CIO TO CEO

BARRIERS AND SUCCESS FACTORS

A WHITE PAPER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of Chief Information Officer emerged in the early 1980s as IT leadership became increasingly important in many organisations. The CIO is now seen as a key member of the executive team and the position is the career aspiration of many IT professionals. Significant work has been done to identify the attributes of successful CIOs and much advice has been offered on how to move into the role.

Evidence is now emerging that the top CIOs are moving up beyond their specialist leadership role, to become Chief Operating and Chief Executive Officers, with more than 100 such leaders identifiable in North America. This project examines the attributes of those who have stepped up to the very top of the corporation, by analysing the actual experiences of those who have done so. It builds on a theoretical foundation for leadership development by interviewing 29 executives who have become CEOs or COOs (21 CEOs and 8 COOs).

The research has been funded by the Ontario government and the Toronto chapter of the CIO Association of Canada, with assistance from executive search experts at Korn/Ferry International. It started by examining the available literature. Some limited academic work had been done on developing theoretical models of such a career move and a review of the trade literature identified more than 100 CEOs who had held prior CIO positions. A preliminary model was developed and tested through interviews with 9 such Canadian CEOs and then extended with 20 further interviews (11 more in Canada and 9 in the United States).

Participants identified key factors that contributed to their career development and success at the highest levels in three distinct areas - their work experience, environmental factors and personal attributes. Their work experience demonstrated initial success at being a CIO, taking on broader firm-wide responsibilities and developing an ever increasing business focus in their activities. Typically their organisation was a mature user of IT with good IT governance or, as the CIO, they contributed significantly to the development of these factors. Finally, their personal attributes included superior personal skills and a broad understanding of the business and its customers. They were seen as change leaders in their organisation and also credited a career adviser or mentor with providing significant help during their career development.

Their experience provides clear guidance both to IT executives who wish to make it to the very top as well as for those who simply wish to succeed within the CIO role. Career progression comes from abilities to build credibility (through knowledge, skills and leadership) while taking action to manage one’s career development.

The report provides detailed guidance on proactive career management for aspiring IT leaders.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1. **INTRODUCTION**

2. **STUDY DATA**

3. **RESEARCH FINDINGS**
   - 3.1. Increased Business Focus
   - 3.2. Good at CIO Basics
   - 3.3. Personal Skills
   - 3.4. Business Knowledge
   - 3.5. IT Governance and IT Maturity
   - 3.6. Change Leadership
   - 3.7. Role of a Mentor

4. **OTHER IMPORTANT FINDINGS**

5. **IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY’S IT LEADERS**
   - 5.1. Building Credibility
   - 5.2. Orchestrate Career

6. **AN ACTION PLAN FOR CIO CAREER PROGRESSION**
   - 6.1. Build Credibility
     - 6.1.1. Build Credibility by Increasing your Business Knowledge
     - 6.1.2. Build Credibility by Improving your Personal Skills
     - 6.1.3. Build Credibility by Exhibiting Business Leadership
   - 6.2. Orchestrate your Career

7. **CONCLUSION**
1. INTRODUCTION

Although relatively new, the position of a Chief Information Officer (the CIO) is now widely accepted as one of the key C-suite roles. With the continuously increasing role of technology, the demands of the position have been changing. CIOs are now responsible for more than just providing the right technology and running the IT departments; they are increasingly becoming leaders who actively participate in strategic business decisions. This transformation means that CIOs are required to develop a business-focused set of skills but it also opens new career opportunities in other leadership roles. Specifically, an increasing number of CIOs are moving out of the technology leadership role and into Chief Operating Officer (COO) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions, even though traditionally this has not been a common career path.

The goal of our research was to examine the factors which can support or prevent career progression from CIO to higher executive positions. This report is an outcome of a two-phase study by the Institute for Research on Technology Management and Organizational Learning of the Ted Rogers School of Information Technology Management at Ryerson University sponsored by the Toronto Chapter of the CIO Association of Canada and MITACS-Ontario. The first phase consisted of extensive academic research and a pilot study of a group of Canadian CEOs. It identified key career characteristics and personal attributes that may help CIOs to get to CEO or COO roles.

The second phase of the study, which was also supported by executive recruiting experts at Korn/Ferry International, expanded the initial sample and combined results to examine career progression and personal attributes of successful CEOs and COOs in three areas previously identified in Phase I: Environmental Factors (focusing on the industries and employers that the executives have worked for), Work Experience (executives’ responsibilities and job experiences that shaped their know-how), and Personal Attributes (soft skill and emotional intelligence).

