs are tasked with driving process efficiency and need to ensure there is proper collaboration within the organisation," he said. "This means they must have an in-depth understanding of the business as a whole and must be able to interpret what individuals within different lines of business need before translating those needs into technology requirements. The CIO must also have the acumen to report on overall business metrics, rather than just relying on standard measurements, such as return on investment and total cost of ownership."

Flexibility is another key skill requirement for the CIO of today. "Technology is continuously changing and so are business demands," said Walker. "In order to succeed, the CIO must be able to foresee the implications of these changes and take the lead in minimising their impact on the business and its people. The CIO must also have the resilience to weather any type of storm, be it a technical issue or resistance to change from individuals elsewhere within the business."

Walker believes that while making this transition will be difficult, it is an unavoidable shift in mindset that must be undertaken by every CIO: "At the end of the day, CIOs cannot just be experts in one area anymore; they must have all these leadership skills in their locker if they are to be truly effective."

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