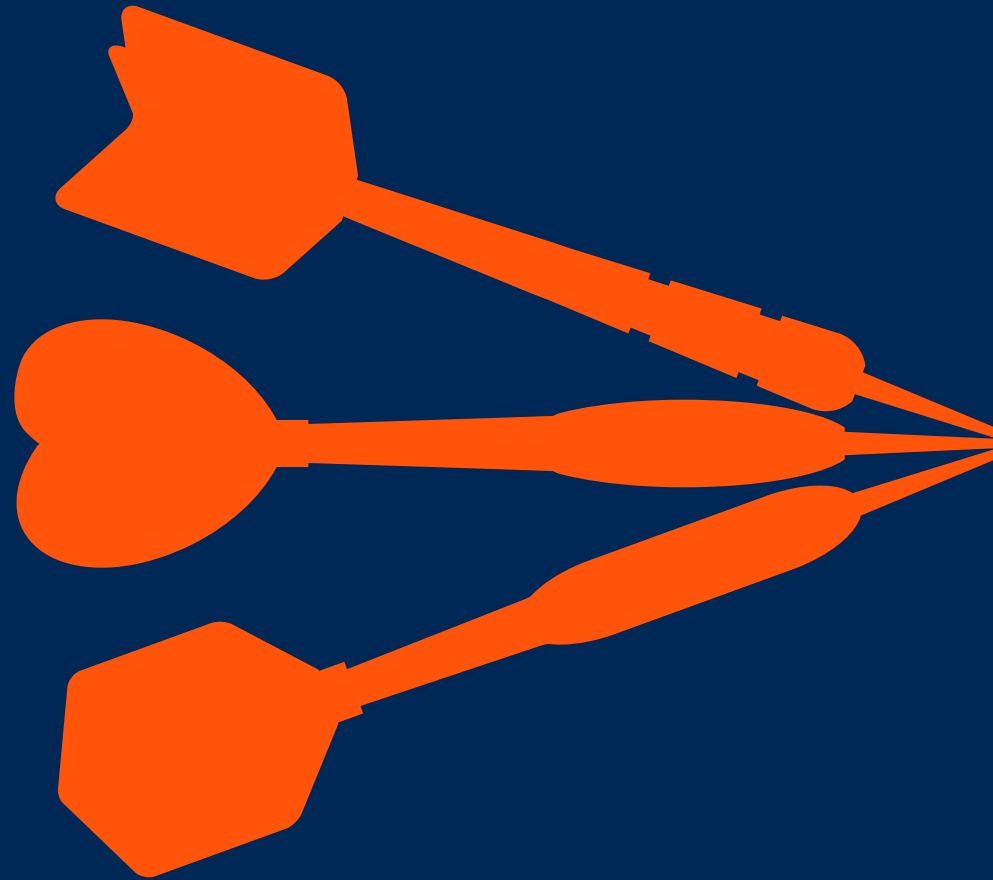


The New CIO

How to make an impact the first year on the job



Edited by
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On Maria's first day in her new CIO role, a major hiccup with an ongoing cloud migration occurs. Although one of her direct reports has been leading the effort, Maria spends her first week hands-on problem solving with the vendor to resolve the issue. She thinks her personal involvement in getting the migration back on track will appear as proactive and results-oriented. Instead, she ends up branding herself a "techie" and undermining one of her most experienced and skilled direct reports.

Such an early misstep might seem unlikely from the outside, but the reality is that new CIOs can easily stumble if they don't carefully plan their approach to the first months on the job. Without a clear set of actions to take, new CIOs are vulnerable to making fast and ill-informed decisions as a result of the pressure they're under to show short-term impact.

The key challenges facing a new CIO have changed radically in the past few decades. CIOs no longer have to explain the importance of IT — the causal relationship between effective technology and strong business performance is indisputable. But now CIOs have to make a case for why they and the IT function are the right partners to lead strategic initiatives.

With marketing and HR buying and managing more strategic technology, the CIO is no longer the de facto expert on technology-driven business value. New CIOs need to earn that reputation at the same time that they establish their bona fides as business leaders. The most successful CIOs present themselves as business experts first and technology experts second.