2. STUDY DATA

We identified and contacted some 100 potential participants who progressed from the CIO role into CEO or COO positions. Of those, 29 agreed to share their experience as well as their thoughts on CIO career progression drivers. Among all respondents:

- 21 held CEO positions and 8 held COO positions
- 14 were US-based and 15 were Canadian-based
- Two were female

Although most participants came from a technology background, for a few, the CIO role was their first position in Information Technology. The interviewees came from a wide variety of backgrounds and worked in different industries including, among others, software, financial services, utilities, pharmaceuticals, healthcare and education.
The interviews were semi-structured, with a mix of open and close-ended questions, ensuring consistency of the analysis while at the same time allowing for respondents’ personal perspectives. The participants shared with us the information about their personal career paths and their views on CIO career progression factors, as well as advice for CIOs aspiring to climb the corporate ladder.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed through a formal coding approach. Unique codes were assigned to specific comments and examined through the use of an automated text analysis software tool. This approach allowed us to effectively analyze a large amount of data and compare respondents’ comments in a consistent manner.

We searched the data to find differences between various groups of executives (COOs vs. CEOs or Canadian based vs. American-based executives). While the participants’ backgrounds and professional paths varied, the core characteristics of the career factors they described did not. Our findings show that certain key elements can influence career progression of CIOs across various industries and career paths.

### 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Our research shows that CIOs are making it to the top. Although the position is relatively new (in comparison to the well established executive roles of COO, CFO or CEO), CIOs are now gaining their seat at the executive table – not just as IT managers but as business leaders and partners in strategic discussions. While certain negative IT stereotypes still exist, successful CIOs are able to overcome them and advance their careers by proving themselves to be knowledgeable, engaged and business-savvy.

Based on a comprehensive literature review, the first phase of the research identified three key categories of factors influencing CIO career progression: *Personal Attributes*, *Work Experience* and *Environmental Factors*. Data acquired from the expanded sample confirmed and validated this model. Despite our respondents’ varying backgrounds and different career paths, we found that they all exhibited quite similar characteristics. The key factors among the three categories (those which were most often mentioned and discussed by the 29 participants) are presented in Figure 1. The top 14 factors presented below accounted for over 62% of all coded comments relating to career progression factors. Within that group, the top two factors – *increased business focus* and *good at CIO basics* – stood out, having received significantly more comments (both in numbers and in interviewees’ perception) than the remaining factors and account for nearly a quarter of responses.

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1 For more details on the first part of the study, please refer to “CIO to CEO. Barriers and Success Factors. A White Paper.”, March 2010
These factors paint the following picture of key CIO success and career progression determinants:

### 3.1. Increased Business Focus

An increased business focus was exhibited by all participants and discussed considerably more often than any other factor. All of the interviewed executives discussed this element, often stressing the importance of not only understanding the business but also being a partner who can actively participate in and bring value to business discussions. As described by one of the participants, “successful CIOs wear their business hat first and their IT hat second.”

Being more attuned to the business needs is both necessitated and facilitated by the fact that IT touches all aspects of the business. Today, all corporate functions are supported by technology, which gives the CIO a unique opportunity to be involved in all parts of the organization. Being involved makes it much easier to align business priorities with technology capabilities, providing improved results. This approach was further facilitated by the respondents’ experience outside of IT, in functional roles.

As pointed out by interviewed executives, “it’s very important to put the business context around IT” and to have “an instrumental role of helping the business determine what applied technologies make sense. Not technology for technology’s sake but how do we turn that technology into competitive value, market value, drive sales productivity, improve customer retention, and improve profitability”. CIOs who were able to anchor their decisions in the business context were more successful and more readily accepted by other executives.

### 3.2. Good at CIO Basics

Being good at CIO basics was the second most frequently discussed factor, mentioned by all interviewees. The ability to effectively deliver IT capability is a natural expectation of
CIOs. However, making everything run smoothly is only part of what truly successful CIOs bring to the table.

Firstly, IT leaders have to “make the plumbing simple” and “prove that you can make things happen”. However, this does not imply a strong focus on a failure-free environment or the use of the latest technology. As pointed out by the respondents, being too afraid of failure prevents many IT leaders from taking full advantage of technology (which sometimes requires taking risks). Similarly, depending on the business context, following the newest technology trends might not necessarily be the right choice for an organization. It is the ability to mitigate risks (rather than avoid them) and choose the right technology for the business that makes it possible to “execute and deliver service at the right price point and at the right level of quality”. This is closely connected with an increased business focus and both factors were often discussed together by the interviewees.

As the CIO responsibilities expand beyond a strictly technical role (and become more business focused) it is also important to find the right balance between different aspects of the job. As one of the participants suggested, “if you spend too much time on process you’ll fail, if you spend too much time on technology you’ll fail, if you spend too much time on people you’ll fail”. It is important to get a good understanding of what mix of activities will most adequately address the requirements of a particular organization. As this changes over time, CIOs must be able to adjust their priorities accordingly.

### 3.3. Personal Skills

Among the personal skills discussed by the interviewees, four were mentioned most often: communication skills, building relationships, being good at people and organizational development, and ability to motivate people.

