

5 Fatal Pitfalls for New CIOs

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Analyst(s): Kelly Calhoun Williams, Heather Colella, Daniel Sanchez Reina

CIOs new to the role have 100 days to make an impact and position themselves with a smooth runway to succeed. Five common pitfalls made by incoming CIOs can prove fatal to their effectiveness, satisfaction, and ultimately, tenure in the role.

Key Challenges

- Pitfall 1: You're communicating a personal brand (but it's not the one you wanted).
- Pitfall 2: You think you know how IT is perceived (but you're wrong).
- Pitfall 3: You think what you did in your previous role or company was better than what they have here (but you're wrong).
- Pitfall 4: You think you understand the organization's priorities (but you don't).
- Pitfall 5: You think you understand the business's capabilities and capacity (but you don't).

Recommendations

For CIOs transitioning to a new role:

- Build credibility and a brand that sets the tone and direction for what you will accomplish by determining both your enterprise's expectations and your personal ambition.
- Learn about the current IT operating model by spending time with your direct reports and other team members, and then identify any gaps in talent, motivation and workload.
- Be highly self-aware, conscious and cautious of your personal assumptions or a desire to quickly prove yourself. Listen more than you tell.
- If you are under pressure to act immediately, buy some time to solidify action by communicating your next steps to gather more insights.
- Ensure the organization's capabilities and capacity are aligned by determining how the current initiatives need to be changed to meet the future direction and working with stakeholders (internal and external to your department or division).

Introduction

At least 25% of CIOs are “in transition” at any given time, changing their organizations or their roles.

It's Day 1 as the new CIO. You're feeling great: You got the job, and you bring to it the experience required to be successful and make a positive impact to the IT organization and the enterprise as a whole. By the end of the first day, you are getting a sense for the culture. By the end of the first week, you're thinking, “What have I gotten myself into?” There are five common pitfalls that — when managed correctly — position you for the success you envisioned (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Five Fatal Pitfalls for the New CIO



Analysis

Communicate Your Personal Brand

Scenario: James arrives in his new role, anxious to prove he's a serious, strategic executive. However, he reacts to early complaints about IT by diving immediately into the operations. His new brand? The IT guy.

Each move to a new organization brings with it the opportunity to demonstrate who you are, but also to shape new perceptions of who you are, and what value you bring with you. The accumulation of these perceptions becomes your personal brand. For the most part, decisions made by the CIO in the early days in a new role end up defining this personal brand, for good or bad, intentionally or not.

It's critical to be cognizant and intentional about what you want your personal brand to be, and whether what you are communicating — directly or indirectly — is supporting or detracting from that brand. (See “Remaster Your Personal Brand in Times of Transition.”)

Addressing the pitfall:

- Understand the expectations of the top management of your enterprise toward the role of the CIO. There is a range of possibilities from business transformation to cost control. Assess where the needle is, and bear in mind that CIO brands that revolve solely around traditional responsibilities, such as IT projects and operational support, will fall out of step with an enterprise undergoing digital transformation.
- Construct your leadership brand statement, such as, “I want to be known for being x, so I can deliver y.”
- Make a list of behaviors that reinforce your desired brand and priority situations in which to display them. Come up with ways to practice them more often. Equally, make a list of behaviors associated with the old brand. Think about where stakeholders see you enacting those old behaviors, and refrain from reproducing them.

Understand How IT Is Perceived

Scenario: Susan starts in her new CIO role, and quickly hears from a few key stakeholders about what a disaster the IT department is. They share a litany of complaints based on their

personal experiences. Susan immediately moves to act on these complaints in a bid to prove her value. But time reveals a very different picture about what the challenges of the department actually are, leaving Susan in an awkward position, with damaged credibility both inside and outside the department.

