# How to Spot a CIO in Trouble

The signs and remedies lie in the areas of executive support, strategic directions, and project portfolio management

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There is little doubt that being a chief information officer is one of the most challenging jobs in academic administration today. New products and new directions in technology regularly surge onto the market and create uncertainty and instability for providers and users alike. Additionally, the university itself is a demanding place, with an ever-increasing need for more comprehensive administrative systems, more robust networks, and more academic technology to support teaching. Moreover, the academic community's widely divergent perceptions and expectations of the performance of a CIO can tax even the most seasoned professional.

When all these forces converge on the already complicated world of technology management, some CIOs struggle to stay on track. Before failure occurs, however, three major organizational signs—in executive support, strategic directions, and project portfolio management—tell us when a CIO is in trouble. We will explore these warning signs and their remedies to help CIOs intervene before the problems have gone too far to resolve.

## The Importance of Executive Support

The most essential ingredient for the success of a CIO is the support of the university president and vice presidents. Without executive backing, any CIO will struggle. Executive support is the linchpin that enables the CIO to drive forward in vital directions. To ensure that executive support continues, the alert CIO must heed the warning signs of executive inattention, negative attention, inadequate information, an unclear job definition, insufficient funding, and rival groups.

### Executive Inattention

*"I never understand what the CIO is saying."*

One of the most important ways that executives can show support for the CIO

is by giving him or her adequate attention so that technology issues, services, and operations can be discussed and understood. A CIO who cannot get the attention of executives has to look at why technology is the last thing on the executive agenda. The most likely reason is that many executives do not view the CIO as the person who has the responsibility for the flow of information through the organization and for the transformative power of technology.
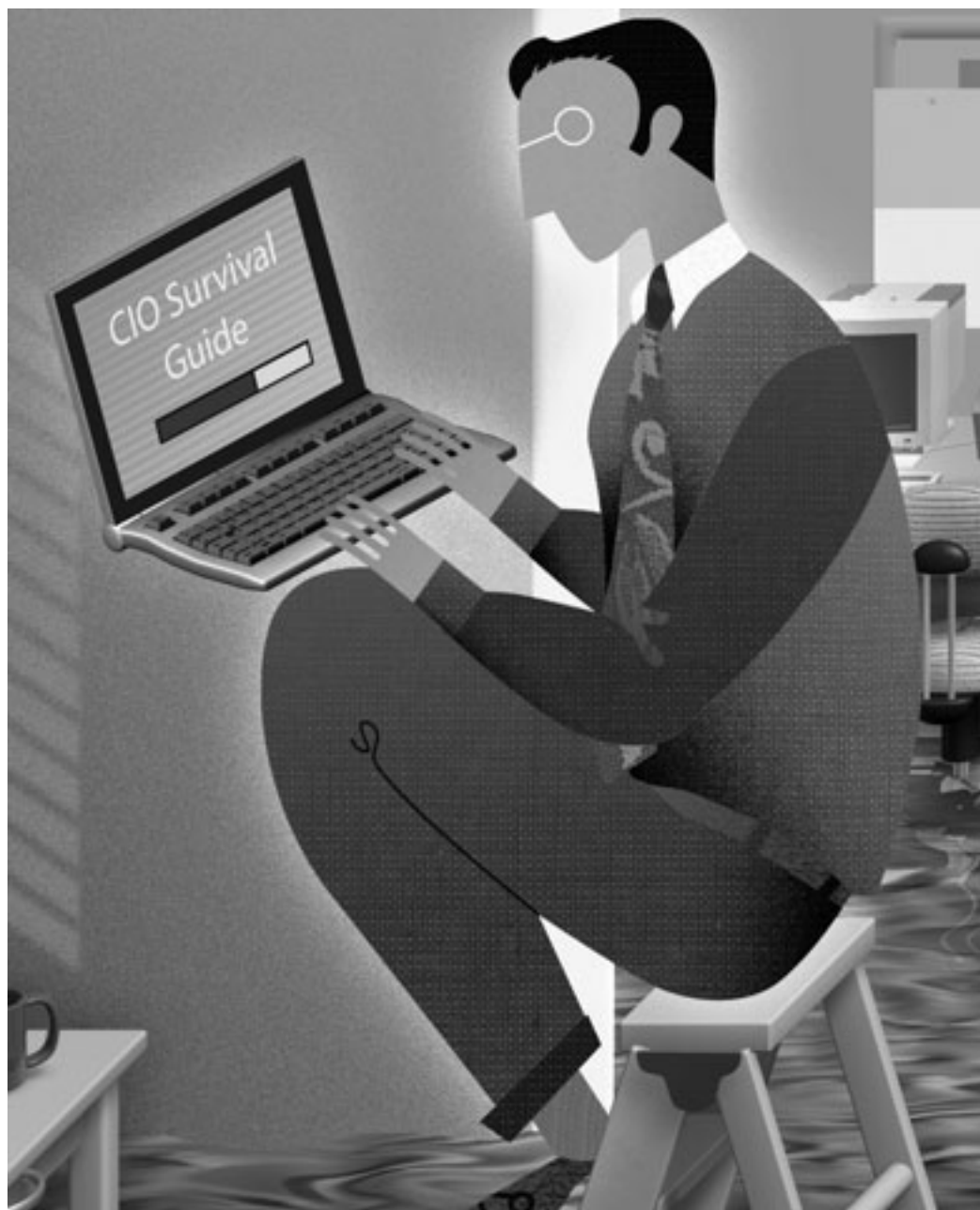
Executives naturally want to work only at the policy and strategic level of the organization. When executives view the CIO's role as just managing a utility of computers and cables, they will not understand why the CIO needs their time. If the CIO believes this limited view is the reason for inadequate attention, then he or she must make every effort to increase the executives' knowledge of what the job entails, since technology will never be understood in five-minute brush-fire conversations. Timely, interesting, and brief presentations as well as retreats, tours, and memos can assist with this educational process.