**Executive level communication skills** are crucial in being able to work with the business and discuss technology-related issues in a way that is understandable to all stakeholders, regardless of their knowledge of technology. Translating complex technical concepts into simple terms has been an important success factor for the respondents as it allowed them to bring various stakeholders to a common level of understanding and create an environment where everyone is comfortable in discussing technology. One of the executives talked about the importance of proactive communication with the business in the following way:

“If I were to ask a business person to give me a blank sheet of paper saying ‘hey what do you need?’ I don't think they would know how to fill that out. But if I went to them and said I can give you this (...) because that satisfies your needs, now I've focused their attention and got them thinking.”

This example is indicative not only of the deep understanding of the business needs but also of the ability to take the complexity out of the technology discussions and turn the often-feared subject into something everyone could relate to.
Building relationships was important to the participants because it allowed them to strengthen their role internally and produced career progression opportunities. For many respondents, having good relationships was crucial in the process of building the previously described business focus and understanding the business. As mentioned earlier, IT touches all parts of the business and the relationships with the business can influence the CIOs ability to deliver results. One respondent pointed out that “often the CIO’s job is about managing by influence; your peers don’t have a dotted line to you and they may have the money you need to do your initiative”.

Secondly, relationships and professional networks were important in the interviewees’ career progression as many of the opportunities that allowed them to advance in their career were not planned but suggested or enabled by people in their network. As described by one of the executives: “Business people don’t necessarily consider technologists for business roles and vice-versa without someone advocating for you internally”.

Some of the respondents made a clear distinction between good working relationships and personal ones, stressing that building relationships does not mean creating close personal ties. Rather, it implies building working relationships where the CIO is accepted as one of the business C-level executives and where they are being trusted as both a technology expert and a business partner. As summarized by one of the interviewees, “you have to respect and professionally work together; you don't have to love each other”.

Being good at people and organizational development as well as the ability to motivate people were important factors, which allowed interviewed executives to build successful teams and organizations. Many interviewees talked about creating an environment in which their teams could be successful, motivated, engaged and able to have a strong positive impact on the organization. One of the respondents described their role as being a facilitator who makes it easier for the team to do their job and to reach their objectives.

Having an engaged, knowledgeable staff allowed participants to create high performing organizations where strategic plans were executed effectively and important transformational projects were introduced successfully. One executive pointed out that “as you move up in management it becomes much less relevant what you as an individual can deliver and much more relevant what you as a leader can…have your teams create”. Another respondent explained that a CIO’s “ability to influence a strategy is only as effective as their ability to take others with them”.

3.4. Business Knowledge
The interviewees agreed that the ability to exhibit the increased business focus is largely dependent on understanding and knowledge of the business and its industry. Understanding how the business works provides a CIO with a context in which technology-related initiatives can be evaluated and analyzed; a project without that context “can be successful from a technology perspective but unsuccessful for the business”. Some executives also talked about the importance of encouraging their teams to gain business knowledge. One interviewee encouraged their IT team members to find a
partner on the business side and work closely with them. As the IT team learned more about the business, “they were able to come up with some very creative solutions to everyday problems of their business partners and at the end of the day we were highly impactful”.

Many respondents talked about the importance of understanding the customer and being customer-centric. As described by one interviewee, “you don't win clients and you don't keep clients” if you are not close to them and engaged. Being able to understand customer needs makes it possible to adequately address them and create value for the business. Simply put, “you can't understand how to help someone unless you understand the shoes that they are in”.

Understanding of the business and of the customers cannot be superficial. As stated by one executive, “you have to really understand the intricacies of the business not just the buzz words”. In the case of our respondents, this was enabled by work experience and having firm-wide responsibilities. Hands-on experience was often quoted as the best way to gain a true understanding of various parts of the business. Some executives gained the experience by taking different positions in various industries, while others diversified their responsibilities internally by engaging in M&A activities, taking responsibility for different geographical areas, or participating in large transformational projects within their organizations.

Respondents generally agreed that successful leaders have to be able to demonstrate a range of different skills and an ability to deliver results in various environments, such as customer management, sales management, product management, marketing, financial management, risk management, governance, communications, PR or revenue growth. One interviewee compared this to filling a toolbox with a set of different tools that will come handy in the future.

3.5. IT Governance and IT Maturity
While the interviewees worked in companies with highly varying IT maturity and formal IT governance structures, they generally recognized the importance of these factors in their professional success. Both of these factors are strongly interconnected, as good IT governance structures are a sign and a product of high maturity in how an organization views their IT capabilities.

Where necessary, the respondents built or improved governance structures and increased IT maturity to levels adequate to the context of their organizations. This was important “because if you have governance that gives you exposure to your peers, gives you exposure to the board, you know you’re well positioned. If IT is integrated in with the business you’re going to learn and understand the business more and really be able to perform better”.

