

A Master CIO in Government

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Initiatives: Government Technology Optimization and Modernization

Government is a unique and risk averse environment with chronic underinvestment in technology, a cost-centric view of IT and a proliferation of data and digital roles, yet often scarce digital leadership. To succeed and advance during this period of uncertainty government CIOs must become master CIOs.

Overview

Key Findings

- Inconsistent digital leadership among government executives makes it difficult to execute a consistent strategic digital direction.
- Government CIOs and IT are too often viewed as support functions, and consequently, they are submerged within the organizational structure. The proliferation of “adjacent” roles (chief digital/innovation/transformation officers) has diluted CIO authority and responsibilities.
- Chronic underinvestment or deferred investments in IT — combined with the evolution of technology outpacing governments’ capacity to adapt and respond — results in compounding risk and damages governments’ ability to execute operations and deliver improved mission outcomes.

Recommendations

Government CIOs who wish to become proficient in mastery of leadership, culture and people dynamics:

- Improve the chances of affecting enduring organizational changes by prioritizing personal development and succession planning.
- Elevate conversations regarding technology toward strategic investments by forming and empowering a coalition of allies among all peers (CFO, chief analytics officer [CAO] and agency/program leaders), and by gradually shifting the focus to mission and business outcomes.
- Build confidence and trust in IT by establishing a record of accomplishment and delivering quantitative, factual IT transparency and cost optimization. Capitalize on this record by actively advocating for greater responsibility and ownership of digital services.

- Foster greater executive engagement by adjusting (and elevating) governance models and decision making, instituting an enterprise risk management discipline and directing informed investments in technology.

Analysis

For many years government CIOs have faced a litany of challenges — transient and inconsistent political leadership, financial austerity and advancing citizen expectations, to name a few. The disruptive start to 2020 has amplified these existing challenges and brought with it new ones. Even so, the opportunity has never been greater for government CIOs to help lead their organizations through this period of uncertainty, and in the process becoming a world-class digital government.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased government executives' understanding of the positive role technology can play in achieving their public purpose. In conversations with our analysts, government CIOs have indicated that the role technology has played throughout the crisis has elevated their leadership profile within their organizations.

Many challenges and opportunities government CIOs face are common, such as an increased demand for remote work capabilities, while others are shaped by the mission or purpose of their organization and level of disruption experienced in their geography.

Social programs and human services organizations are experiencing a peak in demand that is not expected to reduce anytime soon. This is creating both challenges and opportunities with their workforce and service delivery partners. Their plans and responses have needed to be agile as they pivot to meet constantly changing demands.

K-12 educational organizations around the world are on a spectrum from dealing with continued distance learning challenges, to dealing with sporadic school lockdowns and hybrid learning models, to in-person learning with new classroom structures and procedures. These models have required swift investments in digital learning platforms and additional resources to comply with evolving health orders, despite substantially strained budgets and often divisive and resource-intensive programs to support them.

Public safety and law enforcement CIOs face challenges of high business risk caused by legacy systems, overextended workforces and reduced budgets. Historically, moving beyond a supporting role has been difficult for many CIOs in this space, as they have faced challenges from the uniformed or sworn parts of the organization. However, particularly in the U.S., as a greater amount of civilian oversight is considered, the CIOs have an opportunity to use their executive skills and experience management acumen to elevate their role.

To seize these opportunities, CIOs, regardless of their unique challenges, need to act now to adopt traits that may initially appear foreign, or at least uncomfortable. Adopting these traits will set them on a personal journey toward becoming master CIOs who are dynamic and inspirational leaders.

What Is a Master CIO?

Gartner's extensive research on leadership and CIO capabilities over the past few years has been focused on describing what great leaders and effective leadership looks like. Great leaders stay on top of their own personal development and constantly engage in new learning experiences. Figure 1 summarizes the 10 most common characteristics of master CIOs.

