5 Fatal Pitfalls New CIOs Must Avoid

Daniel Sanchez Reina, Kelly Calhoun Williams

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

Overview

Key Findings

- Pitfall 1: You build a brand that your enterprise is not interested in.

- Pitfall 2: You make assumptions about the capabilities and capacities of IT.

- Pitfall 3: You take action to improve how IT is perceived, based on fragmented and biased feedback.

- Pitfall 4: You underestimate the importance of enterprise culture and politics.

- Pitfall 5: You fail to focus on the importance of being a change leader.

Recommendations

CIOs striving to be successful as new executive leaders in their enterprises should:

- Build credibility and a brand that sets the tone and direction for what they will accomplish by determining both their enterprises' priorities and their personal ambition.

- Ensure the human and technological capabilities and capacities of IT are aligned not only to the present, but also to the future, by working with other business areas to identify the business strategy for the future.

- Learn about the current IT operating model by spending time with their direct reports and other team members, and then identify any gaps in talent, motivation and workload.

- Identify the most common hindrances when it comes to adopting new ways of working, by reading the signals of their enterprise culture and acting in a politically smart manner.

- Display and nurture their change leadership skills by investing time in exploring the morale and level of fatigue of their team members and taking action on it.
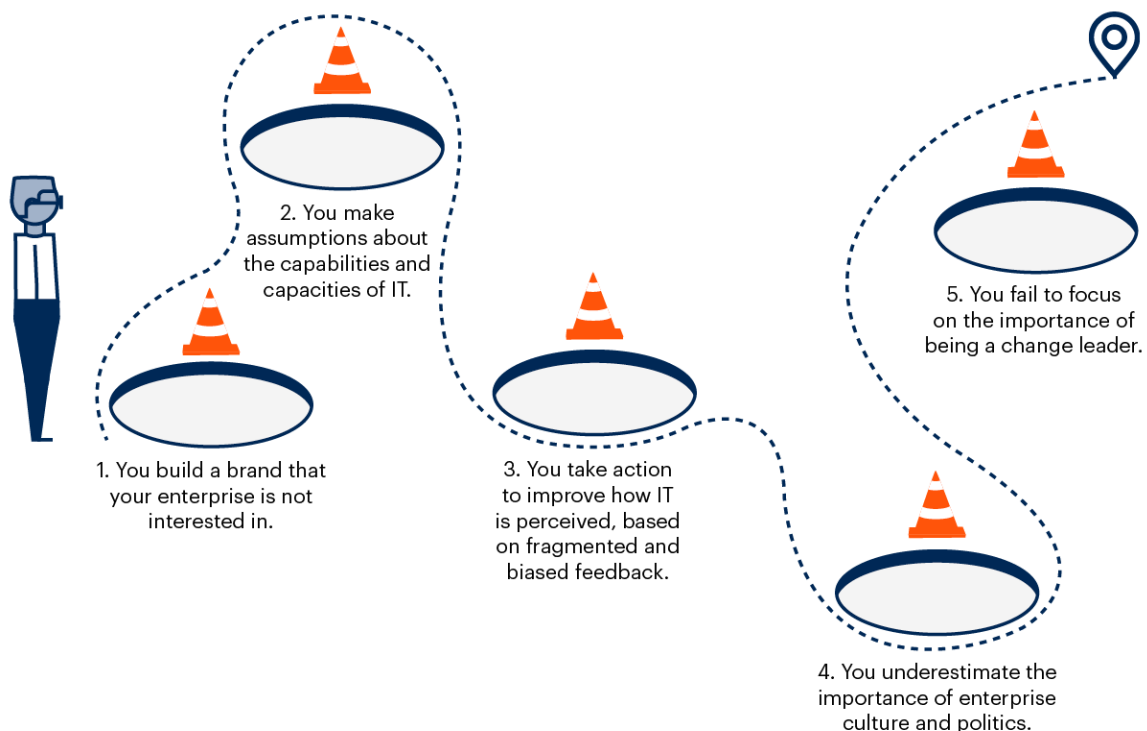
Introduction

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 on the IT organization and the enterprise as a whole. But, by the end of the first month, you're thinking, "What have I gotten myself into?"