One of the executives pointed out that “the view of IT tends to fluctuate from strategic …to necessary evil”. Where the leadership team understood the importance of IT, the respondents were able to considerably increase the IT maturity levels and governance structures.
3.6. Change Leadership
The respondents often talked about being change agents in their organizations, leading initiatives from major technology transformations to redefining business processes, introducing efficiencies and changing the culture of IT organizations. In each case, the executive was able to better align technology with the business needs and create an effective organization supporting strategic business goals, reducing costs and increasing business value.

A common skill that the change agents had was the ability to quickly identify problem areas, suggest ways of improvement, create an action plan, and effectively carry it out. In many cases, the organizations were facing considerable problems that often required radical solutions (such as cutting the IT budget by $500 million). In others, the respondents were able to identify opportunities for improvement and proactively propose ways in which the IT organization could step up (such as rationalizing technology or introducing employee engagement programs). Not all of the change efforts were revolutionary. One respondent pointed out: “if we stand still as an organization, one of our competitors will catch up to us and surpass us… the pace of change continues to accelerate… that’s why I happen to be a fan of continuous improvement”.

3.7. Role of a Mentor
While not all interviewees had official mentors, all but two talked about someone who played that role in their career. Some respondents had several mentors over the years while others had one or two people whose advice they sought out repeatedly throughout their careers. The interviewees recognized the importance of the advice they received from their mentors on business issues, personal development and career progression.

The respondents who worked with their mentors (and whose mentors were on organizational leadership teams) often talked about being engaged in various discussions or brought into meetings which they would not have participated in otherwise. This allowed them to watch their mentors “in action” and to see how they “approached problems…and issues”. For many executives, their mentors had a strong impact on their career path, pushing them outside their comfort zone, encouraging them to move to other positions and giving them confidence that they have the necessary skills to succeed.

4. OTHER IMPORTANT FINDINGS
Throughout the interviews we identified additional important factors that emerged as recurring themes.

The Changing Role of IT
Many interviewees believed that the role of IT has changed and will continue to change. IT is a relatively new field and one of the executives described their early role as “first generation IT”, while another said: “when I got into the field, there was no field”. In the early days all IT professionals “came from somewhere else” whereas today the IT career paths are more specialized, often starting with IT-focused degrees and certificates.
Some respondents felt that because the field was new, people had a chance to progress through their careers more quickly than would be possible in other areas. As IT grew, a more structured technology career path emerged. Today, the path is changing again, evolving into what one respondent called a “dual stream within IT”. The traditional roles focused heavily on technology are complimented by more business-focused roles, such as business analysts. From the leadership standpoint, IT executives “evolved significantly from just being the…IT guy or the IT leader to having responsibilities around innovation, creation, productivity, operational efficiency” and “enabling the organization with technology”.

As the IT field grows, it continues to change. From the technology standpoint, IT departments have become an essential part of virtually all organizations. While some companies still view IT as a utility, it is increasingly becoming an integral part of the business. From an organizational perspective, another change has been taking place – “IT was a silo for a very long time and…those lines have blurred in the last 10 years”. More and more organizations break the previously predominant structure where IT and the business were clearly separated, both organizationally and culturally. Today, with the growing amount of customer-facing technologies, IT is ceasing to be just a support function and is increasingly becoming an integral part of the business.

This change in the IT field is not just a thing of the past; it continues and should be recognized by today’s CIOs. New technology and new delivery channels continue to bring more change. One of the interviewees explained the impact that the new technologies, such as cloud computing, have had on their organization and their role: “if you were to look at my company I have no servers, I have no data center, I have no email systems, I have no ERP systems… So the traditional IT CIO role just doesn’t exist and yet I’m doing all of the things that I did” within the traditional IT model.

**Trust and Credibility**
The ability to build trust and credibility was another factor which interviewees often talked about, stressing its importance in their career progression and in their relationships with both the subordinates and the peers. It is important to keep in mind that “you’re not going to please everyone all the time, but there needs to be a level of trust that you’re doing the right thing from the perspective of the overall company”.

The ability to build trust is dependent on several of the previously described factors. Firstly, a CIO has to be able to deliver on promises and provide proven results in order to gain trust in their abilities to execute. Additionally, this should be supported by good interpersonal skills and executive level communication skills. Overall, these elements will build a level of trust that will help the CIO be fully accepted as one of the C-level executives and overcome the stereotype of technology-focused IT specialist with limited understanding of business.

**Lateral Movements**
The interviewees identified lateral movements as a way to gain valuable business experience. When searching for development and career opportunities many IT professionals look for positions higher up on the functional diagram but in order to go up
it is often better to first step sideways. While “there is no standard playbook” that describes the best career path for IT leaders and CIOs, the respondents generally agreed that experience in various roles outside of IT brings an invaluable addition to the technical skills. In the words of one interviewee, “you have to be willing to step backwards to move forwards”. Many participants urged CIOs to get out of the IT field and take advantage of opportunities outside their area, before considering a move to a higher role.

