

UK Tech Leaders Forum

Leaders of Tomorrow

The changing role
of tech leaders

Foreword

“In the innovative and ever-changing tech industry, the role of the tech leader must also evolve and adapt to keep up.

“Having seen these developments first-hand throughout my career and having worked with both the tech leaders of today and tomorrow, it’s clear to me that sharing experiences and advice is a fantastic way to support up-and-coming CIOs and CTOs with their career aspirations.

“We’ve collated conversations from some of the UK’s foremost C-suite professionals to provide you with a comprehensive narrative on the changing role of tech leaders.”



Dom Boshier
Associate Director

Introduction

Deloitte's 2023 Global Tech Leader Survey of more than 1,150 CIOs and tech leaders shows that 54% of those surveyed cite “soft” leadership traits such as ability to inspire, communication skills, and executive presence as the most important qualities within the technology function¹. In a report by Foundry, 85% of CIOs said that their role was becoming more digital and innovation-focused². So, what are the realities of the role? And what are the key skills required for success?

47% of CIOs believe their workforce understands and aligns with the transformation vision and strategy of the business, while only 39% of the IT workforce said the same³. Communicating

a shared vision and translating it into desired technology outcomes is imperative for company buy-in; how can newly-appointed CIOs make an impact from day one and start those vital relationships off on the right foot?

According to the State of the CIO Survey, CIOs see their number one task by 2026 being driving business innovation. IT leaders say the near-future CIO will spend more time working on business strategy, developing revenue-generating products and services, and influencing ideas on the enterprise roadmap than they do now⁴. As the role of the CIO evolves, how can those looking to make the move to the C-suite ensure they're ready for the requirements of the future?

References

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- https://www.ey.com/en_uk/consulting/for-cios-it-is-about-the-people-not-the-technology
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Motivating factors

The desire to achieve consistent career progression is felt by professionals across all industries, sectors, and geographies. But if the ultimate goal is the C-suite, it's important to consider how the journey there can affect success.

When it comes to tech leadership, the two traditional pathways are through technical expertise or people management. And while either option can be considered individually, the favoured skillset is a blend of both, combining specialist knowledge and team leadership that results in well-rounded understanding and experience.

With the longer development journey and heightened responsibility involved with a C-suite role, clarity on motivation from the outset is vital – why do you want to be a leader? What is it about a senior role that appeals to you?

Understanding motivating factors for others is also important. A senior role isn't everyone's career goal, but if you try to bring people along with you when they aren't bought in or don't feel they have transparency on the realities of the path ahead, you'll find it difficult to secure an internal senior talent pipeline.

“ Once you identify the why, it's easier to forge the pathway that will lead you to the position you want.”

“ Really think about what it is you want to do before you jump into it. It's important to set out those goals because the role quickly swallows you up and you can lose sight of that. I don't just want to be a title; I want to be achieving specific things.”

The pros and cons

Every role has its good and bad points, and being realistic about the strengths and challenges of a C-suite position from the outset is key to not only reaching the boardroom, but also in carving out a long, successful career once in the role.

Some pros to consider include:

- + Ideating and embedding positive change within organisations and filtering this through the workforce.
- + Leading a wider team and everything that comes with it - promotions, life events, personal challenges, and growth.
- + Bringing people together to deliver on goals and successes and rewarding those efforts.

Some cons to consider include:

- Making hard decisions such as redundancies or cost-cutting during challenging times.
- Dealing with other members of the executive team where there may be clashes in personality and egos to manage.
- Mental and physical load of a demanding, high-responsibility position and the probability of poor work/life balance and increased stress.

The people piece

Company culture is a huge focus for organisations in every industry and sector, but particularly in a fast-paced, innovative environment like tech, the need for a robust support system is central to the success of any business.

Transparency is key – especially during times of transformation or accelerated growth. Clear, consistent, recurrent communication goes a long way in helping employees understand the why and how of new initiatives, and results in better buy-in. Remember, communication is a two-way street; actively seek out feedback and ensure you’re having (what can be) difficult conversations to get to the heart of any concerns.

Be mindful of your visibility and approachability on your journey to a C-suite role. No matter how successful you are, if you’re not part of the day-to-day and your employees can’t

come to you with the realities of the business, you could be missing some glaring issues. Be open to challenges and ideas from people across your organisation; they’re the ones in the trenches, after all.

Building successful cultures is also about identifying disruptors. In some cases, this is a positive – someone who brings a different perspective or suggests alternative ways of working – but in others, this could be someone who upsets the environment and those around them. Lead with tolerance when this occurs. Find out why, ask questions, listen. Not everyone will be a long-term employee, but using these instances as a learning tool will give you more insight and understanding of what’s happening within your teams.

