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The CIO: Defining a Career for the Future

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Those of us who are IT professionals in higher education spend a lot of our time focused on the “new normal” of accelerating demand, flat resources, and constant change. But we often invest little time in assessing and advancing our careers. As a community, we are typically self-motivated to reach our potential and, in many cases, to extend the boundaries of our potential. However, if we are laissez-faire in our approach to career growth—in other words, if we are “too busy” to focus on ourselves—reaching our potential becomes much less likely.
Dispelling the CIO Myth
In 2013, information technology matters... a lot. Enrollment growth, student success, next-generation analytics, increased operational efficiency, social media presence, increased research activities—these all depend on highly effective and transformational information technology, as envisioned and implemented by the CIO-level IT leader. Yet in a troubling trend, the belief that being a CIO is not a great position and worthy career goal seems to be growing among IT professionals. By definition, this belief results in increasing numbers of our talented community not being interested in filling the most important IT positions on our campuses. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that too many current CIOs grumble about the difficult aspects of the role. There are indeed many challenges, but the opportunities for CIOs to make a difference at their institutions have never been greater. This is the IT position that drives change, makes investment decisions, collaborates with regional and national leaders, and ultimately shapes the future of technology integration.

As Tracy Schroeder, Vice President of Information Services and Technology at Boston University, explains: “I think a CIO can help institutions take on big challenges, transformative initiatives. These initiatives can be extremely difficult; you have to have some courage, even stubborn hope, to launch them and see them through. I take pride in leading those initiatives. Even if things don’t go as well as I would have liked, I can look back at the effort and know that I helped the university do something really important.”

Kevin Morooney, Vice Provost for IT and CIO of the Pennsylvania State University, states: “Even on the toughest days, I go to bed knowing that good and important things happened that day for Penn State, the state of Pennsylvania, the United States, and the world. That’s not just fluff—it’s the truth. The painful days still make a positive mark on the world. And the great days? I can hardly imagine any feeling more joyous than to have an uplifting day at a place that is making the world better. I get to see every aspect of university life, and it is tremendously diverse. I’m always, always learning. The view always changes. I’ve sometimes thought ‘What’s next?’ But I don’t have those thoughts for long because the landscape and challenges change so frequently. I’m always growing.”

Keith McIntosh, Vice Chancellor for Information Technology at Pima County Community College District, adds: “The most rewarding thing about being a CIO is the opportunity to help the institution set and achieve its goals and objectives. As CIO, I’m privileged to be a part of our chancellor’s cabinet and be a part of strategic discussions where I can help shape the future as well as ensuring effective and efficient use of technology. I must add that I really enjoy the opportunity to serve my staff as the leader of the IT organization. I also find it appealing to develop/mentor staff.”

The unique campus-wide involvement of IT leaders is highlighted in comments from Sean Reynolds, Vice President for Information Technology and CIO at Northwestern University: “From the perspective of other IT positions on campus, the CIO role is particularly rewarding because you get to interact with such a wide swath of people: the faculty who are looking at creatively educating a new generation or solving incredible problems; the students who are enthusiastically participating in learning and community; the staff who are trying to serve these community members; the senior administrators who are all on the same team to pull all this together. The CIO gets to participate in it all.”

The comments from these IT leaders reveal how rewarding the CIO position can be. A case can even be made that it is one of the most rewarding roles within the entire higher education institution. So how can we look at career planning from a broader perspective in order to define a career for the future and expand our potential?

Extending Our View of Best Practices
We all know the best practices and conventional approaches for career development: establish career goals, reach out to mentors for guidance, establish strong people networks within our community, and demonstrate success in our current role. These are clearly important success factors; in fact, they are essential. But there are others. We need to push ourselves forward, get out of our comfort zones, and focus on some of the lesser-known aspects of the job application and interview.

Pushing Yourself Forward
At the EDUCAUSE Midwest Regional Conference in March 2013, I had the opportunity to meet a number of talented attendees who had a definite interest in and potential for additional career growth. On hearing that I am a CIO, several volunteered, “I could never do that.” They then mentioned some aspect
of the job that they felt they couldn't do or wouldn't want to do. This struck me as understandable but also as a major internal roadblock to their career growth. Mentors and other peers can provide a positive influence by encouraging us all to try to reach higher. But if our internal voice is negative, perhaps due to a fear of failure, we will have a hard time moving past that and reaching our goals. If we don't try, we will never be successful. And we will never know if we could have achieved more in our careers.