Occasionally, a straightforward conversation must take place about the support needed. The important thing is not to give up even though some executives, partly because of time constraints, are very resistant to educating themselves in depth about technology. Executives can become steadily more remote if the CIO does not take quick and persistent action to increase their attention. If this happens, executives will no longer see the CIO as a vital player, which may cause them to rethink the CIO position.

### Negative Attention

*"I am tired of dealing with the problems in that area."*

The flip side of inattention is too much attention, usually indicating a failure of confidence in the CIO. Oddly enough, one of the first signs can be the withdrawal of attention, as executives might feel that attending to the CIO is no longer worth their effort. During this time, executives often strategize about the CIO's future. Not long after this period comes negative attention in the form of increased criticism, closer supervision, an imposition of new governance structures, movements to reorganize technology services, and the hiring of consultants to understand user needs.

A CIO who sees these signs has to remember that working harder is not the key response. Instead, the CIO needs to determine whether the failure is perception or reality. If it is a matter of perception, the CIO must more aggressively, clearly, and frequently explain the directions and achievements of technology services. The CIO will also need to increase communication with the

user community about their needs and expectations.

If the problems are real, then the CIO must seriously examine the causes of failure. Most significantly, a CIO in trouble needs to look at his or her management ability if the situation has become this desperate. Additionally, a CIO must look at concrete performance measures for technology services and operations and solicit honest feedback from staff, users, and executives to determine where the problems lie.

Sometimes, the situation is so far gone that executives will no longer address the CIO's issues—a clear and sobering sign that a pink slip is on the way. Distancing from a problem employee is always one of the early steps on the path toward dismissal. At that point, the CIO must decide between trying to turn around a desperate situation and exiting gracefully.

### Inadequate Information

*"Why is the CIO never on board?"*

Another warning sign of lack of executive support is inadequate flow of information from executives to the CIO. If information about major enterprise-wide directions is withheld from the CIO or inadequately discussed, the CIO cannot align technology with the institution's major business directions.[1] This misalignment can have dramatic consequences because, like a large ship, a technology unit needs time to turn in a new direction. A new process or direction in the university must take into account the time required for the technology, hardware, software, and personnel to be ramped up to meet the needs. If there isn't enough time, the technology won't be in place for the launch of the new initiative.

The question is, Why is there inadequate information? The main reasons hark back to the previous points—especially a misunderstanding of the strategic role of the CIO and a lack of executive knowledge about what it takes for technology to support a new initiative. Regardless, this can spell big trouble for the CIO because inadequate information from executives will not be considered a legitimate excuse for not deliv-
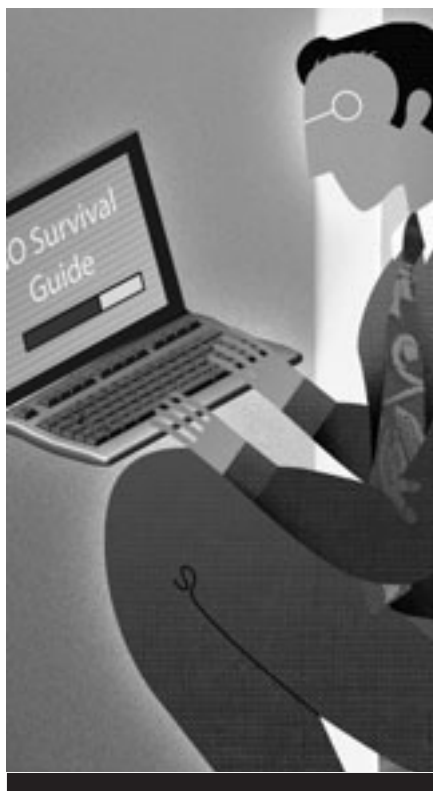


**Many organizational designs occur as universities define for themselves the portfolio of CIO responsibilities**

ering. Once again, educating executives, continually but gently, is key.

