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The Double-Duty CIO



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A recent CIO magazine survey finds IT leaders increase their business value by taking on additional organizational roles. Which roles do you think naturally fit under the office of the CIO? Should these decisions be made based on skills of the individual or the needs of the organization—or a combination of both?

CIOs have long juggled tactical and strategic responsibilities that are in constant flux. Recently however, research and anecdotal evidence suggests they are increasingly taking on additional formal roles in their organizations, such as heading up distribution or process management.

According to CIO magazine's 2009 "State of the CIO" survey, 64 percent of CIOs (out of a total of 506) cite taking on an additional leadership role for other non-IT areas of the business:

Security (32 percent)
Strategy (25 percent)
Administration/operations (20 percent)
Risk management (14 percent)
Customer service (14 percent)

Other CIOs are heading up mergers and acquisitions teams, human resources and marketing. And in further evidence of their voice at the executive table, 74 percent are now a member of the business executive management committee, up from 68 percent two years ago.

Taking on further responsibilities might be the shrewdest career move CIOs can make. As IT and operational budgets take on a parsimonious pallor, a CIO who offers additional expertise can stretch those precious dollars in constructive ways. And with job security more evanescent now than in previous downturns, those who are dilatory in proving their value and seeking new ways to help the business may face the chopping block.

"Fear causes us to seek stability, yet a dual role is about risk-taking," says Oakland, Calif.-based executive coach Joel Garfinkle. "This is a way for a CIO to be proactive in a tough economy. It's against our nature, but it's what is needed."

Growing Your Skills While Growing the Business

Pursuing additional roles related to operations or strategy makes good sense for IT leaders says Garfinkle, who has spent a decade coaching CIOs and other executives at companies including Google, Hewlett-Packard and Microsoft. "CIOs have a problem-solving mindset, so in operations they can be effective."

Supply chain, purchasing and any rule- or process-based activities are all smart fits for CIOs, says Kathy Gallo, managing principal with Marshall Goldsmith Partners, a New York-based executive coaching firm. Gallo confirms the rise in dual-role CIOs. "This [trend] is growing in part because there has been an upgrading of talent in the CIO role in the last decade, and people have come to see those leaders as very effective in adjacent areas," she says. "To be a good CIO today you have to have a broader set of skills."

Ideally, CIOs with dual roles deliver bottom-line benefits to their organizations and enhance their own marketability into different career paths. "CIOs understand integration, hooking processes and systems together," Gallo says. And those skills can help organizations cut costs and become more efficient.

Finally, a dual role can add variety and excitement to traditional IT responsibilities and enhance IT-business alignment, as the CIO gains both broader knowledge and strategic relationships across the organization. "You can delve into your areas of interest, and you can also do a better job representing IT to the business," Garfinkle says.

Getting Started

Becoming a dual-role CIO requires not only a serious commitment of time, but also a change in attitude. Not every corporate culture is open to a double-duty CIO. To make an effective case, take small steps to show your worth beyond the tactical decisions around technology purchases, IT support and infrastructure. "You need to think, act and operate from more of a strategic mindset," Garfinkle says. He recommends volunteering for projects outside of IT and demonstrating to other stakeholders what expertise or best practices you can offer. "Part of this is educating others and changing the perception of IT," Garfinkle adds.

To maximize success, choose an area that is aligned with your knowledge and experience. Part of the preparation requires doing the necessary research to understand what resources you'll need to succeed in the new role—including staff. "If you fail, you may not get another chance," Garfinkle warns.

CIOs need to build relationships with C-level executives and business heads to gain credibility and support for any strategic endeavor. "Go to others, be proactive and learn about the business," Gallo advises. For instance, if you recently led a project for a new, state-of-the-art data center, take the board members on a tour of it to help build stakeholder relationships. Another strategy is to deliver a presentation showing how the business can profit from new technologies.

"The reality is, if you don't understand the business you will be extremely ineffective," says Laraine Rodgers, former Xerox U.S. CIO and a lecturer at the University of

Arizona.

Juggling a Dual Role

CIOs have to demonstrate how they will pull off the extra work. Balancing IT and business hats requires finesse and, more importantly, a highly capable team. "Put your smartest people in place so that they can lead and you can be more out of the picture," Garfinkle says. "If you have phenomenal people there's nothing you need to do but check in with them."

Here are Garfinkle's other tips for double-duty success:

- Find mentors who can provide guidance and expertise.
- Make sure that your IT staff can handle extra responsibilities—and can see how this benefits their individual careers.
- Build positive, open and collaborative relationships with the other leaders in your new area of responsibility because, in some cases, you may be encroaching on their turf.
- Don't get consumed by tactical, day-to-day deadline worries as you assume another role. Delegate the finer details.
- Don't overpromise what you can reasonably accomplish.
- Prepare for the extra workload by adopting new time management strategies.
- Communicate your vision of the dual-role mindset to staff members so they understand why it is necessary and important to the company.
- Ask for additional compensation, but prepare to show higher-ups why you deserve it.

A dual role might sound chaotic but it can actually be the best way to overcome the chaos of the business world today. It builds new skill sets, and can help you gain broader influence throughout the workplace. Consider the economic downturn not with dread, but as a means to reinvigorate your career. "You will not just be seen as the IT leader, but as a leader of the entire organization," Garfinkle says.

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