**Emotional Intelligence**

*Emotional intelligence* combines a number of soft skills that complement the CIOs technical knowledge to make them great leaders. It is focused both internally (on the CIOs ability to manage their emotions and be self-motivated) and externally (on their ability to be empathetic to other people’s needs, be able to build interpersonal relations, and communicate effectively). Several participants pointed out that IT professionals are more likely to lack skills in this area. One explained that “it’s easier to deal with computers than people. Because computers don’t get mad at you and they don’t have emotions that you would have to deal with and all these complexities that humans have. They are very logical and a program either complies or it doesn’t. There’s reasons why it doesn’t comply and it’s always consistent”.

These are not skills that people have to be born with. Several interviewees admitted that this did not come naturally to them; one participant talked specifically about being introverted and having to work harder on these skills. What emerged throughout our conversations with successful CIOs was not their natural inclination towards certain behaviour (such as being more extroverted) but the awareness and willingness to develop those skills as necessary.

The Canadian CEOs who took part in the first phase of the study also permitted us to assess their emotional intelligence (EQ) by completing the Leadership Dimensions Questionnaire (LDQ) – a well-established psychometric tool. All participants exhibited emotional intelligence at a level considerable higher than that of the wider population of managers. This demonstrates that high levels of leadership competence are required to advance to the CEO position and to be successful in that role.

As Korn/Ferry International has found in examining the career progression of several thousand successful executives, a journey up the corporate ranks requires a change in leadership style. Successful executives were able to transition from a task-focused approach to a more flexible, participative leadership style (much more so than those who have not been as successful). In other words, senior executives must take steps to prepare for and approach the changes that are required as they expand their responsibilities and progress in their careers.
The results of our analysis show that the CEO office door is open to CIOs but that CIOs have to gain the right to enter that door. Although you can plan your career to the top, it is what you do along the way that really matters. Before reaching out for the CEO position, you have to prove that you have the experience and the skills that make you the right candidate.

The goal of this report is not to describe how to be a good CEO. The journey to the top starts with being an outstanding CIO and gaining the credibility, experience and skills that are necessary to make it to the CEO level. In the next two sections we list the key areas and specific action items that CIOs should consider in the context of their career planning and, most importantly, in the context of delivering excellent results as CIOs. Indeed, even if you have no intentions to become a CEO, the following steps still apply and will help you become an exceptional CIO.

The key elements that influence career progression of CIOs are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Elements Influencing CIO Career Progression

Based on the research findings, the first step in successful CIO career progression is to build credibility through performance by providing results, demonstrating a business focus (supported by business knowledge), and showcasing the ability to be a business leader. This approach allowed the interviewees to overcome the negative IT stereotype and gain a seat at the executive table. Being accepted as one of the C-level executives led to more opportunities, as the CIO role was more likely to report directly to the CEO and as the CIO became more visible to the board. As shown by the interviewees’ career paths, this increased visibility, combined with credibility, tends to open many new doors for CIOs.
Secondly, it is important that CIOs orchestrate their career moves and take actions that will prepare them for the top executive role. These actions have to aim at developing the necessary skills, gaining relevant experience and being able to showcase readiness for the top role. At the same time, successful CIOs are able to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves along the way and which support career progression. These elements are described in further detail below.

5.1. Building Credibility
As previously mentioned, building credibility is based on combining business knowledge with relevant skills and leadership traits.

Building credibility through knowledge
In order to gain credibility through knowledge CIOs need to prove that they are not only good at CIO basics, but also that they deliver technology with the full understanding of its business context. In order to acquire the increased business focus, CIOs must gain relevant work experience outside of IT and take on firm-wide responsibilities. When it comes to understanding and knowing the business (and its customers), only first-hand experience can truly prepare CIOs for the requirements on higher executive positions. At the same time, it serves both as a way to demonstrate an interest in professional self-development as well as a means to validate business skills.

Building credibility through skills development
Being able to deliver results in only one part of the equation. To be truly successful, CIOs must also develop a set of interpersonal skills that will allow them to be great communicators, build strong relationships and motivate their team. These traits become more important with each step up the corporate ladder and are a key requirement for the CEO position.

Building credibility through leadership
Finally, successful CIOs have to exhibit the ability to introduce change in their organizations and be able to motivate and develop their teams. Not only can they identify improvement opportunities and act on them but they also know how to effectively communicate the value that they bring to the business and the IT organization. At the same time, they recognize the importance of motivating their teams and aligning their organizations to common goals. Even the best-designed plans cannot be executed successfully without a team buy-in or at the very least understanding as to the goals and rationale. Successful CIOs are open about their strategies and know how to address important issues with various affected stakeholders.

