Why is the best digital strategy a human one?

The better the question.
The better the answer.
The better the world works.

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Throughout this eBook series, we have discussed how a CIO adapts as business is disrupted. We first looked at the five ways to de-risk innovation and future proof your IT initiatives. We also recognize that while CIOs are shifting more toward a business focus – versus purely technology – there are important steps along the way to becoming a successful business partner and digital transformation leader. Then we discussed the four fundamental capabilities of a Transformative CIO: visibility, flexibility, reliability and securability. It will be difficult for organizations to succeed without these capabilities present in their technology leaders. Next, we uncovered why your strategy, data and technology, workforce and strategic vendors are the four building blocks to a successful digital foundation. Continuing our series, we looked at how CIOs have been navigating the pandemic and continue to move with agility as the future remains unclear. Now, we turn to our final topic and will analyze the IT talent agenda and how to build the right team for tomorrow's challenges – regardless of disruption.

The talent agenda

What kind of team does a CIO need to build to meet tomorrow's challenges?

Upskilling the workforce

For a CIO to make the move from a tactical to a strategic focus, and enable transformation across their business, there is no more important focus than assembling the right talent in the right roles. For example, managing data and applications in the cloud is different than on premise, so a business may need to upskill its workforce with cloud strategists, database administrators, data management and application migration experts, cloud engineers and security experts, among other roles. Enterprises will also need to add artificial intelligence experts willing to leverage emerging technologies, such as chatbots, machine learning and even deep learning. And of course, change management and program management expertise will be highly sought after to help people adopt and continue using the various technologies needed to win in the market.

Winning hearts and minds

Implementing technologies within the CIO's purview (e.g., DevOps, application testing, performance management) is sometimes the easy part. The real difficulty lies in effectively engaging the rest of the business on new digital initiatives. Implementing new technologies involves behavioral changes and mindset shifts, particularly for technologies that require the workforce to connect, collaborate and learn in new ways.

Take, for instance, the need to quickly shift to working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Going back to March 2020, within a couple of weeks, most employers told their workers to not come in the office and work from home. But with such a mandate, technology needs quickly accelerated. Companies found themselves lacking enough employee laptops, desktops, keyboards and other computer peripherals for employees to successfully work from home. And enterprises that rolled out collaboration platforms on the fly, such as Microsoft Teams, mightily strained enterprise network bandwidth.

To make changes like these happen in weeks – and not months – demands as much from technology enablement as it does from IT talent. In the case of COVID-19, there was a compelling catalyst for change. But in many cases, the impetus for new technology rollouts are not as clear, and organizations struggle with business units that prefer the status quo.

That is why a CIO needs to be the key advocate for the digital transformation journey and evangelize unique and compelling benefits to various stakeholders to gain buy-in. This may involve running events like data boot camps, data science competitions, technology fairs, inviting experts to speak, and more to help employees understand the art of the possible. Efforts such as these often help ignite new ideas, foster innovation and create employee excitement for what technology can bring to the table.

2.7%

of executives in senior roles at 10 major tech companies are black.

Source: *U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, June 2020
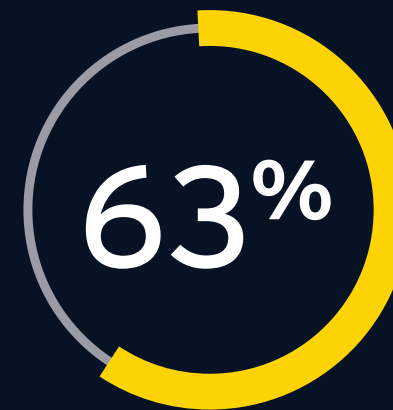
63% of black tech employees found it more difficult to find a mentor.

Diversity drives high-performance

The relationship between diversity and innovation is well-recognized. More diverse teams help unlock innovation and consequently lead to stronger organizational performance. Greater diversity and inclusive environments can also drive better decision-making, stimulate innovation and increase organizational agility. To thrive during periods of business transformation, a culture in which people team and lead inclusively will help organizations tap into the vast potential of a diverse workforce.

To build diverse and high-performing teams, the Transformative CIO needs to change their hiring and retention practices. It's hard to find great talent, so they should choose from a diverse interview pool for all roles, particularly senior ones in the organization. And should a CIO find themselves with a shortlist of just three very similar candidates with no diversity, they need to pause the process, even if that costs another month to go back and explore the talent pool again and identify more diverse options.

Second, a CIO needs to focus on retention. Usually, diversity at entry-level positions is not an issue for organizations. The real challenge is enabling talent to move on to mid-level and then senior positions. Therefore, a CIO must look closely at retention and career mobility statistics and then ask questions to find out if there are issues.

Third, a CIO needs to consider offering diverse team members the ability to lead high-profile transformative projects. Chosen project leaders can work with the CIO on a weekly basis and gain access to business leadership teams. Armed with the opportunity to showcase their abilities and improve their executive visibility, this may open the door for new roles for diverse staff within the organization.

Finally, diversity needs to be a standing agenda item with pre-determined metrics to measure results against, and the CIO needs to ask questions of their team to make sure those metrics are being met. If diversity and inclusiveness is not an integral part of IT leadership meetings, it is difficult for change to occur.

Inspiring tomorrow's leaders

To help solve the problem of a shortage of diversity in leadership roles at technology organizations, the inspiring CIO needs to be an advocate and a mentor to enable change. CIOs must sponsor the dialogue in their business and promote issues, and they need to talk openly about how they can enact change.

Technology leaders should – whenever possible – direct young people and students toward technology and STEM-oriented subjects. CIOs and IT leaders can also sponsor and mentor in the professional growth and development of technology students. Taking this long-term view will be key to helping solve the lack of diversity in information and technology departments.

Contact EY for more insights and information on becoming a Transformative CIO or to start your technology transformation journey.

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