### Unclear Job Definition

*"Isn't the CIO supposed to take care of that?"*

In a university setting, a CIO can mean different things to different people. In some cases, the CIO handles only administrative systems and the network. In others, the CIO might also handle academic technology. A CIO might manage a small shop but coordinate broadly across the campus, or handle a large shop but leave the colleges and other areas to care for their local needs. In other words, many organizational designs occur as universities define for themselves the portfolio of CIO responsibilities. Problems arise for the CIO when executives have not

clearly defined the CIO's responsibilities. This is compounded by the fact that a CIO is a relatively recent addition to campus life. A CIO's job is not as well known by the campus community as the job, for example, of a provost or a college dean.

Unfortunately, the signs that the CIO's job is poorly defined are subtle. However, the carefully observant CIO can detect them. The president and vice presidents might communicate conflicting expectations. The president might talk about the job of the CIO one way, yet make assignments that clearly indicate a different view of the position. The work that comes across the desk of the CIO might reflect an unusual array. Additionally, conversations with faculty and other administrators could reveal varying expectations as a result of conflicting messages from the top.

To correct the different understandings of the position, the CIO must first seek clarity with the university's executives. In particular, a complete understanding must occur between the CIO and the CIO's supervisor. Subsequently, the CIO must continually reinforce what the job entails. Now, the assumption could be made by an incoming CIO that it is the job of the CIO's supervisor to articulate the job to the campus. This rarely happens. Once the CIO is in the position, it becomes the CIO's problem. When the CIO's responsibilities are not clearly defined, executive and user disappointment and frustration increase in response to unmet expectations. It is in the CIO's best interest to have a well-defined job.

### Insufficient Funding

*"You aren't the only priority around here."*

Sometimes a university is in such fiscal straits that a lack of funding becomes the norm; no CIO should take this personally. However, there is a problem with executive support when the university's budget is adequate but the CIO's budget remains underfunded. Unfortunately, many CIOs, rather than analyzing the causes of this situation, respond to it by submitting larger bud-

get requests to meet increasing needs as the technological infrastructure deteriorates each year.

A large budget request usually frustrates executives and reinforces the view of technology as a black hole. The CIO is criticized for not understanding all the priorities of the university. The CIO then faces a terrible dilemma: on the one hand, services expected by the campus cannot be completely delivered, and on the other, executives are not funding the services at an adequate level.

What is the remedy for this difficult situation? First, a clear link between the CIO's budget requests and the university's priorities must be established. Second, the CIO must engage—and secure agreements with—executives regarding the appropriate levels of services and expectations. The priorities and their costs must be clearly articulated and agreed upon. Third, the CIO must once again check to ensure that executives have confidence in the CIO's ability to deliver. Without this series of actions, technology services will continue to suffer and executives will continue to be frustrated with the CIO's budget requests and eventually with the CIO.

### Rival Groups
*"What about us?"*

Another sign of a lack of executive support is a persistent belief by some executives that the CIO and central technology services are not concerned with the needs of the entire university. A CIO and technology services can be located in a variety of places organizationally. When the CIO reports within one division in the university, executives in other divisions often feel—not without reason—that the CIO gives precedence to the home division. Even when the CIO reports directly to the president, executives can feel that the CIO is only concerned with the central services.

One of the strongest manifestations of a CIO in trouble in this area is the establishment by other areas of smaller technology units. While there may be excellent functional reasons for other departments to form new units, the CIO must be alert to the motivation behind their creation, particularly if

this action occurred without prior consultation. If the motivation to establish a local unit is frustration and not functionality, confidence in the CIO is already at low ebb. The CIO must open the lines of communication to encourage executives to state their issues and concerns. Of course, conversation alone is not enough. The CIO will need to redirect resources to meet the wider needs of the whole university.

If the CIO already has established priorities in alignment with the university's goals and does not have the resources to meet the full range of expectations, the CIO should establish a strategic alliance with the decentralized units to work collectively and to minimize conflict, rivalry, and territoriality. In this alliance, clear lines of responsibilities must be established between centralized and decentralized services to eliminate duplicate efforts and to achieve goals cooperatively.

## The Significance of Strategic Directions

Clearly articulated strategic directions are critical for the success of a CIO. Occupying a leadership position, a CIO must spend a great deal of time as an administrator who sets clear directions and keeps on course. Three warning signs indicate when a CIO has not focused enough on strategic directions: recurring criticism over the CIO's uncertain vision, lack of technology alignment with the mission of the university, and lack of perceived business value of the IT operations.