5.2. Orchestrate Career
In order to advance beyond their current role, CIOs have to actively take control of their career progression. Successful CIOs are not afraid of taking up challenging high-visibility projects and reaching out beyond their comfort zone. For many CIOs, the importance of building professional networks is invaluable in their ability to make it to the top. While opportunities for CIOs exist, they typically present themselves as a result of the CIO’s “brand” recognition among the executive and among their peers. While not all CIOs who
progressed in their career actively searched for advancement opportunities, all were able to demonstrate that they were ready to step up to a higher role.

### 6. AN ACTION PLAN FOR CIO CAREER PROGRESSION

Based on the identified research implications for CIO career progression, this section presents concrete steps that CIOs can take to build credibility through knowledge, skills and leadership, as well as to orchestrate their career advancement.

Although not all of the respondents actively planned their career progression, they all took actions to become outstanding CIOs (which led to advancement opportunities). The following steps will be helpful to you whether you aspire to become a CEO or simply want to increase your impact in your current position.

#### 6.1. Build Credibility

Key to successful advancement is building credibility. Figure 3 shows how this can be done.

**Figure 3: Building Credibility**

![BUILD CREDIBILITY](image)

**6.1.1. Build Credibility by Increasing your Business Knowledge**

*You have to be good at CIO basics but not only at the technical part – show how IT contributes to the business*

Get engaged with the business to understand its drivers and its needs. IT is no longer a silo; its strategic importance in most businesses means that CIOs have to work closely with the business and be active partners rather than managers of supporting services.

This requires that CIOs be able to understand the business needs, discuss technology in the context of those needs, and communicate in a way that is clearly understandable to all
stakeholders (avoiding technical jargon and specialized terms). As simply put by one of the interviewed executives, “make sure your audience gets it”. This means you need to know your audience and adjust your communication accordingly. Another interviewee suggests:

“Never talk techy in front of business executives – you may, as the IT person or the CIO, think that you’re wowing the audience... but that’s not the case. When you do that in front of the business audience that just shows the business executives that you cannot engage the audience and you lose more credibility than you think you’re earning.”

Being able to contribute to the business is important in the context of career progression but most importantly, it will help you “to establish yourself as an individual that can have impact, add value, and contribute into the performance of the company”. This requires taking risks and stepping out of the traditional support role. As one interviewee put it, “you can’t be a bottle neck, you can’t be solely production oriented – you have to be growth oriented”. Otherwise, you will be seen solely as an executor rather than as an equal partner in business discussion. Try to build your credibility with the CEO by understanding their objectives and helping them achieve their goals.

Finally, you need to understand the profit drivers of your company or, more simply put, how your organization makes money. Once you understand the levers in the business, you will know where IT can have the biggest impact and how it can become an integral part of the business. Your best opportunities are with organizations where IT is regarded as much more than a utility – if that is not the case within your company, the focus on profit drivers will help you change that.

**Gain the needed business experience – consider lateral moves into business units (full time or interim appointments) or get involved in special projects**

While a certain degree of business acumen can be gained in IT roles, first-hand work experience on the business side is invaluable. Not only will it provide a way to considerably expand your knowledge base and skill set, but it will also enrich your track record, proving that you are ready to step up beyond your current role.

Consider taking operational roles and positions within Finance, Sales, Logistics, Marketing or other areas essential to your business. Take responsibility for regional operations outside your home country or take on interim appointments where you can considerably expand your role. You should also consider getting involved in projects where you can assess your business skills and test them before moving to a full time business position; these can include M&A activities, transformational projects and any unique initiatives that impact the business. There is no single path in getting business experience but whatever the means, the goal remains the same – to expand your knowledge and your know-how beyond IT. Fill up your toolbox with many different tools - “you don’t know when it’s going to help you but it will help you”.
As pointed out by one of the interviewees, some CIOs “have a tendency to get sucked into the prevailing winds”. With the quick pace of change in today’s IT world it is easy to focus on your current responsibilities and miss opportunities that arise elsewhere. Try to actively look for those opportunities and be open-minded about those that are suggested or offered to you in your organization. When exploring various opportunities think of them in terms of the long-term impact they might have on your career.

When taking on new responsibilities, make sure you realize all the benefits that your new challenges offer. Be an agile learner – seek feedback and learn both from your successes and your mistakes. In today’s fast changing world you cannot afford to stand still. An agile approach to learning will allow you to acquire new skills and knowledge which you will be able to use to creatively solve problems and think outside of the (IT) box.

**Improve your knowledge through executive education, IT leadership programs or MBA-like programs**

Expanding business acumen does not have to be done only through practical experience. Education and training programs have two main advantages: they can fill gaps in your business knowledge and they also showcase your willingness to learn and continuously develop your expertise.