For optimal success, prioritize four actions in the first few months of tenure: Build relationships, learn the business, create a plan that augments the role of IT for the business and build your own brand.



Build relationships

Strong relationships make everything operate more smoothly. When new senior leaders take the time to get to know their peers and team members and understand their goals, it's far easier to identify high-priority initiatives and elevate talent in a way that overcomes barriers and advances the entire business.

Build rapport with the C-suite

The majority of CEOs have named growth as their top strategic priority for multiple years of the Gartner CEO Survey. Technology and data and analytics top the CEO's list of key growth enablers, but senior business leaders often lack sufficient knowledge to lead in those areas. They need technology-savvy business partners they can trust to build the capabilities to drive digital revenue.

A new CIO is in a prime position to step into that partnership — but first must understand the specifics of the business and the goals of its top leaders. How does the CEO spend most of their time? What are the top three priorities for the coming year? Is the CEO willing to try untested ideas to realize those priorities? Does the CEO have attitudes about technology that influence what they are willing to support? Know the answers to those questions before making any changes or proposing a strategic IT business plan.

It may not be possible to spend enough time with the CEO early on to get substantive answers to those questions, in which case the second C-suite relationship priority should be with the chief financial officer (CFO). CEOs view CFOs as their closest C-suite confidants, according to the Gartner 2018 CEO Survey. If anyone knows the goals of the business and its leadership, it's them.

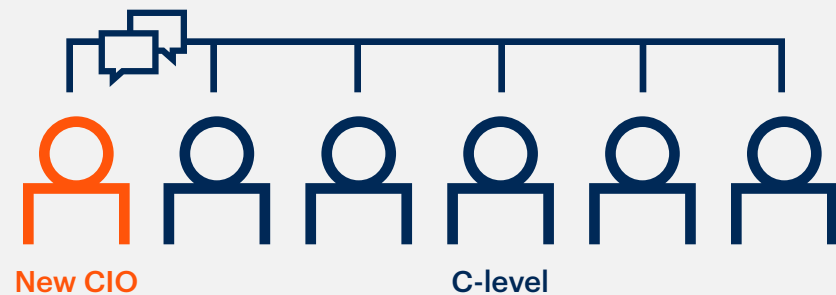


The CFO is an important ally nonetheless for the insights they have into how the organization talks about and measures financial success. Spend time with the CFO to understand: Where is the firm making investments? Where is it looking to cut costs? How does the CFO believe different functions can and should contribute to the bottom line? What language and metrics does the CFO use to talk about the business?

Be mindful during these early interactions with C-suite peers that your goal is to learn the business, not talk about IT. Senior business leaders are rarely interested in technical discussions, and engaging in them will serve only to position you as a tactician, not as a business leader with technical acumen. Likewise, be careful of looking too quickly for IT cost-cutting opportunities as a way to gain favor with the CFO. Controlling costs will always be part of the CIO's job, but the IT cost-cutter isn't usually viewed as a strategic partner.

What you can do, however, is look for opportunities to solve business problems using emerging technologies as your lever. For example, your conversations with the CEO and CFO can reveal opportunities to use artificial intelligence (AI) to tackle strategic priorities like cost reduction and customer experience issues. In this way, the new CIO links technology to business value.

The augmented CIO



Connect with your team

Most CIOs step into established operations and inherit teams with significant institutional knowledge. Take time in the early weeks to meet with team members and get to know them. You have multiple goals for these early meetings.

Your first goal is to establish two-way lines of communication and send the message to your direct reports that you are their ally — and they are yours. Express genuine interest in knowing about each of them: Who are they? How engaged do they feel with the organization and the value they produce? What goals do they have for their careers? As a new CIO, you can't afford to lose key talent. Send early signals that you view people as the key to producing strong outcomes for IT.

One way to demonstrate respect is to listen. Ask for input, opinions and information. Keep early thoughts or conclusions to yourself. Focus instead on no-blame, no-judgment information gathering until you get the full picture. It helps to remember that the veteran IT team members have institutional knowledge that you lack. Use that knowledge to validate and give context to the information you get from the CEO and CFO. Don't just rely on one person or subgroup. To avoid bias, listen to a variety of views.

