

Let's put this one to bed once and for all....that tired old debate

'IT doesn't matter any more' was always the wrong debate. It seems to me that organisations divide broadly into two camps. Those where IT can't really offer much opportunity to drive bottom line growth and those where technology breathes life into the organisation and moves it forward every day.

The growth of outsourcing and the increasing standardisation of applications have undoubtedly made it easier (at least for the second generation adopters) to get the basics right but as we all know this is just the tip of the iceberg.

There have always been organisations and industries where IT never really mattered and maybe these structural changes have made it matter even less. For instance manufacturing industries have rarely found sustainable competitive advantage through innovating with technology. And if this is where you are, then achievement in your role is going to be about driving incremental improvement, maintaining service levels and reducing cost year on year on year. Nothing wrong with that and CIO's in this space need to be great leaders to deliver against that backdrop. However, if driving bottom line performance gets you out of bed in the morning then get yourself into an industry where technology has the potential to make a real and fundamental difference. And from where I'm sitting there's a huge number that fit into that category at the moment.

It's also becoming increasingly apparent that the second wave of the digital revolution is upon us and providing opportunities through technology to move business models to a very different place. The change is all around us and it's radical. A few well placed camera phones have probably altered Burmese history. Shopping gets delivered to my door. Daily papers seem passé; I get personalised news feeds to my desktop and podcasts when I'm on the move. Linked-in.com has transformed my working day. I haven't visited a record store or a bank in years or a travel agent for that matter. I check myself onto flights at home and I have my irises scanned at the airport. My insurance broker is an online price comparison site and Tesco seems to be insuring my car. My photos are in cyberspace and a webcam means I see my Australian niece every week for a chat. My eldest son has a girlfriend courtesy of Facebook, doesn't watch television or listen to commercial radio and has his own personal radio station beamed to him from Last.fm.

There's a seismic shift going on in consumer behaviour driven entirely by technology and I think we all know this isn't a bubble; it's a fundamental change and just wait until today's digital teenagers with their digital habits become the affluent workers of tomorrow with high disposable incomes.

Logical thinking, change management ability, board level credibility, leadership and a drive for results have been the qualities that I have always looked for on behalf of my clients when assessing CIOs. These are clearly still crucial skills but I think there's another dimension that you might need if you want to help your organisation thrive in the digital age.

The board needs to think about technology in a creative and imaginative way and this of course should start with the CIO. I was discussing this the other day with a corporate psychologist and we came to the conclusion that asking logical and process-driven people to think creatively and to dream about the possible, was a pretty big ask for all the obvious reasons. However, I passionately believe that it's where you need to be. A CIO who has the imagination to create commercial opportunities, the influence to bring others with them and the ability to deliver on the promise is a real leader in every sense of the word.

I can't think of a more exciting time to be a talented CIO and if you're in the wrong industry or in a business where the CEO doesn't get it, then jump as fast as you can. There's a whole bunch of organisations out there who want to ride this wave and they need outstanding CIOs to make it happen.

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