Another choice we all make in our careers involves being “anchored.” This is often in terms of location—that is, not being willing, because of family or other local commitments and preferences, to relocate. We all know of successful IT leaders who have stayed at one institution, or within one metropolitan area, their entire career. Nevertheless, being anchored greatly limits opportunities for growth. At some point, career growth is about the number of opportunities available, and those who are willing to relocate will likely reach their career potential sooner than those who stay in the same place. Whether resulting from an intentional decision or a situation that develops over time, the geographic anchor is just that: one more obstacle in the path to success.

Climbing outside Your Comfort Zone
How well do you know yourself? Do you have a career weakness or fear? Can your current manager support your career growth? Are you stuck?

There is much discussion these days about having a personal “brand.” From the perspective of career growth, understanding what your brand is in your current role at your institution is essential. Those who work with and for you are certainly aware of your brand or reputation. If you are unsure about your brand, it is worth working with your campus professional development resources to see if 360 feedback or other feedback programs are available. If you are surprised by or disagree with the reputation you uncover, that may be a sign that you need to further develop your emotional intelligence. Success in the IT field is usually more about people relationships than strategic decisions or technical operations. As Reynolds states: “To be effective, you need to be innately a positive person with a ‘can-do’ attitude. People skills have to be developed to the maximum, and emotional intelligence is extremely important. Core communications skills are essential, specifically being able to negotiate and being direct but humane.”

To make significant progress in career growth, you need to understand your weaknesses. For example, do you fear public speaking? If so, the good news is that you have plenty of company. The bad news is that unless you address your fear, you will severely limit your ability to be successful in higher-level positions. Once again, campuses usually have professional development programs that can help you develop the needed experience and lessen your anxiety.

In many cases, your current manager can be a valuable mentor for career growth. You are likely already working with him or her in a mentoring relationship, even if informally. There are specific positive outcomes to pursue beyond that. Your manager can probably provide opportunities to broaden your work horizon. Asking him or her to appoint you to a hiring committee within your department or to a campus-wide group as the IT representative is a low-risk way to gain experience and additional contacts at your institution.

Another move to consider is asking for a lateral transfer within your IT organization. If you feel that you know your current role well and have delivered results, and that a promotion is unlikely in the near term for whatever reason, making a lateral move is a way to broaden your skills and experience base while also demonstrating your commitment to learn and to serving the organization. In any career path, lack of experience in a key area can be an obstacle. With a sideways move, you can pick up the experience that will make you more competitive later.

Applying and Interviewing
The best way to construct resumes and cover letters for job applications has been discussed for decades. But common missteps are still evident: resumes that are based on process instead of focusing on results; resumes that are so generic it’s not clear why the applicant should be considered for the position; and resumes that disclose personal information not in the applicant’s best interest to list (e.g., early career positions that are not related or impressive; information about personal or social causes).

If the resume and other background materials appear to be a good fit, the interview first impression is critical. It is not unusual for an interviewer to determine within thirty seconds whether the candidate has a chance of being hired. Professional development coaches can help you understand what your “presence” is and how it can be improved. This can be a challenging area, since candidates are unlikely to receive candid feedback in failed interviews.
After the first impression, interviewers are making another judgment: has this candidate spent the time to learn about the department, the institution, and current priorities and issues? If the judgment is no, you are not likely to be hired. Be prepared. Make sure you know who you will be meeting with, what roles they play, how they interrelate, and why they are part of the search process. As Linda Hodges, Senior Vice President and Leader of Witt/Kieffer’s Information Technology Practice, offers: “My advice to candidates would be to do your homework before interviewing so you can say you are seriously interested and can let the organization know that you and your family are on board. Showing serious interest is key.”