It is rare to find an organization that doesn't have gripes about its IT services. The high degree of reliance on these services leaves stakeholders often frustrated if they perceive they are not getting what they need. And add to that the natural human tendency to home in on sharing negatives when a new leader comes on board (in the hopes of getting one's own issues addressed). That may make it difficult to assess the real perception of IT in the organization.

The pitfall arises when the new CIO attempts to assess perceptions about IT too quickly, relying solely on initial feedback in the early days of his or her tenure. It may take a bit more time to explore and assess the real perceptions within the organization and, from that, to learn whether those perceptions are actually accurate. Issues that require addressing may or may not then flow from those perceptions.

Addressing the pitfall:

- Spend time with your direct reports and other team members to understand the current IT operating model (see “What Is an I&T Operating Model, and How Do You Accelerate Its Design Process?”). Make sure it addresses and facilitates your enterprise business model and strategy.
- Identify the gaps in talent, ways of working and tools that you may encounter in conversations with your direct reports and other team members. Then tackle them, taking into account the fundamental nature of the gaps, whether they are about talent, motivation or workload capacity (see “Create an Environment That Makes Learning a Rewarding Experience for Individuals” for guidelines about how to bridge these gaps).
- Listen to and review evidence from a sample of stakeholders — including C-suite members — regarding the effectiveness and contribution of the IT organization. Be sure you understand the business's mission-critical priorities and the role IT plays. Map what you hear with your conclusions about the previous two points, and set out a plan to tackle the root causes, if needed.

Avoid Comparing With Others

Scenario: The new CIO from the U.S. walks into a global CIO role based in China. He starts telling people from Day 1 about how they did things (and how much better) in the U.S.

One of the simplest mistakes that new leaders make is letting their ego run ahead of proving their efficacy, by indulging in self-aggrandizement about what they achieved in previous roles or organizations. This often leads to an explicit criticism of the situation they have inherited. This can be especially offensive to locals if the leader's experience was in a different country or culture.

You are always “on display” as a leader, but particularly during a transition. During transitions, boastful claims or insensitive criticisms, unintended offenses or slights, throwaway words, and small passing acts will be observed, shared, discussed and dissected. Moreover, you don't yet know who was responsible for the things you are criticizing, nor their friends and allies, and their agendas. Your new staff may jump to conclusions about you. Observers may start to form a negative impression of you very early on — an impression that may be difficult to reset.

Addressing the pitfall:

- Avoid any bragging or frequent comments about how you or your previous organization did things or did things better — tempting though it may be (and even if it's true). Ask questions to understand how and why things are done here, rather than telling people how you did, or would do, things. Listen more than you tell.
- Kick-start your relationships with each of your direct reports early as your first priority. You will need to re-form your inherited team through the cycle of forming, norming, storming and performing. You need them to become your closest allies and your vehicle to deliver your vision and objectives, so bring them close and get to know them. They need you to be their staunch supporter and coach.
- Empathize with your predecessor, and imagine yourself in his or her shoes. What would you like people to say about you when you've moved on and your replacement is finding his or her way, sitting in your old chair? This is a scenario that is probably playing simultaneously in your previous position, and it's likely to repeat for you again one day, because CIOs change organizations or roles on average every three years.

Understand the Business

Scenario: Bill did his research before taking on this new role, and came in knowing of several highly visible priorities for the

organization. He mapped out a plan for how to dive into these initiatives right away to demonstrate value. However, he soon learned that there were, in fact, several even higher priorities that were not so visible, and his efforts had pulled him away from addressing these.

Organizations are naturally complex. They often have priorities that are somewhat hidden from view and take time to discover. They even more often have conflicting priorities, where feedback from one division or another may make it less than clear which really are the “top” priorities needing attention first.

CIOs who jump too quickly to assume the organization’s priorities step into a common pitfall of using assumed priorities to set the direction, and then finding out the direction is not the right one (or at least not right now). Equally, before starting a big or visible initiative, spend a few weeks understanding what the real priorities of the organization are. An initial error of judgment will prove more costly and visible than a similar misstep made later in the CIO’s tenure, souring his or her nascent reputation and slowing the transitional path to efficacy.

