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Should CIOs have a technology background? 7 IT leaders weigh in

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By

[Enterprisers Project](#)

on

December 19, 2016

Community of business-minded IT leaders exploring the evolving role of CIOs as they drive business strategy and inspire enterprise-wide innovation.
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As IT plays an increasingly important role in business outcomes, the must-have skills needed for CIOs today are increasingly swaying toward business and leadership skills. Communications, mentor skills, strategic thinking, and a vision for the future come to mind, while some argue that actual technology know-how is less important. It begs the question – do CIOs need to have a technical background at all to lead IT today?

Seven IT leaders weigh in. Let us know your thoughts in the comments.

Out with operations CIOs

"Some of the best CIOs come from non-technical backgrounds. They can quickly see how the right technology solution aligns with the business and brings value. In fact, as I reflect on my years as a CIO, the best compliment I ever received is that I do not get blinded by the novelty of technology, but rather apply technology solutions to the business in ways that transform the organization. There has never been a greater day to be an exceptional and transformative CIO, while at the same time there has never been a worse day to be a mediocre, operational CIO." – **Michael Matthews, CIO of Oral Roberts University**

CIOs as disruptors

"The new breed of CIOs are a lot more business focused. The days are gone where they just focus on technology. But they have a good view of the business as a whole so they can use software and data analytics to really drive the business strategy. CIOs must become disrupters. To do that, a combination of technology background and a strong business background is key. They have to become more of a business strategist person than just a pure technologist." – **Sanjeev Addala, chief digital officer, GE Renewables**

Business background needed

"You can be a CIO with a technical background, but you can't be a CIO without a business background. If you've got a business

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background and you're technical, that's great. If you've got just the technical background, I don't know if you can really thrive. At the board level, you are talking about solving business problems and taking advantage of business opportunities. You can only do that if you understand the business." – **Bill Packer, CIO of American Financial Resources, Inc.**

Tech background also needed

"I've worked for a CIO who came out of purchasing, and his lack of understanding about technology caused a lot of confusion. I get teased that I'm not technical enough because about 15 years ago I stopped doing the hands-on stuff. My background is computer science and engineering and industrial engineering. I am well versed in the use of technology, system design, and system processes. So when people start talking systems and processes, I can understand and contribute. But when we start talking business processes and cost of ownership, I'm just as skilled in those areas as well. When you bring in a CIO who doesn't have a technology background, it makes it harder on the technology team. A CIO with a strong business background may serve the company well but they don't lead and utilize the technology team as well." – **Kenneth N. Pereira, director of customer support, Medco Data**

A good mix is ideal

"I come from a technical background, studied it at college, always had a technology-oriented role. But my philosophy has always been it's a lot harder to teach a technology person the business than it is to teach a business person the technology. I have eight people reporting to me and four of them came from a business-oriented role. You need a good mix, but technology is a skill you can either rent or nurture. Really understanding how a business operates, leadership talent, management talent, and then understanding and having a passion for the industry are attributes that are critically important to success." – **Dale Danilewitz, CIO of AmerisourceBergen**

Talking the talk

"Does it help in some ways to have a technical background? Sure. I'm lucky enough to be surrounded by very good, thoughtful leaders in the technology space. But I also think there's great value in having a CIO who can talk to your peer business executives on a business level to share the value of IT. I don't need to know all the ins and outs of how something works or fits together to share what the value is. You do need to be able to talk about business alignment and transformation through technology. That's what we really need to drive those conversations forward." – **Keith Werner, State CIO, North Carolina**

Empathetic leadership

"The most effective CIOs are going to have feet on both the business and IT sides. I came up through the engineering side, and I think it's made more me much more understanding and empathetic to the challenges that IT faces. But the CIO also cannot just be focused on

technology. I believe strongly there is no such thing as a technology project, only business strategies with technology components. So organizations will always find more value from CIO leadership that has technical and business experience." – **Kevin Mark**, CTO, College of Southern Idaho

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Submitted by David Beckerman (not verified) | December 19, 2016

I believe that more and more

I believe that more and more CIO's need to speak and understand the language of business. CIO's are leading transformations that require IT organizations to shift from an engineering-centric perspective to a product and business-centric focus. Having the skills to drive these business objectives, such as; scale, outcome based, time to market, collaboration and innovation are paramount for a CIO. I don't believe a technical background is required for a CIO to succeed at achieving enterprise technology value and differentiation. Empathy, growing and

learning, curiosity, relationships and facilitation will define the success of digital CIO's and their organizations.

About This Site

The Enterprisers Project is an online publication and community focused on connecting CIOs and senior IT leaders with the "who, what, and how" of IT-driven business innovation.

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