While education cannot be a substitute for work experience, it can complement it and it can be very helpful in gaining basic understanding of the business in preparation for hands-on experience. One interviewee recognized the importance of an executive business program, saying that it grounded them “in finance, economics, organizational development and little bit of marketing”, providing “a better picture of all the different disciplines that ultimately are going to roll out to you”.

**Build a network by participating in a wide range of corporate activities – become part of committees, planning groups etc.**

Being involved in corporate activities is another way to gain valuable experience and larger visibility within the business. In addition, it will help you build a network that can both support you in your current role and propel you to the next one. Become what one of the interviewees called “a connector” – build relationships with various parts of the business and connect various stakeholders. You will become a trusted contact and will be included in more strategic discussions.

When getting involved in corporate activities, be sure to actively contribute to the discussion. Become a partner who participates in defining technology needs rather than a manager who delivers it. Be an advocate for your team and use corporate activities to bridge the gap that might exist between the business and your team. Build networks inside and outside your organization - with colleagues and even with competitors. It is not uncommon for CIOs in certain industries to meet and discuss technologies, vendors etc.
In addition, get involved outside of work – volunteer and join groups or associations where you can meet people who will become a valuable part of your network. If you can, take leadership roles in these groups. Those groups don’t have to be related to your professional area of expertise – expanding your network beyond your industry will provide you with access to a much broader knowledge and experience base from which you can draw as needed. Whatever the way you choose to build your network, be sure to take personal time to build peer relationships.

_Become visible to other executives and demonstrate partnership_

Think about what you bring to the table and how you can contribute to the overall business value. Don’t be afraid to say no, but be ready to explain and support your views so that other executives will understand and trust your judgment. Become a partner in business discussions, proactively suggesting ways in which technology can support all areas of the business. Share your team’s success stories with other executives and help them better understand how IT impacts the entire company.

The more you are able to take the mystery out of IT, the more your peers will seek your advice and opinion. You have to be approachable to initiate that contact and then be able to have a meaningful conversation about how IT can impact your peers and how it can make the Line of Business executives successful.

6.1.2. Build Credibility by Improving your Personal Skills

_Do periodical self-assessment and reflection (you don’t know what you don’t know)_

The first step in the process of improving personal skills is to identify the gaps. Catalogue the skills of successful leaders you know (in the positions you aspire to hold) and compare them to your own skills. Take personality tests, perhaps from professional advisors. Where you see a considerable gap, develop an action plan to improve those skills (find a mentor or a coach who can help you with that process). Also, think about the role that will be most suitable to your skills and preferences – CEO is not the only role into which you can progress.

_Assess and work to improve your emotional intelligence_

Be ready to step out of your comfort zone and practice skills that you require to be a successful leader. Work on your public speaking skills, presentation and communication skills, and remember to keep the lines of communication open. Become a sales person for your organization, communicating your goals and achievements.

Don’t shy away from dealing with situations where you are not at ease. Reach out to your mentors to get help on how best to approach difficult problems and improve your emotional intelligence. Awareness followed by development and practice will bring results, which will elevate your skills to a CEO-ready level.
**Build a reputation for developing staff and building effective teams**

Your success as a business-focused CIO will be largely dependent on your ability to motivate your team and have them accept your vision for the IT organization. You are likely to be close to your organization’s strategy and understand the reasons behind certain initiatives or projects. Help your team understand those reasons and inspire them to actively contribute to the corporate vision. Recognize your team and celebrate their successes – both within the IT organization and with your peers. On the other hand, remember to pick your battles and keep in mind that not all of your team members will be equally motivated and engaged. Understand what drives your team members and adjust your management style accordingly.

As you work on your own development, don’t forget about those who make your plans a reality. Your own team might also benefit from the skills we discuss in this work. One of the interviewees talked about having certification programs supporting technical training as well as a range of soft skills courses – communication, presentation skills, project management etc. Think about what skills can help your team become more business focused and support you in delivering IT value in the business context.

**6.1.3. Build Credibility by Exhibiting Business Leadership**

**Be a change leader in your organization**

Be actively engaged in identifying and introducing change in your organization. You can lead or participate in change projects but you can also create value through continuous improvement. Some solutions are very simple yet powerful and valuable to your business partners. As one participant suggested, “find something that’s annoying, irritating, that’s simple to solve and then solve it”. The solution itself doesn’t have to be complex; the important thing is how well it solves an organizational problem.

Remember that small incremental changes might go unnoticed, even when they bring significant benefits to the organization. Make sure that the stakeholders are aware of how you solved the problem – talk about your team’s achievements and your own accomplishments to not only demonstrate how you bring value to the organization but also to encourage others to come to you with their problems. If you are seen as an effective change leader, you will be consulted, engaged and involved more frequently.