There are five common pitfalls you'd better avoid, so you can position yourself for the success you envisioned (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Five Fatal Pitfalls for the New CIO

Five Fatal Pitfalls for the New CIO

2. You make assumptions about the capabilities and capacities of IT.

5. You fail to focus on the importance of being a change leader.

1. You build a brand that your enterprise is not interested in.

3. You take action to improve how IT is perceived, based on fragmented and biased feedback.

4. You underestimate the importance of enterprise culture and politics.

Source: Gartner
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Analysis

Build a Brand That Contains at Least the Set of Elements That Your Enterprise Expects From You

Scenario: James arrives in his new role, anxious to prove he's the strategic executive he is expected to be. The CEO invites him to be a permanent attendee at the sales and operations (S&O) weekly meeting. However, after the first month, James begins to absent himself from those meetings because the topics discussed are far from being about technology. 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 new perceptions of the 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 two things:

- What you want your personal brand to be

- What your enterprise expects your brand to be

Be sure you're aware of "what they thought they were buying" when they selected you. Make sure your brand contains these elements too.

Remember you are giving off verbal and nonverbal signals all the time — directly or indirectly — that support or detract from both aspects of your brand.

Address 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.

- Construct your leadership brand statement, such as, "I want to be known for being x, y, and z, so I can deliver a, b and c." Remember to incorporate not only your personal ambition but also your enterprise's expectations.

- Make a list of behaviors that reinforce your new brand and the priority situations in which to display them. Equally, make a list of (unwanted) behaviors associated with the antibrand, old brand. Think about where stakeholders see you exhibiting those behaviors — the wanted and the unwanted. Make some more visible and refrain from displaying the others.

Double-Check Assumptions on Technological Capacity With Your Business Peers

Scenario: Antonia starts her new role as CIO and invests time in understanding and assessing the human and technological capabilities of her department. Everything seems to be in good shape. The human organization and capacity seem to be well-dimensioned for their operating model, and infrastructure is stable and able to support existing applications. Two months later, the CX platform collapses. Antonia learns from the COO that the number of client transactions through their online channels have tripled over the last six months because the number of products offered online have also tripled. She focused on capabilities and overlooked capacities.

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

It is often IT that has more awareness of capacity limits. The rest of the business areas generally see only the lack of capabilities — not capacities — like, for example, the need for a new application to interact with customers. Once the capability has been deployed, capacity is often overlooked (from both a human and a technological perspective). It is incumbent upon the CIO to maintain focus on capacities as capabilities are added.

Address the pitfall:

- Spend time talking to the rest of the business areas about growth expectations under today's business model and in the future. 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.

- Make sure the strategic plan for IT maps back to the business strategic plan. You have heard this a thousand times, haven't you? And you know how to do it, and probably your enterprise is doing well because there is reasonable alignment. However, the challenge lies in looking ahead into the future. Explore how your business model is expected to change in the near future, how the business strategy will evolve accordingly and how your IT strategy has to evolve to reach the future with as little tension as possible.

Confirm an Accurate View of IT's Reputation

Scenario: Frank starts in his 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. Frank immediately moves to act on these complaints in a bid to prove his value. But time reveals a very different picture about what the challenges of the department actually are, leaving Frank 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 technology services. The high degree of reliance on these services often leaves stakeholders 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 the IT organization and technology in the organization.

The pitfall arises when new CIOs attempt to address perceptions about IT too quickly, relying solely on initial feedback in the early days of their tenure. It may take a bit more time to explore perceptions and reality. In order to do that, look at IT with a high-level, global perspective (that is, taking into consideration its challenges within the wider enterprise). Issues that require addressing (i.e., reality) may or may not confirm those perceptions.

Address the pitfall:

- Spend time with your direct reports and other team members to understand the current IT operating model. Prepare a list of no more than five questions, some specific and others open-ended, that will ensure these conversations yield insights. Then, make sure the IT operating model 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.

- Listen to and review evidence from a sample of stakeholders — including C-suite members — regarding the effectiveness and contribution of the IT organization. Then reach out to those who have not expressed their view point. Sometimes, the quietly frustrated partner is among the most perceptive.

- Be sure you understand the business's mission-critical priorities and the role IT plays. Map what you hear with your conclusions against the previous two points, and set out a plan to make improvements if needed.

Read the Signals of Your Enterprise Culture and Politics

Jill is in a new CIO role, and prepares carefully to understand the organization's business needs and areas for improvement. She attempts to proceed quickly with her ideas to remedy this. Everybody seems to agree to her plan. She manages to arrange all resources and the initiatives start off. She feels proud of having made an impact so soon. However, after one month, she realizes the initiatives are not running at the expected speed and quality. There is huge resistance, by both IT teams and other business units, to go beyond mere cosmetic changes that will not be the breakthrough in operational excellence that she expected for the enterprise. The general lack of growth mindset has turned into an insurmountable roadblock.