The interesting and difficult questions that you’ll be asked in the interview are fairly predictable. Memorizing well-thought-out answers will serve you well. But there are also questions that interviewers want answers to but typically won’t ask. You can help by providing this information in your answers to the more conventional questions. The following are examples of these unasked questions:

- **Interview committee:** Why should our institution hire you? Is there something wrong with you (your background, your interpersonal skills, your private life)? Why do you really want to come work for us? Will your current work experience prepare you for our institution? Can we trust you?
- **Your new boss:** Why should our institution hire you? Will you make my life easier or harder? Will I be able to tolerate you? Will you always be asking me for more funding? Are the institutions you’ve worked for in the past higher or lower in prestige than our institution, or are the reputations and rankings about the same? How much will it take salary-wise to hire you? Will you stay? Can I trust you?
- **Your colleagues:** Why should our institution hire you? If hired, can you persuade the boss to provide us all with more resources? Will you try to grab my turf? Can I trust you?
- **Your staff:** Are you a going to be a nightmare to work for? Will you threaten my job? Will you give me a raise? Will you make me work harder? How long will you stay? Can I trust you?

Finally, there is one scenario that interviewers are looking to avoid at all costs. Colleges and universities are risk-averse, period. Senior leaders have no tolerance for making a visible, high-level hire that doesn’t work out. Keep in mind that any red flags, inadequately defined gaps in your work life, or other unusual experiences that you offer or that are uncovered in background checks will often end your chances of being hired.

**Listening to the Experts**

In most cases, a successful interview experience is what stands between us and career-growth positions. Tremendous insights into how to make those interviews successful can be found in the executive recruitment community. Although used primarily for CIO searches, executive recruiters offer advice and guidance that is helpful to all levels of job candidates, whether they are looking for a promotion on campus or pursuing a growth opportunity at another institution.

Recognizing the value of executive search mentoring, EDUCAUSE invited Phil Goldstein and Mary Beth Baker, Managing Partners from the executive search firm Next Generation (http://itleadersearch.com/), to provide complimentary coaching sessions at the EDUCAUSE 2012 Annual Conference in Denver. After meeting with eighty members of the community for these individual sessions, Baker described some key themes that emerged: “It is imperative that candidates articulate a compelling story of their careers. Interview committees are interested in understanding their impact as a leader on their current organization’s and institution’s priorities. Be prepared with examples. And don’t overlook the basics. A well-written cover letter is essential. Doing your homework about the role and giving crisp, well-communicated answers to interview questions are often what make the difference.” Goldstein commented on how the role of the IT leader is evolving: “The period of change and uncertainty that higher education is in is reflected in the CIO search process. Institutions want candidates that are forward-leaning, strategic thinkers that can run IT well and contribute to broader conversations on the role of technology in higher education.”

A bit before that, in preparation for a presentation at the EDUCAUSE Enterprise Conference in 2011, I had asked for advice from representatives of three executive recruiting firms: Matthew C. Aiello, Partner, Heidrick & Struggles (http://www.heidrick.com/); Martin M. Baker, Vice President, Baker and Associates (http://www.baasearch.com/); and Linda Hodges, Senior Vice President, Information Technology Practice Leader, Witt/Kieffer (http://www.wittkieffer.com/). I recently contacted these representatives again to see if their recommendations and insights still applied and also to ask about trends that they may have noticed in the past year. Below are some of their key insights:

**What are college/university senior leaders really looking for in an IT leader?**

- Men and women who not only are very skilled technically but also possess the administrative and leadership skills necessary to be a great CIO (Baker)
- Someone who is comfortable in an
What are the most important characteristics of a successful candidate?

- Some degree of tenure/stickiness, with the best candidates tending to stay four to six-plus years in one place: any shorter and there is the suspicion that “something went wrong”; much longer and the assumption could be that the IT department has stagnated (Aiello)
- A logical career progression, with roles of increasing responsibility over time and, ideally, promotion from within (as opposed to being promoted only when changing jobs) (Aiello)
- Excellent communication/presentation skills (no shrinking violets allowed); someone who comes across as confident but not arrogant, comfortable but not casual, high energy but not over the top (Aiello)
- Executive presence and excellent communication skills (Hodges)
- High energy, passion and drive, strategic vision/big-picture thinker (Hodges)
- Confidence without seeming arrogant (Hodges)
- Individuals who can make tough decisions: like any other administrator on campus, CIOs have to be able to make tough budget decisions (Baker)
- The ability to interact with key decision-makers on campus; information technology lends itself to creating change, but listening to the needs of those on campus is important when making changes or decisions that will impact them (Baker)
- The ability to communicate to campus users the changes that are taking place, why the changes are taking place, and how these changes will benefit them (Baker)

What is your advice for those who are applying to and being interviewed for a senior IT leadership position?