“Take on smart and kind people – don’t underestimate how far the people side can go.”

“People are really at the core of everything – get to know people and how they work, what inspires and motivates them.”

“Don’t become “The CEO”. Make sure you’re still being your authentic self as you become more senior.”

Prioritising for growth

It's no secret that business success revolves around continued growth and, as a tech leader, you'll be measured on how you contribute to this. Understanding the economic value of each of your tasks can help to not only prioritise those that will deliver the biggest impact, but also indicate where you can be delegating or reassigning others.

Be wary; a balance does need to be struck. You can focus on driving value, but if you don't also have an eye on the foundational building blocks that keep the engine running, it's easy to become unstuck. There is a cost involved every time

you change direction. Resetting or driving something new means you leave things behind, so ensure that trajectory is leading you in the right direction and not away from something that's working well.

Remember that people are often attached to the things that they're working on - it can cause upset if you don't address that attachment when you make the changes. Again, transparency in your communication and being open to challenge and push-back can all help with making your employees feel heard and involved.

“ Spend 80% of your time on priorities and 20% on the rest.”

“ Think big, think about the few things that are going to move the dial, and find a way to keep a focus on those.”

“ Don't sweat the small stuff – the little things aren't important, so make sure you're prioritising.”

“ Connection to the end value is really important in securing direction and belief in what you're trying to achieve as a business.”

Building your inner network

The journey to the C-suite (as with many other professional positions), involves a huge amount of peer-interaction, cross-collaboration, and stakeholder management. Don't underestimate the value of building relationships throughout your career; not only is it important to develop a network of allies who can support you on the way up and when you're in the role, it's also vital for professional reputation that bridges aren't burnt along the way.

Invest in time spent with the people around you, those you can learn from, and those you can grow with. Reach out across your organisation to find out more about the inner workings of different teams, how they contribute to the business, and the challenges that they experience. This knowledge and understanding will give you a more rounded view and make you more visible, which will ultimately help you in a senior position.

“It's incredibly political and it's your allies who will help you through your career.”

“Surround yourself people who are different from you and will challenge you – cultivate and embrace diversity of thought.”

Data at the centre

Even the most convincing leaders need to back up their claims of growth and success, which is why knowing your business' data is so important. Using accurate, up-to-date metrics to prove where you are, how you're measuring up, and where improvements (and mistakes) are being made, you must be able to present a realistic picture to your fellow C-suiters.

As with digital transformation – the move from physical things to information and ideas – understanding what the numbers are telling you, and pinpointing where efficiencies can be made, is central to the present and future of the industry.

“Strong, data-driven conversations with stakeholders are often the most successful.”

“Never go into the boardroom without knowing your numbers inside and out. Be ready to answer every question with a number.”

Working at speed

In an ever-evolving industry such as tech, keeping up is key to success. As both digital and physical technologies develop, the requirement to stay competitive comes hand-in-hand with the requirement to react quickly to market and product innovations.

The concept of embracing “good enough” is often hailed as a speed tool; delivering something quickly is preferable to taking much longer producing something that may be fantastic but arrives too late to be competitive.

“ Innovation is about moving faster.”

“ Governance and culture are the most important things to deliver speed. Governance shouldn't be about rules and regulation when it comes to your employees – if you take away those constraints then you can move much quicker. Governance is a framework to guide us, but if you build the right culture that allows people to do things (rather than holds them back), then you'll see results. Trust your team and allow collaboration.”

Futureproofing yourself

As technology develops, so must the roles of those leading tech teams. There's a need to adapt, context switch, and stay informed with new and emerging trends. Be prepared to flex and change alongside industry advancements.

Surround yourself with people who have more knowledge than you, whether that's peers within other organisations, mentors who have seen similar evolution within their careers, or external coaches. Don't be afraid to recruit people who are or could be better than you; you'll both learn as they progress, and succession-planning is always a consideration.

“ No-one ever got fired for hiring great people.”

“ Where do you see the CIO role in ten years' time? It's going to be more about ensuring delivery of autonomy and AI at speed.”

Outro



Ollie Whiting
CEO

“One of the advantages of being a talent solutions provider is that we partner with people throughout their career journeys, from new entrants to the tech market via our La Fosse Academy through to Executives landing a key leadership role and everything in between. Over an extended period of time, we’ve developed relationships with candidates and have partnered their career progression through multiple career steps within industry leading organisations. Many have gone on to become our customers and, through understanding their needs as a candidate, this has helped us build successful teams for them in their new positions.”

Special thanks

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