Figure 1: Common Traits of a Master CIO in Government

Common Traits of a Master CIO in Government



Source: Gartner
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Individually, these characteristics can be described in more detail:

1. **Business leaders** — Master CIOs are trusted allies when referring to the CEO-CIO relationship (see "The 2020 CIO Agenda: Winning in the Turns" and "Future Paths for Technology Leadership in the C-Suite: How CIOs Are Redefining Their Role for Digital Business"). They have a high level of power and influence over the organization's strategy and its future. They are seen as enterprisewide business leaders outside the boundaries of the IT organization. Master CIOs usually, but not always, report to the chief executive and are, indeed, senior C-level executives. They consider their behaviors and attitudes more relevant than their job descriptions. Even when not having a C-level position, they spend more time making decisions around services with peers and partners in the ecosystem than they spend managing their IT organizations. Master CIOs build their reputation on the value delivered to the organization and its constituencies, and

they are very much involved with the creation and execution of their organization's mission strategy.

2. **Industry vision** — Master CIOs have a personal vision of where the industry is moving (for example, government service delivery) and communicate a clear message both internally (to their employees) and externally (to the market/industry/citizen/agency environment in which they operate). They are vocal about their industry's future.
3. **Subject to relevant business metrics** — Master CIOs use relevant digital and business metrics (such as innovation ratio) instead of the traditional IT metrics (for example, financial and technical key performance indicators [KPIs] and SLAs) to measure their personal results. They build their credibility on those business metrics (see “Develop Impactful KPIs Leveraging Citizen Experience Metrics to Show the Business Value of Digital Government”).
4. **High emotional intelligence** — Master CIOs have developed their emotional intelligence (EI) capabilities as their main priority for personal development. They have chosen to focus on “people skills” more than on technical skills. They also make EI a relevant development priority for their teams.
5. **Bimodal leaders** — Master CIOs are bimodal leaders who have evolved in the bimodal journey by creating a track record of real, successful explorations of new services and business processes through innovative ideas relevant to the front end. They have successful narratives to tell how IT drives real value to the business and other constituencies, and they have positioned the IT organization as a relevant component in designing new business models.
6. **Ready for anything culture** — Master CIOs have elevated their IT organizations to the higher stages of the tribal leadership culture, at least to Level 4 (the “we are great” stage). ¹ They are effective leaders who have learned how teams communicate and operate, and they can extract maximum productivity and engagement from those teams through creating and promoting a thriving corporate culture. They design culture as part of their strategy to promote innovation in the entire company or public organization.
7. **Look for additional capabilities everywhere** — Master CIOs are rarely constrained by lack of resources and skills because they look everywhere in the business, and even outside their companies/organizations for additional capabilities (for example, citizen developers). They constantly engage with startups, small or midsize businesses and academia to look for complementary capabilities, expanding their organizations' ecosystems.
8. **“Values first” mentality** — Master CIOs have their personal values aligned with their organization's values. They want to make a global impact outside their companies' boundaries and be part of the purpose economy where measuring business success in social terms is the new bottom line. They combine a focus on wider ethical and social purpose and values, along with a desire to deliver relevant public services (or profits in private organizations), to retain and attract the best people to their agencies or companies.

9. **Coaching or visionary leadership styles** — Master CIOs apply a visionary or coaching leadership style, and they are capable of inspiring, developing and motivating people to execute their mission beyond their IT responsibilities. They only apply a “command and control” leadership style when required by specific circumstances that would impose additional risks to the business if the CIO is not in control.
10. **Focus on innovators first** — Master CIOs have a focus on innovation from a business perspective and not from a technology perspective alone. They do two things: They carefully choose business problems to solve first and then seek adequate technologies they should experiment with — not the other way around. Their focus is on the people they choose first, as opposed to only selecting and prioritizing innovations. They have a clear “focus on innovators first, not on innovations” mantra.

Why Should You Become a Master CIO in Government?

Globally, the ongoing transition to a digital government, combined with the disruptions of 2020, have thrust technology to the forefront of government organization priorities. Faced with this increased focus, government CIOs need to be prepared to take on additional roles and responsibilities. There are other more specific competencies that can enrich any master CIO, and these are especially relevant in government. In particular, government CIOs should be able to:

