

The CIO Role in a Post-COVID World

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The unprecedented global lockdown in the wake of the spread of COVID-19 has catapulted the Chief Information Officer into the spotlight. Virtually overnight, a company's technology platform became the lynchpin around which all other business functions turned, acting as shopfront, client support, HR, warehousing, dispatch and conference centre, and accelerating a jump to digital that had already been in the wings for some time. With tech having emerged as the only winner in the COVID-crisis, how will this affect the CIO function going forward? We asked five of our top tech practice leaders for their views on the possible impact of the COVID-19 experience on this complex and evolving role.

Assuming you have the technical skills and domain expertise, this is what will set post-COVID CIOs apart. Do you have what it takes? Read our top requirements [here](#)

"When the COVID tide turns, it will become clear who has been swimming naked in terms of their platform and technology readiness, and who fell short, and was exposed," says [Tony Leng](#) of [Diversified Search](#) / AltoPartners USA. Together with his AltoPartners colleagues in Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and South Africa, a large proportion of his California-based practice is focussed on actively helping clients to bridge the digital divide and future-proof their businesses.

"Even before COVID-19, the CIO role had been going through some significant transitions in keeping with the technology transformation roadmap that has seen IT systems mature from systems of "record" to systems of "engagement/intelligence", to the current emphasis on delivering systems of "experience". Many legacy organisations had a castle and moat approach designed to gather, analyse and protect company information and to keep those on the outside, out. Fast-forward to 2020 and employees and consumers have much higher expectations, demanding seamless, integrated digital experiences across multiple devices. And yet, pre-pandemic many organisations found themselves on the wrong side of the digital/analogue divide, with clunky, ageing tech infrastructure supported by a few digital add-ons in the form of a website and mobile technology. When the all-clear is sounded,



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those organisations that survive the economic fallout will either have proven that technology adds significant value, flexibility, and resilience and will speed up their digital transformation processes, or they will be forced to play catch-up in order to stay in the game. Either way, we can help forward-thinking CIO's augment their teams, or help the laggards find the right leader who can switch from analogue to digital in mid-air, without crashing."

Hansjörg Meine of AltoPartners Germany agrees: "Pre-COVID we had already started to see the influence of the digital natives, with the CIO taking on a more strategic advisory role, and becoming the business enabler for the Line of Business executives, with the resultant move to Cloud-Services and XaaS offerings. The post-COVID experience will accelerate this fusion of process and product IT, meaning that the CIO of the future must be able to work and think in networks. This is difficult for old-school professionals as it means leaving behind the rigid organisational hierarchies of the past and operating in networked environments where reporting lines are much less important than the influence that one exerts on the organisation.

"With the breaking down of traditional barriers between product (or operational) technology and process IT, including ERP and supply chain systems, the two disciplines are converging and merging into an inseparable unit.

"As a result, the traditional separation of the CIO's role as the person responsible only for process IT, and a CTO or CDO responsible for product technology, will largely disappear." Pieter Ysbrandy of Leaders Trust / AltoPartners Netherlands agrees: A CIO without digital transformation skills and insight into new digital business models is headed for a career dead end.

Tony Leng goes even further: "I'd go so far as to say that if you're a CIO and your CEO wants to hire a Chief Digital Officer, then you're in trouble. We expect some of the biggest problems to arise in situations where organisations have taken the easy route of hiring a CDO as an adjunct to the CIO, in the hope that the CIO will handle existing technology and the CDO will do digital. In our experience, they are working towards the same objective and will eventually clash, and unless the CEO wants to manage the transition personally, our advice is to have someone leading it all. The leader can have a team member handling the analogue and someone handling the digital, but they eventually become one, and one of those leaders will become redundant."

Either way, it's a transition that has to be carefully managed, says Jaco Kriek, head of the tech practice for Search Partners International / AltoPartners South Africa: "In the scramble for digital expertise, companies need to take cognisance of the impact such a move will have not only on their processes but also their people. This is not as simple as finding the next technological tool to do what you're already doing today. Our clients are looking for people who can rethink core assumptions about how an enterprise works and redefine the intersection between people and technology. At the heart of the matter is the move from a closed to a co-operative mindset, and this is very hard to achieve without substantial change-management interventions. It's not just a question of how to open up a closed ecosystem to ensure that there are uniformly good layers of security across a range of devices, but of managing the users' expectations and people's growing distrust of how their data is used. Digital technology innovations that take place without addressing concerns about security, privacy and ethics will be met with resistance by those inside the organisation and worse, the very customers you are hoping to find and keep by implementing the new technology."



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So, while the temptation is to go out and hire a CDO to keep up with the Digital Joneses, without the cultural shift to support a different, more customer-centric focus, at some point you are going to come up against deep-rooted cultural values attached to hierarchies and reporting lines. "It is a bit like 'agile development,' cautions Hansjörg. "It's a great buzz word aimed at removing hierarchical structures to allow more nimble decision making, but at some point, this will clash with the rest of the organisation which still works and behaves in a very traditional fashion."

The trick, says Pieter, is to find a commercially savvy, technically adroit leader who understands the business levers and deploys tech for its core purpose of finding customers and continuously adapting to their changing needs and circumstances. Building a pathway to the future - whatever it may look like - goes to the heart of an organisation's strategy. If it requires upending an existing business model, a successful CIO will need to be both strategically orientated and highly collaborative if they're going to get their vision onto the board's agenda.

Which is why tech-whisperers who can do all this and persuade their executive team to go along with them, are hot property right now, says [Peter Tulau of AltoPartners Australia](#): "This function requires a degree of collaborative dexterity that is rare. Even assuming they enjoy a mandate from the CEO to set the vision, it's up to them to secure executive buy-in and support from colleagues across the organisation who may be unaccustomed to working together. This requires a knack for making the complex simple and the simple compelling, particularly in an environment where the evolution of operational and information technologies has not been canvassed in a structured way. In this respect, a CIO also needs to have significant C-appeal: composure, connection, confidence, credibility, clarity and conciseness. Executive presence is the precondition to quickly establishing credibility and building trust, without which any mandate is pointless."

Post-COVID, we'd also added Courage to the C-Appeal mix. Unless you're lucky enough to be operating in the narrow band of tech industries that have boomed during lockdown, budgets worldwide will be under huge pressure. It will take considerable courage and vision to be able to take limited capital and redeploy it on a digital strategy that many of your senior teammates do not fully understand. To this end, empathy is the new super-power.

"Intuitive technology that looks at solving people's problems is where the magic is at. The ability to put yourself in the users' shoes - be it employees, customers or vendors - is the starting point to building a new generation of products and services that will radically differentiate you from your competitors and ensure your organisation's survival in a post-COVID world," says Jaco.

Because, cautions Tony, if we've learned one thing, it's that reinvention can never stop. The CIO's role is to stay front and centre - influencing, collaborating and building on the momentum and creativity spawned by COVID-19: "This has been a phenomenal time, with heroes emerging on every front. Cultures are being defined and redefined on an unprecedented scale. Tech has emerged as an indisputable core driver of value and not just a support function. The real winners will be those who can continue to maintain trust in a pixelated world. Those CIOs who can go deep, fast and first, and take their teams with them, will emerge victorious."