Early connection with team members likewise provides an opportunity to coach everyone in IT to speak the language of business and finance. Pass along what you learn from the CFO about the financial goals for the organization and the internal language used to communicate it. Coach IT team members to lead with business-impact language when describing why a technical investment matters and what the organization will get from it. Model the behavior for them, and encourage it by asking questions like “Who benefits?” and “How?” and “How do we know?”

These behaviors will eventually leak into interactions between IT and external functions, resulting in a rise in IT's business credibility. It's even better if those interactions focus on technology-enabled business solutions that tackle the three magical words for an executive: Revenue, cost and risk.

Last, use time with the team to assess the balance of IT skills. What gaps exist? Who exhibits strong leadership potential? CIOs need to be able to delegate leadership responsibility for IT service areas like infrastructure and operations (I&O), so you can focus on strategy and IT-enabled business opportunities. Identify the people on your team who are already doing leader-level work, as well as those with potential and a willingness to learn.

Buy time to learn the business

New CIOs feel pressure to have an immediate impact, but be wary of taking action too soon. Use the first weeks and months to fully understand the business.

“Understanding” isn’t just about the business strategy and key goals you’re learning about from the CEO and CFO. It’s also about the culture, the formal and informal channels by which the organization makes decisions, the existing alliances and conflicts. Take action too soon and there’s high potential to offend a powerful executive, shut down a project with board-level support or misdiagnose the root cause of a key IT-level problem.

Bridge the gap between the strategy insights gleaned from the C-suite and the IT insights from the IT team by engaging with functional and business-unit VPs to understand the company’s business and operating models. A new CIO needs insight into the company’s major processes and systems, how they perform and how they interact with IT. You need to understand the ways in which the current IT operating model allows the business to operate smoothly and improve, and the ways in which it hinders operations and limits the ability to change.



Augment your influence in the enterprise

New CIOs should distill the collected knowledge of their first months on the job into “breakthrough plans” for the business. The plan consists of a high-level inventory of actions the organization could take to improve operations or implement an innovation. Align the proposed action with the priority goals of the organization, and be ambitious — 78% of CEOs view their organizations as pioneers or fast followers, and are thus more likely to support ideas they believe are new or innovative.

IT doesn't have to be the lead function for all of the ideas. For example, a new German CIO saw an opportunity for tighter alignment between his organization's marketing and customer service departments. The resulting collaboration led to improved customer service. The bottom line benefits connected indirectly to IT, but the CIO gained credibility as a strong business partner.

Socialize the breakthrough plan informally with C-suite peers and business-unit leads. Revise them based on feedback from these stakeholders before making a formal proposal and gaining approval.



Make culture part of the breakthrough

Be prepared to participate in culture change as part of driving the breakthrough plan. Ambitious ideas often require new habits, behaviors and ways of thinking. Leaders often ignore the behavioral aspects of change, which is one reason why 66% of change efforts fail or do not fully meet expectations.