According to CIOs participating in the 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey, the enterprise culture ranks highest on the list of barriers to technology-related changes. [1] It is a slippery concept because very often the enterprise culture is difficult to perceive. It is in "moments of truth" — like business or digital transformations — when it surfaces, along with political dynamics, hindering the design or the execution of your enterprise's digital ambitions.

The pitfall arises when you underestimate the importance of your enterprise culture and its political dynamics, or when you make assumptions about it based on your past experiences or on fragmented observations. Bear in mind that enterprise culture and politics can be your best allies or your worst opponents. You will be able to manage them if you invest time in getting to know them.

Address the pitfall:

- Observe the hindrances of an existing change in the enterprise (one that was ongoing before your arrival), no matter how small. This will speak volumes about the roadblocks you will face. Start observing:

  - What resistance employees exhibit (from IT and from the rest of business areas)

  - The intensity of the support (or lack of) from their managers

  - The level of collaboration (or siloes) among employees to make the change succeed

  - The level of autonomy of those employees in daily decision making

- Make a map of the political dynamics in the C-suite: Who is/are the key opinion leader/s? Who are the followers of those opinion leaders? Who are the outsiders (i.e., those whose opinions are not conventional and/or controversial)? To whom does the CEO listen the most, and is it circumstantial due to a hot topic or is it a general influence regardless of the topic? That map will give you the key to get the buy-in for the digital initiatives you aspire to carry out.

- Look for ways to leverage your insight into the organization's culture to help you execute on your high-priority goals. Build alliances (or reduce resistance) in advance of seeking support for specific deliverables.

Develop Change Leadership — It Is Not Just Leadership

Bob wants to make an impression quickly and barges forth on an initiative that will require significant stakeholder buy-in. He does not realize the organization has been under pressure from a lot of change (especially from IT) for some time, and as a result, his initiative idea is met with resistance everywhere.

One of the outstanding demands of employees nowadays is to have leaders who know how to lead change. Change leadership has become a fundamental competency for CIOs. The reason is simple: Enterprises are undergoing unprecedented levels of change (business models, business strategy, ways of working), where digital is at the core. CIOs who say, "The transformation projects are important, but the day-to-day is also important, so distribute your time in the best possible manner to make both things happen" are condemning their team members to frustration. This is true because the day-to-day will always take precedence, and change will probably have to happen off hours — or potentially not at all.

The pitfall arises when CIOs assume that ongoing projects/initiatives — the ones that had started before their arrival— have their own course of action, and they focus only on planning the new ones. These CIOs overlook that, while time goes by, their team members may continue to experience frustration and fatigue.

Address the pitfall:

- Revisit the ongoing projects and explore the level of fatigue of your team members. Once you have a clear picture of the situation, renegotiate deadlines and resources with your C-suite peers, as the case may be. Bear in mind that you will shine when you deliver three initiatives with excellence, not when you deliver six initiatives in a mediocre manner.

- Educate the C-suite about the sources, effects and palliatives of change fatigue (see Four Tactics to Mitigate Change Fatigue).

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 explored in this research and choose to adapt during your new CIO job will enrich your leadership toolkit to form part of your professional strengths. The mitigating tactics we recommend to avoid or escape these five common situational risks are not technical, but will contribute to your personal mastery. Practice these tactics. Go forth and conquer these to be the best CIO you can be.

Evidence

R-22520 2022 Gartner Technology-related Change and Fatigue Survey. The 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey was conducted online from 5 through 18 July 2022 to identify the most prevalent types of IT- or technology-related change, and to understand how enterprises are approaching them successfully. The survey also focused on identifying the main symptoms and impacts of employee change fatigue and how enterprises are addressing them. The following Gartner-managed panel members participated: 56 CIO Research Circle members, 42 ITL and Business Leaders Research Circle members, and eight CFO and Senior Finance Leaders Research Circle members. Members from North America (n = 49), EMEA (n = 39), Asia/Pacific (n = 12) and Latin America (n = 6) responded to the survey. Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

[1] **The 2022 Gartner Technology-Related Change and Fatigue Survey:** This survey was conducted online from 5 through 18 July 2022 to identify the most prevalent types of IT- or technology-related change, and to understand how enterprises are approaching them successfully. The survey also focused on identifying the main symptoms and impacts of employee change fatigue and how enterprises are addressing them. The following Gartner-managed panel members participated: 56 CIO Research Circle members, 42 ITL and Business Leaders Research Circle members, and eight CFO and Senior Finance Leaders Research Circle members. Members from North America (n = 49), EMEA (n = 39), Asia/Pacific (n = 12) and Latin America (n = 6) responded to the survey. Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

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