

New CIOs: How to succeed in the first 120 days

By null

Executives are under pressure to deliver from the day they start their positions. That applies to CIOs just as much as it does to CEOs, according to Diana Bersohn, managing director, Accenture Strategy and author of the 2015 paper [Go Live on Day One: The Path to Success for a New CIO](#). But Bersohn said [new CIOs](#) also have challenges unique to the post, and they must not waste any time demonstrating that they can handle those challenges and produce results that benefit the entire organization. As she writes in her paper: "CIOs have to prove they can use [technology and digital innovation](#) to build and deliver new capabilities, products and services at speed, while also tackling existing problems and closing current gaps."



Diana Bersohn

Here, Bersohn shares her thoughts on why the first few months of the CIO job are so critical and what new CIOs need to accomplish to put themselves on a path to success.

Are new CIOs under more pressure than other newly appointed executives?

Diana Bersohn: Yes, I do think that CIOs are under more pressure than other executives. The world is changing, [digital information](#) is causing lines to blur between the business and technology, and because of that there are new challenges that are [unique to CIOs](#). They have an unprecedented opportunity to affect change because the environment and the landscape are changing so rapidly [that] their span of influence is much broader. There's a greater opportunity to influence how technology is being used.

Do [new CIOs](#) have more at stake than other new executives, such as a new CEO?

Bersohn: I wouldn't make that exact comparison. I'd say that CIOs today are under greater pressure than they were five years ago. So it's less a question of [CIOs vs. CEOs](#); that's harder to compare. It's more that the [CIO role is evolving](#) and changing. So in addition to being tech savvy, CIOs have to be business oriented and customer driven more so than they were in the past. Whereas five years ago it might have been sufficient to be deep technologists and have peripheral relationships with other parts of the business, now they have to have much more [collaborative relationships](#) with their peers and the different functions within the enterprise.

You say new CIOs only have 90 to 120 days to make their mark. Why such a brief window of time to prove themselves?

Bersohn: There are significant expectations on the IT organization to serve the needs of the business

and produce results, and there's impatience [if IT's value isn't well understood](#) by the business. So there's a short period for new CIOs to demonstrate that the IT organization has an actionable plan and can make changes and is on the right track. It's not that new CIOs either make a mark or don't make a mark by [90 to 120 days](#). They have to gain buy-in from the business in that window and build collaborative relationships and set the stage for the changes they're going to make over a much longer period.

What is the No. 1 task that new CIOs must accomplish within the first three to four months?

Bersohn: The No. 1 task is to gather facts on the current IT performance and the perception of IT so they have a baseline view of how IT is performing and where opportunities lie, so they can develop that actionable plan and show tangible progress against that baseline they've established as they go forward. It should include quick wins as well as longer-term transformative initiatives, so they can show progress to their stakeholders.

What are the No. 2 and No. 3 top tasks new CIOs must do?

Bersohn: No. 2 is really more about taking that customer and business mind-set and building relationships across the organization; so looking beyond IT is the No. 2 task. If they don't build those relationships and get that buy-in, it's harder to be effective. And a lot of the innovation is happening outside IT, so there's a much greater need for the CIOs to be [operating collaboratively](#) across the organization.

No. 3 would be from a more [long-term planning perspective](#). The CIO needs to look beyond the company walls and look at the broader ecosystem -- the partners they have, competitors. Lines are blurring between industries, so there's an opportunity for CIOs to look more broadly and to determine how they can use technology to enable the business.

What do you see as the most common mistake new CIOs make in their first few months?

Bersohn: I'd ask instead, 'What's the biggest challenge they're facing?'. And that is the need to balance the detailed focus on IT and what we've talked about in terms of baselining IT and developing that broad action plan and building those [collaborative relationships](#). Striking that balance is really critical for new CIOs. The mistake would be either extreme: focusing exclusively on managing their stakeholders, or being too internally focused and focusing solely on IT without a broad understanding of the needs of their stakeholders.

How do new CIOs measure their success along the way, given it's such a short period of time?

Bersohn: It goes back to the task No. 1 about [gathering facts](#). They should measure success by establishing metrics based on that baseline view of that performance and make sure they have near-term wins so they can show quantifiable successes in the short term. It could be as simple as an operational metric that needs improvement that they think they can deliver quickly.

How do others measure CIO success in the early months?

Bersohn: It needs to be translatable into business value. So as part of gathering that fact base, CIOs have to establish the metrics they're going to use to measure success and make sure they've translated them into [business-relevant metrics](#).

Can CIOs who don't do well in those early months recover?

Bersohn: They can recover, they just have to address these topics we talked about. If there is a delay in moving forward with these tasks, they then have to accelerate the process and look for catalysts to affect change more quickly. Quick wins would be critical to gain some credibility.

Is there a magic timeline of when new CIOs fail?

Bersohn: I don't think there's a magic timeline. The more time that goes by, the harder it is to be successful in the role. Conversely a CIO who builds strong collaborative relationships with his peers and stakeholders in the first 90 to 120 days is on the path to success.

Any advice for IT professionals in general?

Bersohn: One of the biggest pieces of advice for IT professionals is that it's no longer sufficient to be just tech savvy. They have to bring business and [digital skills](#) to their roles and be customer focused.

Can other IT professionals benefit from this approach when starting a new job?

Bersohn: They could take a lot of these pieces and apply them. They have to be able to quickly articulate and demonstrate that they are business savvy and have a customer-focused mindset in addition to their technology skills. Being able to show the digital implications of the technology is also critical in their roles.

Should they have a written action plan?

Bersohn: It's a great point for anybody in any role to have a written plan on how they're going to move forward with their own job, their own personal plan.

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