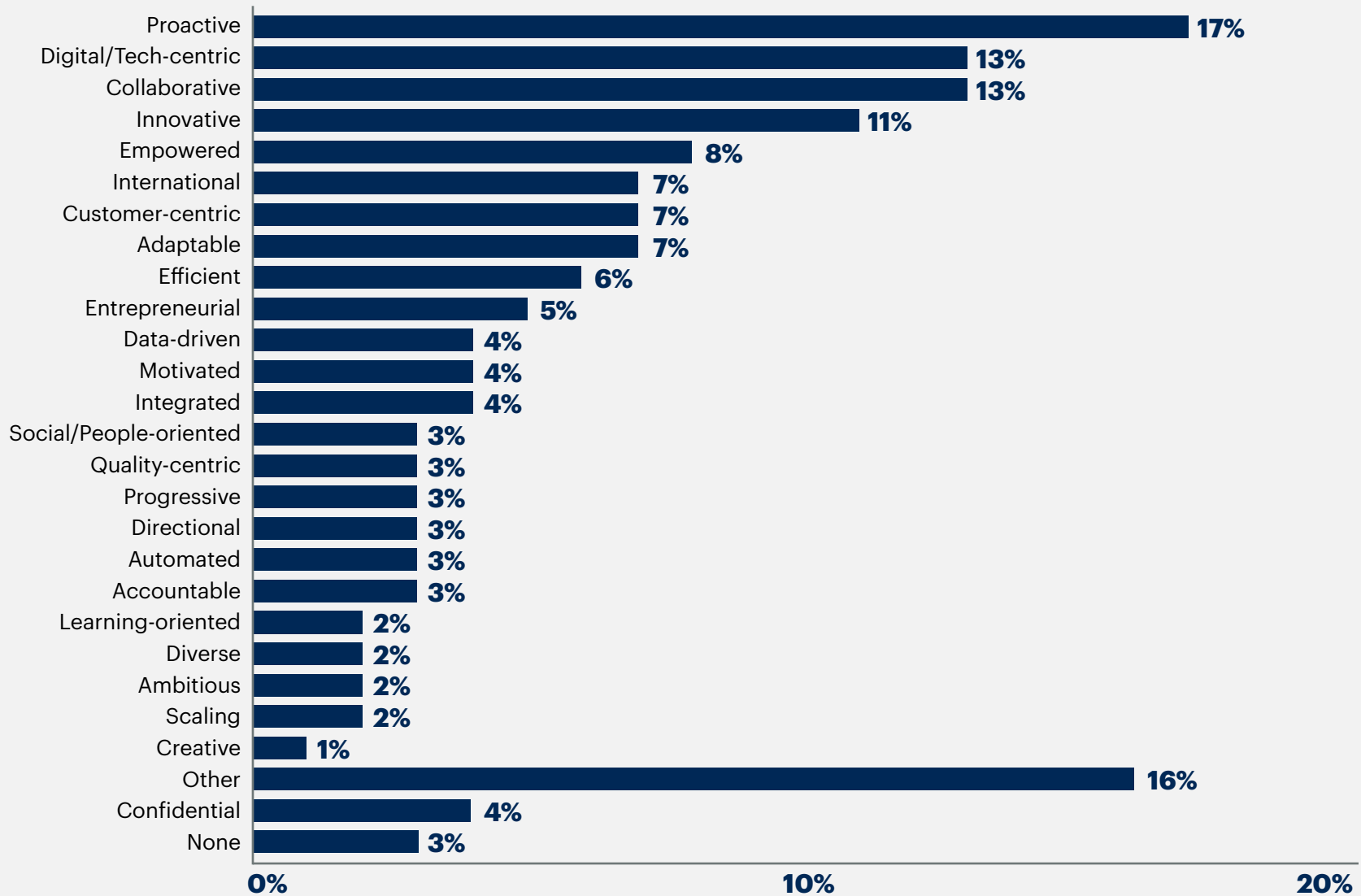
To avoid making the same mistake, collaborate with the chief human resource officer (CHRO) and other members of the C-suite to pursue proactive change — CEOs believe proactive engagement and collaboration are two of the most important dimensions of culture change efforts.

Identify one or two common, yet inhibiting, cultural behaviors in the organization. For instance, move away from a blame-driven culture to one that promotes accountability based on synergic solutions or adopt a smart risk-taking attitude to encourage teams to explore untested ideas. Replace unproductive behaviors with a new behavior or habit, communicate the expectation to relevant teams and put that new behavior into practice as you implement one of the plan initiatives. Choose a test initiative that requires low or moderate effort to produce high value. Your aim is to think big, act small, and take some risk to build your credibility and in-house connections.



Most important dimensions of the culture change

Percentage of respondents



n = 460

Source: Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey

Q: Describe the one or two most important dimensions of the culture change you intend to make using your own single word or very short phrase (max. 4 words).

Build your brand — and IT's

The first months on the job offer a unique opportunity for you to present yourself to the organization. The conscious steps to build relationships, understand the business and then propose an ambitious breakthrough plan help establish you as a strategic business partner. When peers hear your name, they'll associate you with ambitious ideas and practical plans to achieve them. In other words, you will have defined your personal brand in a way that aligns with the strategic, IT-driven growth priorities of the business.

