

CIO Perspectives: Past, Present, and Future

In a Q&A in the current edition of PricewaterhouseCoopers's quarterly Technology Forecast, EMC Corp. CIO Sanjay Mirchandani shares his views on how the cloud is accelerating the repositioning of IT to support business development and innovation. Cloud computing, the self-described "career businessperson" tells PwC, is enabling IT to be more responsive to the business. At EMC, members of the IT team are responsible for running core integration projects, "and they're seen as subject matter experts."

Cloud computing allows IT departments to be more agile in responding to business activities with technology solutions. Moreover, he explains, those solutions can now be assets with real "longevity." IT can be more cost-effective by adding capacity only when usage of current capabilities is fully realized. "It's better utilization, and it's a better return on assets," he tells PwC, adding that the CFO "loves that conversation."

Meanwhile, as the role of IT evolves, so does the IT organization. Mirchandani also sees the traditional silos within IT systems, security, network operations, and storage operations continue to blur as IT becomes more centralized from a technology perspective.

From silos to ivory towers...

Mirchandani talks of the "incredible leaps in technology in short windows of time." Meanwhile, from academia comes the latest scholarly survey of the CIO role in the latest issue of the Journal of Information, Information Technology, and Organizations. Gordon Hunter of the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada, bases his article, on one-on-one interviews with sitting CIOs from the United States, New Zealand, and Taiwan.

The problem with academic articles is that they're usually derivative of decades of previous research. Rigorous scholarship proceeds in its own sweet time, in stark contrast to the brisk pace of change in the real world. So even though the ink is barely dry on Hunter's article, "The Chief Information Officer: A Review of the Role" reads like something out of a time machine. He notes, for instance, that "the CIO still is held in lower regard than other members of the senior management team," referencing an article from five years ago.

While I don't recommend CIOs actually read the article it's still interesting to note some of the career implications the professor draws from his interviews. If nothing else it's worth mentioning because of the variety in the population of real-life CIOs who voluntarily participated in comprehensive questioning about their personal and professional backgrounds. Hunter interviewed 18 CIOs: five from New Zealand, six from Taiwan, and seven from the U.S. The subjects represent mid-size and large companies in industries as diverse as manufacturing, education, health services, and airlines.

The future issues these CIOs anticipate include more dealings with external parties such as customers and regulators; situations related to language and culture in outsourcing arrangements; and the use of IT capabilities to reduce costs across the organization. On the IT-management front, the interviewees indicated as their main concerns hiring the right mix of skills and performance standards. "CIOs will be looking for an independent assessment model," Hunter writes.

Finally, from his analysis of the subjects' professional profiles, Hunter suggests industry focus will be an advantage to CIOs in the future, as the CIO role becomes increasingly tied to business strategy. "It becomes a very high-risk approach for a CIO to change industries," he concludes.