- Sell before you buy. In most of the search process, you should be convincing the search committee and leadership that you’re the right person for the job; once you’ve done that, you can be more discriminating. (Aiello)
- Don’t allow the generation of an offer that you won’t take. Selling your house, moving your family, discussing compensation expectations, asking for a different title or reporting relationship—these are not “last minute” details. Iron out the wrinkles before putting on the suit and frustrating an entire administration. (Aiello)
- If you’re currently in a #2 position, round out your experience. CIOs need to understand infrastructure, enterprise applications, and academic technology (at a minimum); fill in the resume gaps. (Aiello)
- Do not assume that information technology is valued and used in the same manner at the prospective campus as it is at your current campus. (Baker)
- If you are already in higher education, expose yourself to as many university-wide issues as possible. (Baker)
- Understand the specific needs of faculty, staff, and students—needs that can indeed can be very different. (Baker)
- Answer questions directly and in a fairly concise manner; don’t ramble. (Hodges)
- Do your homework on the organization and the community if relocation is involved. (Hodges)
- Be energetic and enthusiastic about the opportunity. (Hodges)

What new trends in IT leadership placement have you noticed during this past year?

- More CIOs are being recruited. CIOs are retiring, and some schools are adding this position. There seems to be an acute awareness about how critical information technology is in higher education and how important it is to have the right leader. Unfortunately, many schools don’t realize what they need to pay to get the right CIO leader and are not willing to have the position be part of the president’s council or report to the president. (Hodges)
- CIOs are picking up additional responsibility. The implication for CIOs is that they need to develop “situational awareness” about the context for information technology at their institution and to understand that there are tremendous opportunities to grow and expand the role in today’s...
technology context. \(\text{(Aiello)}\)

- There is increased recognition of the greater need for CIOs to think strategically and broadly about how their office plays a role across campus. As colleges and universities, especially the public institutions, continue to struggle with budget cuts, every unit on campus is having to prove its worth to the administration, and information technology is no different. The increased focus on online learning courses offers an opportunity for additional revenue for the institution; whereas information technology was previously supporting the academic enterprise, it can now more directly contribute to the bottom line. \(\text{(Baker)}\)

Finally, our own community—the higher education IT community—has many success stories in career growth and can offer insights. A great strength is our ability to reach out to support one another. Although we may be competing at times for the same leadership positions nationally, our sense of community is so strong that we focus on doing what is best for the collective good and for each other. This extraordinary community is one reason that it is so important to make connections with our thought leaders. As Melissa Woo, Vice Provost for Information Services and CIO at the University of Oregon, comments: “Cultivate a network of mentors who can help you develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to take the next steps toward becoming a CIO.” Kevin Morooney adds: “Know, really know, as many people at your institution as you can. You’ll better understand the culture, be able to solve problems faster, and better ideas will be generated. This can be an engine of trust.”

Another success factor is our intimate knowledge of the entire institution. James Davis, Vice Provost for IT and CIO for Iowa State University, states: “An in-depth understanding of our strategic opportunities and challenges, and fluency in how the faculty, staff, and student worlds intersect, increase our ability to produce meaningful results.” Schroeder adds: “A key success factor for me, and I think for many higher ed CIOs, is genuine interest in and ability to understand the hopes and challenges of the university community, and to consistently demonstrate the alignment of the technology organization with realizing those hopes and addressing those challenges. In a nutshell, I think I ‘get it,’ and the ‘it’ is higher education at my institution.”

