

Get a grip on your career

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One thing that always amazes me as a CIO recruiter is the degree to which people allow their careers to happen to them rather than actively manage them. I'm as guilty as anyone in this regard. That whole job-for-life ethos disappeared almost a generation ago and the idea of entrusting your career to 'the corporation' probably wasn't the best idea in the first place. A successful career today usually involves many changes of employer and can span different industries or professions. Staying put in one place for too long can be seriously career limiting.

Everything else in life gets pretty well planned, so why not possibly our greatest asset – our careers? In fact, perhaps there's some kind of inverse relationship here between importance and the time we spend on it. Think about the time you spend comparing prices for relatively unimportant gadgets or looking round your home before you made the decision to buy it.

Four steps to getting a new CIO Job

What are your attributes? Are you a turnaround CIO? A technology guru? A startup CIO?

- The more specific you can get about your goal – a midsize retail company – the more proactive you can be about building leads to get you there.
- Limit your CV to three pages. Include a one-line description of each company you list. Emphasise the business impact of your technology achievements.
- Keep in regular contact with CIO recruiters.

The point is this, I can almost guarantee that the most basic techniques you use to manage work-related projects are not being applied with the same rigour applied to your career planning. So, if you haven't done it already then it's time to really assess what it is you want from your career and put some firm plans in place. Approach it in the way you would any IT project. Start thinking about what outcomes you're looking for, outline your end goal and analyse what success looks like for you. Apply those skills to determine the key milestones along your career path and assess whether you are achieving these in good time without wandering too far from the route. Don't be too linear in your thinking. Success for a modern CIO could well be a move into a business role. So review the plan regularly and adapt as appropriate. Stand back occasionally and look objectively at whether you are on track to reach your goals. If not, what do you need to do to get back on track? What changes could you make to bring that goal into view? What do you need to do more of? What internal help can you get? There's nothing more effective than 360-degree feedback, be it informal or formal. In fact, I feel the informal, ad-hoc feedback is often more powerful and helpful than any formal process. Try to find and nurture a board-level mentor; this can have a hugely positive impact.

Interview top tips

- Talk more about why you want the new job than about why you want to leave the old one
- Never bring up money
- Prepare five major accomplishments to discuss – in detail, with bullet points – when asked
- Make eye contact with everyone in the room
- Listen as much as you talk
- Prepare a ton of really smart questions

And ask about external help. An average coach is a waste of time but if you can find a good one then hang on to them. A good coach will be encouraging you to think about your performance in a holistic sense, which allows you to ensure that your career plan is in balance with your home and family commitments. If the balance isn't there, the goals will not only be harder to achieve but may also feel like hollow victories when you do.

"Everything else in life gets pretty well planned, so why not our greatest asset – our careers?"

As they say, none of this is rocket science but it frequently gets overlooked in the hurly burly of our daily lives. Invest time in it. It might just be the best investment you ever made.