Addressing the pitfall:

- Divert attention to buy time and make your own prioritization calls. Even if you are under pressure to act immediately, maintain the status quo for a short while. Buy time to listen and learn, enrich your insights, and imagine alternate scenarios before you take your first big, visible actions. Balance your priorities across all the urgent things you’ll inevitably find.
- Get a “parachute” by gaining executive sponsorship for your decisions and priorities. This step is always critical, especially during transition. Securing buy-in for your decisions can be the difference between a safely navigated landing and a “short ride with an abrupt end.”
- When matters of urgency are raised, inquire and listen carefully. Show empathy. Use language such as, “I understand why this is so urgent for you,” so the person feels heard. Follow with, “I’m going to do my research on this, but I’m new here, so give me a little time to get up to speed.” If you feel compelled to act, try presenting a considered analysis with alternatives, demonstrating care and due diligence in the face of pressure.

Understand the Business Capabilities

Scenario: Frank starts his new role as CIO and immediately hears that “the systems” just won’t work. Users have already engaged vendors, and as the new CIO, he believes that the

systems are probably sufficient and users will see that, too, with education on the capabilities. To honor the work the stakeholders have done, he partners with them to see the vendors and learns that business growth has been so rapid that they are both right. The old systems are sufficient — for the old business model — but new additions need to be integrated to meet the new capabilities introduced by successful growth.

It's easy to understand how a CIO could be lured into making some assumptions about organizational capabilities and capacity early in one's tenure. Past experiences may lead one to see the organization through a lens that contains some confirmation bias, assuming some things that aren't necessarily there.

The more prudent course to avoid this pitfall is to spend a bit more time gathering evidence of existing capabilities and capacity before falling into the temptation to quickly jump to commitments that may not be possible. Investing some time in a keen understanding of these elements can ensure your early efforts are executed smoothly, and really do show value.

Addressing the pitfall:

- Determine how the current initiatives need to be changed to meet the future direction, and work with stakeholders (internal and external to your department or division) to ensure the organization's capabilities and capacity are aligned. Is there capacity missing in the organization that can be fulfilled externally or using some other strategy? What does your current budget suggest? Company performance? Priorities? Any or all of these may provide additional ways to check your assumptions for accuracy before proceeding.
- Take time to understand the business capabilities required to deliver the business model today and in the future. Then make sure the strategic plan for IT maps back to the business strategic plan.
- Use your experience and training to navigate a path forward.

Bottom Line

You were hired for a reason. You have experience that makes you ideal for the role. The first 100 days felt rocky at times, but a new sense of clarity is emerging — one that uses your unique abilities.

The tactics you explore and adapt during your career transitions as a CIO will enrich your leadership toolkit to form part of your professional defense arsenal. The mitigating tactics we recommend to

avoid or escape these five common situational risks are not technical, but flow from your personal mastery of listening, empathizing and imagining. Practice these tactics.

Listen first and learn. You don't yet know what you don't know. Then empathize by putting yourself in their shoes (or find out what's in it for them). Imagine alternatives by exploring worst- and best-case scenarios in diverse personas. To be the best CIO you can be, go forth and conquer.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

"2020 CIO Agenda: Industry Perspectives Overview"

"CIO Role Evolution Primer for 2019"

"The CIO's Guide to Strategic Engagement"

"Three Actions for New CIOs to Build Solid Rapport With C-Level During Their First 100 Days"

"The Politics of Powerful Partnerships"

"Five Tactics for CIOs to Ease the Pain of Leadership Transition"

"Build Your Executive Career by Leveraging the CIO Experience"

"Remaster Your Personal Brand in Times of Transition"

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Corporate Headquarters

56 Top Gallant Road
Stamford, CT 06902-7700
USA
+1 203 964 0096

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