**Recognize the importance of IT governance**

If you are not in an organization with good IT maturity and governance, change it. Try “to put a very transparent and easy to use governance model in place”. Without proper governance structures you will not get the organizational support that comes from well-defined processes and your visibility will be limited. Although you might feel that your ability to influence the IT governance structure is limited, don’t be discouraged. The example of our respondents show that you can educate your leadership as to the importance of having such structures and consequently increase the maturity of IT use in your organization. If your organization already has mature IT governance, be sure to take
full advantage of the opportunities it provides. Use the internal processes to increase your visibility and build credibility within your organization.

If despite your efforts you are not able to introduce governance structures, consider moving to an organization that recognizes the importance of IT management and where your efforts to advance and improve IT will be supported. Your efforts in creating a business-focused IT organization will be effective only as far as the support you get from your leadership.

6.2. Orchestrate your Career

All of the interviewees took actions that helped them shape their careers, even though career advancement wasn’t necessarily their main motivator. Specifically, they actively sought ways to gain more experience, they built relationships with peers and mentors, and (where they did seek to move into higher positions), they made their aspirations known and approached them strategically. Figure 4 shows how this might be done.

Figure 4: Orchestrate Your Career

Gain experience and increase visibility

To move into a higher position, you must demonstrate that you are ready to take on the associated responsibilities. If your track record revolves only around IT, you will find it difficult to convince others that you have what it takes. However, if you can show that you have dealt with a variety of business situations, you will become a stronger candidate for the COO or CEO role. Consider serving on voluntary boards.

While the interviewees chose very different paths, they all took the opportunity to be exposed to additional responsibilities and experiences. Some of them become known for their willingness to take on the tasks for which no one else wanted the responsibility. Not only were they recognized for being engaged and dependable but they were also able to showcase their ability to solve problems. When career advancement opportunities came, no one questioned their skills in this area.
Complement your hands-on experience with education – degrees (such as MBA), certificates and training courses will provide you with broader context and information about the areas you do not have a chance to experience first hand. As a CEO, you will be expected to have a broad knowledge and understanding of the business. Education will help you bridge the gap between your current skill set and what you will need to lead an organization.

The experience, proven track record and education will help you get what one of the interviewees called a “business badge” – wide recognition for being business savvy. It will help you in your current role and might bring unanticipated positive benefits in your career progression.

**Let your network help you**

Build a network inside and outside your organization, and use it to gain additional support and propel your career. Build relationships with your peers and create your own brand image as a business partner who can be trusted and depended upon. This reputation will encourage people to consider you for a wider variety of roles and will increase the number of opportunities that will come your way. Make your aspirations known and don’t sit in your office waiting for others to come to you – be proactive in building relationships and make yourself visible.

As you plan your career and set out on a path to increase your impact as a CIO, find someone who has travelled a similar path and made it into the leadership team. Find a mentor and take advantage of their knowledge and experience. You won’t have to solve every problem on your own and you will also have a chance to discuss your ideas with someone who understands where you are coming from and where you are going.

It doesn’t matter if you participate in a formal mentoring program or create a strong personal bond with someone outside your organization. Based on the experience of the interviewees, there appears to be no correlation between the mentoring format and its effectiveness. It is the mutual trust and the relevance of the mentor’s experience that make these relationships highly valuable to the participants.

**Think strategically about your career**

Be selective about the opportunities you take advantage of, but also define your goals broadly and don’t let your career objectives actually limit your career opportunities. Don’t think in terms of positions as much as in terms of what the experience can add to your personal “toolbox”. Seek challenges and don’t shy away from high-profile projects, even if they present high levels of potential risks. All of the interviewees got involved in other areas but they all did it in different ways. Understand what way is best for you and pursue it.

Even though you have to take control of your career, remember that you can’t map out every single step. One of the participants shared the following insight: “I think anybody who tries to really plan out their career in every minute step, will be disappointed when
they get to the end of their career. You miss a lot of things that are just really fun”. Keep an open mind and focus more on where various opportunities can take you rather than on rigidly following a career plan you set for yourself. The range of professional possibilities for CIOs continues to grow and you will find many interesting opportunities come your way when you build your credibility as a business leader.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated conclusively that successful CIOs are able to move beyond their specialist leadership role to the top positions within organisations. There was a surprisingly high degree of commonality in the career development of all the individuals interviewed. They were successful at IT leadership and they demonstrated increasing understanding of the business environment as well as an ability to take on broader responsibilities beyond IT.

Most were respected IT leaders who demonstrated credibility to their peers and superiors. They were willing to take on responsibilities beyond their own area (sometimes through lateral moves), they had executive level communication skills and were able to build relationships as well as developing and motivating their subordinates. In gaining wider business knowledge they got to know their businesses customers and needs, and then were able to assist their peers in meeting these needs.

Their success can be replicated by others aspiring to advance their career, through a combination of learning activities and actual behaviour.