To maintain momentum, behave in ways consistent with the personal brand you want to project. Define how you want to be known in a few words — as a digital transformation leader, for example, or IT-enabled growth leader. List the priority behaviors and responsibilities associated with that personal brand. Then list the behaviors and responsibilities that person wouldn't perform. Spend the bulk of your time on activities that drive the IT-business vision you want to be associated with, and proactively delegate nonpriority activities to trusted IT deputies.

Likewise, think about how you brand IT and its portfolio. If you want to be perceived as a productivity driver, name high-priority technical projects according to the business value they bring. For example, instead of “ERP Migration,” name it “Project Productivity Boost.” Again, use the words revenue, cost and risk when describing the business value of an IT initiative.

IT will still have to deliver on its operational requirements, and the CIO is still responsible for making sure that happens. Long-standing IT challenges that go unresolved too long will eventually tarnish your reputation, so it's important to have a strategic plan for IT and an execution path to realize it; however, you can leave the day-to-day execution to the expertise of your direct reports to focus your time on business activities.

Have early impact as a nontechnical CIO

More than 1 in 4 new CIOs today don't have a technical background — far more than five years ago, when nontechnical CIOs held less than 10% of all CIO roles. CIOs from the business side have an advantage in C-suite interactions: They have business credibility from the outset, and don't have to overcome “techie” stereotypes. But nontechnical CIOs need to invest significant time in establishing credibility with the IT team and the business functions IT serves.

Start by understanding the current IT operating model and how well it aligns with the company's business priorities. Identify sources of misalignment, as well as gaps in skills and capabilities. Validate the issues with the IT team and collaborate with your direct reports on a plan to align the operating model with the business and address skills gaps.

Working closely with IT team members on the operating model assessment provides a strong opportunity to identify IT leadership candidates. You will need trusted deputies to lead I&O and enterprise architecture — both of which require deep technical expertise. Installing capable tech leaders in those roles frees your time to identify and lead technology-enabled business opportunities, which is better aligned with your skills.

Over time, a new nontechnical CIO must develop broad knowledge of the workings of the IT department. The IT world is vast, however, and it's important to prioritize areas where the CIO can make an early impact. Acquire a high-level understanding of the IT architecture of the organization. Develop in-depth functional knowledge of the technologies in which the organization is making large investments today, and learn about technology trends likely to have large impact in the future — game changers. Leverage the expertise of your IT team and seek peer learning opportunities to quickly ramp up both your functional and overall technical knowledge.

Focal points for the CIO with non-IT background



Learn your team's working life and assess the effectiveness of the IT operations



Leverage your experience in business



Acquire a helicopter view of your enterprise IT architecture and a grounded view of the game-changer technologies

Additional Research

[Three Actions for New CIOs to Build Solid Rapport With C-Level During Their First 100 Days](#)

Daniel Sanchez Reina, December 2018

[Remaster Your Personal Brand in Times of Transition](#)

Graham Waller, January 2020

[How to Succeed as a CIO When You Come from a Non-IT Background](#)

Daniel Sanchez Reina August 2019

[5 Fatal Pitfalls for New CIOs](#)

Kelly Calhoun Williams, March 2020

[5 Pitfalls to Avoid as the New CIO](#)

Smarter With Gartner, May 2019

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To get the insights, advice and tools you need to find solutions to your most pressing challenges and learn about the latest developments that matter most to today's CIOs, visit: gartner.com/en/information-technology/role/cio-it-executives.

Download additional resources

[2020-2022 Emerging Technology Roadmap for Large Enterprises](#)

[2021 CIO Agenda: Seize This Opportunity for Digital Business Acceleration](#)

[Benchmarking/IT Score](#)

[IT Cost Optimization Framework](#)

[The CIO Roadmap to Strategic Cost Optimization](#)

[The IT Roadmap for Digital Business Transformation](#)

[Top Priorities for IT: Leadership Vision for 2021](#)

[Top Strategic Technology Trends for 2021](#)

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