- **Anticipate and adapt to change.** Compared with the private sector, governments experience more frequent — yet in many ways, more predictable — turnover among executive officials (elected and appointed) or military rotations. The constant churn of top leadership positions within government, marked by shorter leadership tenure and regular election cycles, can result in periodic political shifts and associated changes in direction and priorities. Government CIOs need to look ahead, see opportunities and find ways to make them part of the political and/or transformation agendas rather than being buffeted passively by them. A master CIO identifies the strengths in the legacy of their predecessors and, with diplomacy, builds upon successes and improves other aspects of the organization as they establish their own legacy.
- **Make changes that stick.** Tenures of government CIOs are notably and consistently shorter than those of their workforce. When a 20-year veteran IT workforce is on its fifth (or even tenth) CIO, the response to the latest change is typically skepticism. A government CIO needs to be able to deal with an entrenched, “tenured,” change-averse culture and have the ability to impart lasting changes. Effective leadership, communication, change management, salesmanship and succession planning are all key attributes (see “Use the ESCAPE Model to Develop Change Leadership”).
- **Think creatively.** Governments are inherently risk-averse, compliance-driven and oversight-heavy. Those cultural aspects have historically stifled creativity and stagnated progress — particularly without competitive, profit-driven motivation. Government CIOs who approach their positions creatively — as opposed to conventionally — have greater likelihood of success and personal fulfillment (see “Government CIO Essentials: Use Human-Centered Design to Build [Better](#)”).

Services”). The ability to translate creative thinking into creative execution depends on the government CIO being an effective change agent — not just for their staff, but for peers and leadership. Creativity must extend beyond the bounds of just IT to include creative approaches for customer service improvement, business process transformation and legacy modernization, including (especially) financing and acquisition. A CIO with vision and strong communication skills can often overcome the typical barriers to progress in a public-sector environment.

- **Elevate the perception of IT.** Before the disruptions of 2020, many government leaders treated IT as an afterthought or a necessary nuisance, secondary to the organization’s primary mission. Or they treated it as a source of costs to be reduced — much like a utility — a sunk cost, a liability or a budget line item. They either overlooked digital government opportunities or delegated their trademark programs and investments to organizations outside the CIO’s purview. Rather than accepting relegation to a support role, being viewed as a cost center or consignment to an IT operations-only position, government CIOs need to work to dispel that view. Reshaping their workforce, establishing greater transparency, delivering projects and programs successfully and ultimately achieving unquestioned credibility can gain them more influence over the enterprise technology portfolio, and more impact on achieving mission outcomes. These actions can also help reinforce the elevated view of IT and its strategic role in delivering mission-critical value to the citizens.
- **Achieve strategic decision making.** Build IT decision making into the governance framework of the organization. In cases where the perception of IT is quite low, even more governments fail to build IT investment decisions and prioritization into an effective demand governance approach. With effective leadership prioritization absent at the strategic level, CIOs often have to make decisions either in a leadership vacuum or where there are multiple competing demands for the same resources. In their effort to be “helpful,” CIOs are lucky just to get to mediocrity because resources are spread too thin across initiatives that have not been prioritized by government executives or political leadership. To ensure success, CIOs must elevate IT decision making to the proper levels and forums in the organization by refining governance models and processes and by helping decisions find the right point for resolution (see “The Most Critical Success Factor of Government Governance”).
- **Adopt a strategic position and attitude.** Moreover, government CIOs need to take on a strategic role — even if their leadership doesn’t initially think of them in that context. Growing out of a “service provider, order-taker” role is important — after all, someone needs to think strategically about technology and be responsible for shaping an integrated, coherent and comprehensive strategy for the organization. Government leadership doesn’t typically have the time or inclination to take that on. Rather, it can be a career-advancing opportunity for the CIO — if the CIO prepares for that role and detects and seizes openings when they occur. Government CIOs should be ready and willing to take on that strategic role — to be the integrator and innovator for all things digital and to lead digital government transformation that is aligned with executive leadership. This is critical for a government CIO to become a master CIO.

- **Function effectively in three operational environments.** With the growing evolution of digital governments and the emergence of digital government technology platforms, government CIOs must be able to address three complementary and potentially competing operational demands: internal, externally facing and ecosystem (see [“Select Applications That Further Your Digital Government Technology Platform Goals”](#)). Government CIOs are traditionally adept at delivering internal successes for efficiencies and improved workforce experiences. Now, they must also be competent at delivering more effective externally facing citizen and business services, and at navigating the increasing complexities of operating in a growing ecosystem consisting of other government and private-sector partners and contributors.

How Can You Become a Master CIO in Government?

