The 4.3-Year CIO

Four Steps to Making an Impact with Every New IT Initiative

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The average tenure for an enterprise CIO is 4.3 years,[1] making it one of the shortest in the C-suite. Whether a CIO is on that trajectory or has plans to stay much longer, there's a way to thrive in this role as business priorities continuously evolve. Here's my take on how a CIO can make an impact on the business, culture, and digital foundation of a company from day one of any new initiative or job.

Whether a CIO is on a four-year trajectory or has plans to stay much longer, there's a way to thrive in this role as business priorities continuously evolve. I advocate producing early wins, setting sights on specific goals at specific points in time, and delivering on those goals whether you plan to be at a company for the long term or expect to move on soon after passing the four-year mark.

Four Steps to Making an Impact with Every New IT Initiative

1. BUILD TRUST

- Collaborate
- Communicate
- Mentor staff rather than remove

2. DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING

- Know the business
- Focus on quick wins
- Present your IT vision

3. COMMUNICATE YOUR VISION

- Socialize your three-year plan
- Empower your team to deliver
- Don't go in with a formula

4. HIT YOUR STRIDE

- Operationalize year one
- Establish a people plan
- Develop a succession plan

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1. Korn Ferry. "Age and Tenure in the C-Suite." Korn Ferry Institute, February 14, 2017.

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Step 1: Build trust

Being at the forefront of business disruption can be both exciting and disquieting. It can also require personal reinvention to sustain engagement and passion. With every new initiative or position, establish yourself as a collaborator, someone who works for the team. Do this by staying clear of politics, and really learning the business (or business reasons for change). No matter how much experience you have, there's always something more to learn.

The first days of aligning with a new corporate strategy or getting up to speed in a new job are ideal for assessing your team. Take time to not only understand what everyone does but what team members aspire to do, so you'll have a credible answer to the question: "Can the team deliver what's needed?"

Think strategically about staffing changes. While bringing in your own team may seem easier at first, it can create rifts. My recommendation is to take a little longer. Figure out the few unwilling to work with you and replace them. Fill other gaps, as needed, then mentor, coach, and counsel the rest of the team toward transformation.

A major intangible that comes out of this early work is trust. You earn it by being a good communicator. Meeting and talking to colleagues; spending time with them; being authentic. My objective in the early days with any new organization or initiative is to explain my job as the "universal enabler." Someone always trying to make finance, sales, marketing, and others better, and I see heading up IT as the ideal opportunity to be a universal enabler because good IT makes every job easier.

Step 2: Deepen understanding and bring in quick wins

About a month into any new effort, I want to have a deep understanding of the current operational state and the effect that any proposed changes will have on it, from customer and employee experience to cost or the metrics used to judge success. During this time, I also focus on quick wins. Not only do quick wins help or continue to help build that all-important credibility, it makes employees feel good about change. Focusing on obvious challenges—the Wi-Fi doesn't work right, a key app is always down—may seem too tactical, but these are what frustrate employees. There's no point in saying you're going to establish a new cloud architecture when people are telling you they can't log into their computers. So fix—or keep fixing—the most urgent but easier problems.

When I have to start fresh in a new job or with a new initiative, hitting a few singles brings people around faster. The home runs will come—once you know the business better and have a strategy in place. If you've done the work upfront, within this timeframe you also should be able to present your vision for where you want to take IT. People will be waiting for it. After presenting to the executive team, I immediately start communicating the vision everywhere to get buy-in, which helps us move faster.

"Avoid the extremes of micromanaging details or abdicating responsibility. Your teams should know that when they run into trouble, you've got their backs. That's leadership."

"It's like getting hits in baseball. Four singles put a run on the board—the same as a home run—and in IT, the smaller wins take considerably less time yet can make a big impact."

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Step 3: Communicate your North Star vision

After the first three months, I'm engaged. I've got the feeling of the business and cultural changes required. I understand pain points and the methodologies that have (and haven't) worked. I'm confident about communicating my version of a North Star roadmap and discussing decisions that have to come next.

Step 4: Hitting your stride

It really takes a year, I believe, to go through the operational cycle of any new company or initiative. Before that, it's tough to know how it works and how you want it to work. That's why setting a three-year vision for IT as change keeps coming—then establishing an operating plan for what can be done in the next 12 months—is a good idea. This operating plan must include both the budget and people plan. Because it does take a year to establish your rhythm, the second, third, and even fourth quarters are going to be best guesses of how to proceed and that's fine. Every year (you can do it around a work anniversary) take time to remind people of the vision. I communicate the next year's annual operating plan, including my people plan, which frankly takes the most planning because I always spell out the leadership succession plan, our values, and the technical skills we're going to need.

This is my approach, and while there are others, I know getting quick wins early on, establishing relationships and trust, and future planning are keys to sustaining my engagement and passion as VMware's CIO.

Successfully navigating through the first quarter is a key milestone because if you haven't worked toward gaining or maintaining trust, failure is a real possibility. Here's how to prevent it:

- **Don't go in with a formula** – What worked last time won't necessarily work now. Every place and project can have a different culture, a different rhythm. Be mindful of adapting to the current culture as you recommend changes.

- **Be sure you're (still) a good match** – Some companies want a cost-cutting CIO. Some want you to finish an integration or instill more operational rigor. In this role, CIOs have to do it all: from managing budgets and operations to championing digital transformation. You can't take a company into the next generation without doing all of it together.

- **Have technical confidence, but most important, be a good leader** – Companies are looking for CIOs who will complete their executive teams. They want an IT person, but they also want somebody to represent the company's values. Among the best skills you can have as a CIO — particularly if you've risen through the ranks of systems and programming where you've "done it all" — is empowering your team.