Navigating Status and Risk in Higher Education

Something we don’t talk about much in higher education is the unofficial but very real status hierarchy and how it can affect our credibility and viability as candidates for senior IT positions. Although there is certainly merit in the perception that a research university CIO position will have broader and more complex responsibilities than a CIO position at a non-research institution, the status hierarchy goes much deeper than that. The bottom line is that if you come from a university that is higher in the national rankings (or other measures of prestige) than the institution where you are interviewing, you will gain some type of competitive advantage. The converse may be even more significant. If you are coming from a state college focused on instruction, you are going to be quite challenged in being considered for the CIO role at a private or a significantly higher-ranked public university. There are exceptions, of course, but where you have worked matters. In fact, it matters a lot to those making the IT leadership hiring decisions.

A related issue is the belief that corporate or other “outsiders” can’t be successful in making the transition to IT leadership roles in higher education. Yet though higher education certainly has some unique and counterintuitive cultural practices, a talented IT leader is more than capable of transitioning fields if he or she has the interest and opportunity. Kathleen Starkhoff, Chief Information Officer for the Ohio State University, had more than twenty years of private industry experience prior to her current role. She states: “Regardless of industry or region, every organization is different and has notions that are held sacred. When one enters a new organization, it is critical that he/she listen to a wide group of diverse individuals over a period of time to understand the nuances, the sacred norms, and the culture of the organization. The confluence of cultural appreciation and years of varied IT experience constitutes a terrific com-
Another consideration is risk. What is your risk profile? We are familiar with the importance of evaluating risk in the decisions we make for our organizations. But have you considered how much risk you are willing to tolerate in terms of your career growth? Leaving a central IT position to accept a higher-level role in leading a campus IT organization has risk. Moving to another college or university in the same region may not work out. Moving across the country to a new job may turn out to be a disaster for you or your family. Yet those and other changes also have high potential to be very successful choices that will ultimately take you much further than you would have ever gone if you had not taken the risk.

In addition, standing still is becoming increasingly risky. Many of our current positions will change or disappear, and if you are at the beginning or the middle of your career, it is particularly important for you to focus on that reality. These are your decisions, your career, your future.

Looking Ahead: Three Career Profiles
What will be needed from senior IT leaders in the years ahead? With information technology always evolving, and with higher education seemingly on the verge of transformation, thinking forward is essential. Given the constant change, what career profiles can we predict with some degree of accuracy?

The CIO-Plus
This profile involves a CIO having high-level responsibilities beyond the IT domain. This role is gaining traction in some corporate settings, and perhaps it will surface more broadly in higher education institutions. In order for this trend to take hold at colleges and universities, IT leaders will need to intentionally broaden their expertise well beyond their IT role. Perhaps this will be feasible in terms of career planning as more IT services are provided from off campus.

The Chief IT Strategies and Services Officer
Imagine having the capability to envision what information technology can and should look like in 2020 and having the skills, influence, and will to make that happen at a college or university. Imagine being able to reallocate, reconstruct, and massively collaborate so that your institution is not spending money to be unique in areas that don’t matter but is instead building partnerships with and leveraging services from Internet2 Net+, other campuses (nationally and globally), vendors, and local resources in order to drive down commodity computing costs and focus instead on research, instruction, and outreach missions. Such dramatic changes require support from the executive leaders. An integral component to this profile is the ability to find and become part of an institutional senior leadership that embraces this vision.

The CEO of the Regional CIO Services Organization
With every IT service now available, to at least some extent, off campus, there is a renewed opportunity for campus leaders to consider the value of restructuring significantly, even radically. In this profile, the business processes involving administrative and many enterprise commodity services have moved to a more common set of best practices, as opposed to our current practice of local uniqueness. There will be opportunities to provide value on a regional or even national basis for those IT services that scale. The remaining IT leaders at each institution are then able to dive much deeper into a more strategic and narrower field, providing differentiation for the strategic research, instructional, and outreach needs of the institution. Could an ERP, LMS, or other high-cost service be used by multiple institutions with a common best-practice model? This is already starting to happen.

Going Forward
The opportunities for IT leadership within higher education are exciting and vast. And they will change in ways well beyond what has been presented here. But there are many practices that will position us well for the future. Know yourself, address your gaps and vulnerabilities, be relentless in building your professional network within EDUCAUSE and other peer communities, and listen and learn from the experts.

But don’t wait. If you’re not moving forward, you are likely falling farther behind, reducing your chances to meet and expand your potential. You own your career and all that goes with it. Define your goals so that you define your future.

Note

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