If you aspire to become a master CIO in government, you must consciously and conscientiously transform yourself to meet the challenges in front of you. The greatest challenge is the awkward (and sometimes messy) collision of yesterday and tomorrow. You must lead an organization through the impending transformations affecting your role, your workforce, your organization structure, your technology portfolio, your enterprise risk management approach and your investment and acquisition approaches. You must move from service provider and cost center to digital leader and trusted ally, from on-premises to the cloud, from reactive to strategic, from asset manager to service broker. All will have pervasive, disruptive transformative effects, not just on your IT organization, but also on your government overall. To be successful, you need to be prepared to navigate all of these transitions.

Maximize Your Flexibility

Government CIOs typically feel constrained by restrictive administrative authorities (for example, financial, human resources and acquisition), which tend to bog down progress and constrict options. In general, however, “we can’t” is often a pseudonym for “we’ve never done it” — whether creative approaches to financing, innovative acquisition strategies or flexible hiring authorities. Test and redraw your boundaries. CIOs must arm themselves with overwhelming evidence and be prepared to convince their colleagues with a “charm offensive.” Make it a point to identify and educate yourself on the “art of the possible,” which consists of specific, relevant and analogous precedents for what you are trying to accomplish. Anticipate the likely sources of resistance and nature of objections, and prepare yourself with counter arguments. Bring to the discussion a superior knowledge of the business, the available authorities and the known precedents, and when necessary, do not be afraid to revisit and recommend amending policy. Approach your colleagues as allies, not adversaries — don’t alienate them with overaggression. Achieve flexibility as an exercise in teamwork, not a contest of wills. Developing a more productive and flexible partnership requires CIOs to devote more time to the “upward and outward” aspects of their leadership responsibilities. CIOs must free time by enabling a trusted subordinate (deputy CIO, for example) to handle the “downward and inward” leadership aspects.

Leading a neglected IT organization that is laden with legacy technology and a seasoned workforce with outdated skills requires a different leadership style than a technology-forward, heavily outsourced IT organization. Each will require leadership that earns their trust, illuminates a path and moves at a pace that is brisk, but not exhausting. Take time to learn and understand — and address — the sources of discomfort. Guide your workforce through the impending transitions while mitigating resistance derived from fear, uncertainty and doubt.

CIO leadership has been characterized as multidimensional and situational (see “The Wolf in CIO’s Clothing: A Machiavellian Guide to Successful IT Leadership”). Recognize that not all elements of a workforce will respond equally well to the same leadership style, so tailor or “tweak” yours to adopt what works best situationally. Understand the fundamental importance of organizational change management skills, refining your prowess and instilling these skill sets in your team as well. Be conscious of how you are perceived and received, and how this affects the workforce. Do you have buy-in or inspire resistance? What effect will that have on your ability to impart enduring changes to the organization? Adjust your language and tone accordingly.

Leadership can also be upward — helping government executives understand and take ownership of digital opportunities. Particularly in environments that lack the inclination toward digital opportunities, finding, educating and cultivating senior sponsorship — and convincing them that it was their idea — is a valuable skill. Invest time in understanding the motivations and concerns of leadership, and speak to those drivers, aligning proposed IT initiatives with desired programmatic and political outcomes.

A master CIO will combine situational awareness with EI to adjust their communication and leadership style for different contexts — across, up and down the organization.

Form and Empower a Coalition of Allies

CIOs can’t do everything, despite governments’ efforts to delegate them disproportionate responsibilities (see “2020 CIO Agenda: A Government Perspective”). At a minimum, government CIOs must build strong relationships with their key enablers (CFO, CAO, CEO) and mission partners (business unit or program directors). These enablers are critical in helping CIOs accomplish the basics (financing, acquisition and workforce), pursue creative options and achieve their larger objectives. Recruiting them as allies can help smooth the road and reduce friction, and it can help reinforce the importance of what you’re trying to accomplish with senior leadership. Similarly, agency, department or program leaders are also useful allies, given that they typically spend more time with senior leadership and have more access to their ear. As with any alliance, be conscious of their motivations and don’t expect more from them than they’re willing to invest. Take the time to map out stakeholders and assess their levels of support, resistance and influence in the ultimate success of an initiative. Focus on outcomes rather than technology. Find and concentrate on areas of common professional interest and personal passion — and use them for maximum gain.

