

CIO = Career is Over? Not Hardly.

– By Pam Baker

For some, the role of CIO is the career peak; for others it's just an outcropping on the side of the mountain. Career advancement for the one is a matter of holding and defending the position. For the other, it's about anchoring a cam in the next crack of opportunity and muscling past icy obstacles. But in either case, standing still is not an option.

"This job is not for someone who is slow to learn or adapt," said Phil Garland, a partner in PricewaterhouseCoopers' Advisory practice who also serves as the National CIO Advisory Solutions Leader.

For those looking to scale higher than the top IT job, the way forward calls for a whole new skill sets and business acumen that rivals that of a reigning CEO (even if the CEO seat isn't where the CIO's aspirations sit). The five career paths that currently lay ahead of CIOs all require far more than a mastery of technological wizardry and more than a touch of Midas talent.

The CEO career path

While plenty of CIOs will likely aim for the CEO seat, that target is exceedingly difficult to hit.

"Frankly, we rarely consider CIOs for the top leadership position," said Chuck Pappalardo, managing director of Trilogy Search Non+Profit, an executive recruitment firm based in the San Francisco Bay Area. "This is not yet a typical career progression model or prevalent trend. It could be, however, as I believe there's still a gap in communications and understanding among executives in the C-suite."

The key to landing a seat in the top chair is to first stand in the center of the action.

"If CIOs spend more of their time understanding what their companies are trying to communicate to customers as well as time listening to company customers to understand how that messaging matches the customer experience, I suspect over the next five years we will see more CIOs break into CEO roles," said Pappalardo.

The key steps you need to master on the path to becoming CEO are repositioning IT from cost center to profit center; know and understand operations on par with the COO; be able to clearly define ways to meet company goals, and be comfortable presenting and/or arguing a business case with other executives or the board of directors. In other words, "move in tune with the company's business rhythm and flow," said Pappalardo.

But be prepared to climb to the CEO position by way of an indirect route.

"The likely path would be to a COO role leaning on skills for continual process improvement and overseeing initiatives supporting business priorities," said Tom Silver, senior vice president of North America at Dice.com, a leading tech job website. "However, this would likely be considered a lateral move with the benefit of more business experience allowing CIOs to shed the tech experience-only tag." It's much easier to move from the COO position, rather than the CIO position, to the CEO slot. But there are other successful side-routes available as well.

"It's possible for CIOs to move over to lead sales or marketing functions, which are the most likely paths to the CEO role, if the employer's primary product is being sold into technology departments."

Diverging paths

Not everyone thinks being CEO is the ultimate career pinnacle, anyway. So for those of you looking for something else, the way forward is full of diverging choices. Take Ilan Levy, for example, he was the VP of Information Services (as the CIO title did not exist then) at Sony Canada from 1988 until 1994. From there he became senior managing consultant at the Boston Consulting Group for two years, then a serial entrepreneur and now finally an angel investor. He says that upon looking at his own (and others') "After CIO" career paths, he sees four distinct destinations separate from the CEO route:

1. A role with greater scope within the same company, a competitor or another company in the same or similar industry. This could be COO or head of Logistics or Sales, for example.

2. A senior consulting role in a technical or strategic consulting firm.
3. Entrepreneurship as in starting a business or joining a startup.
4. Teaching at a university.

The key to choosing one path over another lies in understanding that there is not one mountain to scale but an entire mountain range from which to choose. Decide which pinnacle you want to reach first and then go for it. However, if you don't succeed or you simply decide that mountain top wasn't quite what you imagined it to be, there's nothing stopping you from taking one of the other paths too.

"I know of people who were successful in all four paths. And I know a few who tried some of those paths and did not fare as well," he said. In any case, CIOs generally find it easier to avoid typecasting and career stagnation by leaving their present employer and moving to a different company. But don't jump ship too quickly; look around and carefully inventory your best opportunities for advancement first.

"CIOs may want to target companies they've done business with and have a clear vision of what those companies/vendors could do better," advised Silver.

From fixer to rainmaker

The one step all these career paths require is a change in perception from the CIO as a tech problem-fixer (be that to fix broken tech or fix broken knowledge of new tech) to that of rainmaker. If the goal is to move to CEO, then the CIO must provide a track record in producing profits. If the goal is another C-seat in the C-suite or as a consultant, then the CIO must prove relevant to operations and innovation. If the goal is to teach, then the CIO must prove to be a master of tech details and trends.

Even while working to increase visibility and change perceptions of the top IT role, CIOs must also make sure the basics are covered.

"No matter how elegant the future strategy might be, the CIO will not survive if the business is in jeopardy because of a shaky IT foundation," said Garland.

A prolific and versatile writer, Pam Baker's published credits include numerous articles in leading publications including, but not limited to: Institutional Investor magazine, CIO.com, NetworkWorld, ComputerWorld, IT World, Linux World, Internet News, E-Commerce Times, LinuxInsider, CIO Today Magazine, NPTEch News (nonprofits), MedTech Journal, I Six Sigma magazine, Computer Sweden, NY Times, and Knight-Ridder/McClatchy newspapers. She has also authored several analytical studies on technology and eight books. Baker also wrote and produced an award-winning documentary on paper-making. She is a member of the National Press Club (NPC), Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), and the Internet Press Guild (IPG).



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