Change the Tone, Content and Level of the Dialogue Around Technology

Changing attitudes toward technology begins with achieving transparency and dispelling the “mythology” — misconceptions, biases and emotional discussions — around IT with hard numbers and facts focused on business and mission benefits and impacts and not on technology itself. With some governments devoting disproportionate amounts to IT, cost optimization — not simply cost reduction — will be a necessary discipline. Approach it as a team sport, not just an IT/CIO responsibility. Reframe the internal IT department language to be external/business focused, rather than IT focused, and to be more understandable. Start with IT, expand it to other departments or organizations and shadow IT, and ultimately extend it to enterprise cost optimization that is focused on IT-enabled efficiencies and enhancements (see [“Cutting or Justifying Government IT Spending,”](#) [“Government Cost Optimization 101: Stop Acting Like a Cost Center”](#) and [“Government Cost Optimization 201: Expand Impact to Mission and Business”](#)). Gradually, but decisively, shift the focus of the dialogue from technology itself to the broader mission and business opportunities. Enlist your allies to amplify your messages and to help expand your influence to include the entire technology budget and portfolio. Once the cost-centric dialogue has been dispelled or dissolved, the conversation should more readily shift to strategic digital opportunities. Subjects should include:

- Reimagining citizen services
- Reinventing mission execution
- Improving employee productivity and experience
- Achieving cross-organizational integration and service delivery

Master CIOs are conversant in business and mission terminology, metrics and strategic imperatives, and can enable this shift in focus.

Build Confidence and Trust in IT, and Assume a Digital Leadership Role

The proliferation of other digital roles in governments is ostensibly a temporary, and ultimately unsustainable, distribution (and dilution) of responsibilities. Although Gartner foresaw this in its digital government maturity model, we also foresee these responsibilities reemerging into a next-generation CIO role (see [“Introducing the Gartner Digital Government Maturity Model 2.0”](#)). The addition of all those other roles in governments was a transient “fix” based on:

- A sense of the diverse skills required
- An intuition about the need for a bimodal approach
- A lack of familiarity with (or faith in) existing people
- A too-senior level of integration and deconfliction of those roles

Ultimately, CIOs should assess their ambition and the extent to which they see themselves as the best one to take on consolidation of “digital” responsibilities. Although certainly not the only viable organizational model, CIOs must evaluate their career opportunities and find their own preferred position in the organization (see [“Use Bimodal and Pace-Layered IT Together to Deliver Digital Business Transformation”](#)). They must negotiate with their “digital” counterparts to find a path to a consolidated organization — preferably under a new and reinvented CIO.

If the government CIO had been too focused on delivering IT infrastructure services due to budget and staff reductions, then the opportunity to consolidate these positions under a CIO should provide the organization with more continuity. It should also provide the ability to be both agile and stable (bimodal). With the added roles tending to be more transient, and executive leadership having little time or inclination to rationalize and manage those roles, government CIOs should have an excellent opportunity to step up. With a greater likelihood of being a longer-term part of the organization, CIOs may need to assert themselves to gain equal attention to those recent (and perhaps favored) additions.

Master CIOs will evaluate that landscape and determine a plan of action to earn themselves an open invitation.

Foster Greater Executive Engagement

CIOs’ success is ultimately dependent on executive engagement and sponsorship.

Transformational CIOs aren’t overwhelmed or dissuaded by acculturated risk avoidance and leadership with zero risk tolerance. At the end of the day, CIOs cannot succeed unless the leadership wants, and helps, them to succeed (see [“These Governance Components Will Ensure Your Project Succeeds”](#)). There has to be greater senior executive engagement in decision making and governance from the perspectives of:

- Prioritization
- Conflict resolution
- Business process redesign
- Informed risk management
- Change management
- Accountability

Government CIOs who otherwise personally exhibit the traits of a master CIO cannot also accept passive leadership and “magically” achieve success.

Master CIOs in government must ensure decisions are elevated to the appropriate levels, with full understanding of associated risks and trade-offs. Highly functioning governance is essential to

CIO success and largely absent from governments. The mission of CIOs must be to educate and involve executive leadership, find sufficient time to help them understand the decisions they need to be involved in and persuade them to take ownership of the decisions they make.

Evidence

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Recommended by the Authors

Government IT Successfully Buying the Wrong Thing

These Governance Components Will Ensure Your Government Project Succeeds

The Future Roles of CIOs

CIO Role Evolution Primer for 2020

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