### Uncertain Vision
*"Where are they going, anyway?"*

To state the strategic directions clearly, it is paramount that the CIO first has a strategic plan linked to the university's overall plan. A technology strategic plan is essential in the articulation of a vision and in the management of any technology service. A strategic plan that contains significant user contributions sets the priorities and, in turn, helps manage expectations. Without a strategic plan, there is little sense of direction for the CIO's staff to follow and for the campus to understand; the CIO will

come under criticism by members of the campus community for having an uncertain vision of where technology is headed. It is best not to wait for such criticism to occur, because few CIOs can survive a gathering storm of comments about a lack of leadership.

The remedy is to get started on a strategic plan that is developed with broad campus consultation. This strategic plan also must be approved by executives, to secure their support and resources. We offer two tips on making a strategic plan. First, finish the plan within a few months, and make it short and effective—a strategic plan that drags on might as well not exist. Second, create a strategic plan that will correct another common failing of technology units—the impulse to develop the technology before the strategies are developed.

### Lack of Alignment with the Mission
*"They aren't academics. They don't care about the mission of the university."*

A strategic plan also prevents a misalignment between the mission of the CIO and that of the university. The business of universities is quite clear. While there are variations in application, all universities exist to educate students and to further knowledge through faculty research. When the goals of the CIO and the university are not closely allied, technology resources are wasted on less important efforts while mission-critical services suffer. The university's administration, faculty, and students will come to believe that the CIO is an outsider who neither knows nor cares about the academic mission. The CIO's credibility will be called into question as a person who misunderstands the fundamental business of the enterprise. The CIO must take steps to correct this problem. Immediately, every goal of the CIO must be redirected to support the priority goals of the university. This, admittedly, can be a moving target, but clear linkages between the university's priorities and the CIO's directions must be established.

Still, it will not be enough to redirect goals. The CIO must realize that

the business of technology encompasses not only operations and services but also public relations.[2] The alignment between technology directions and the university's priorities must be stated often by the CIO to the campus. Some aspects of the work of technology are difficult to understand for people who are not working in a technology field.[3] Therefore, not only constant but also clear articulation of the alignment between the CIO's and the university's goals is needed.

Additionally, the CIO must ensure that the technology staff understand the connection between their goals and the university's. The staff interact the most with users and transmit through their actions what they believe are the technology goals. Staff who are unclear or uninformed about the goals will send a confusing message to users. The CIO's efforts to redirect goals will lose credibility in light of negative user experiences with the technology staff.

### No Demonstration of Business Value

*"Why does it always cost so much when we have so little to show for it?"*

The business value of technology to the overall enterprise must be made evident to executives and to users. Explaining the business value goes hand in hand with developing a strategic plan. It will be difficult to achieve the goals unless the business value is explained. The creation of a technological infrastructure is very costly and time-consuming. In major projects, such as the migration of information systems to a new platform or a significant upgrade of the network, executives become very anxious about cost. Additionally, the campus community resents heavy spending on technology while the needs of other areas go begging.

While the campus community might appreciate getting better systems or having a robust network, they may not understand why it requires so much time, labor, and money. Remember that few people have insight into what it takes to build out systems and infrastructures. So before the inevitable criticism erupts, which can place the CIO in

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hot water, the CIO must continuously demonstrate the business value of any technology effort to the overall goals of the academic enterprise.[4] Campus-wide publications, presentations, and briefings will help with this effort.

### The Importance of Project Portfolio Management

A CIO always has a lot on his or her plate. The demands of so many users, the upkeep and development of large systems, and the need to stay up with new campus initiatives often create an abundance of projects. Too many projects, though, can lead to serious problems for the CIO, and good, skillful project portfolio management, backed by a solid performance, is vital for success. How do we know when good management is lacking? Look carefully at the five indicators below.

### Too Much Firefighting

*"Everything is always a crisis with them."*

One of the clearest indicators of a CIO in trouble with project portfolio management is too much firefighting. Every week brings another crisis that requires the attention of the CIO and the staff. Too much firefighting will ultimately result in serious problems for the CIO—the strategic goals and directions will never be achieved if energy and resources are bled off by the effort to resolve one crisis after another.

To explain continual firefighting, a CIO will often point to lack of resources. While inadequate resources might be the true cause of the problems, the CIO must take a hard look at what is happening before requesting more dollars. The CIO must have confidence that the

existing resources are being used in the most effective manner, that the design of the technological systems are appropriate to the demands, and that the projects are being managed effectively. If radical changes in any of these areas are needed, the CIO should take rapid steps to correct the problems. Moreover, if it turns out that the need for more resources really is a problem, then the executives will want to see that the CIO has done all that can be done. After all, executives rarely give money to a failing unit.

### Too Many High-Profile Projects

*"Why doesn't anything get done?"*

Some CIOs think that taking on an array of high-profile projects will mean that the university community will applaud the effort in striving for so many goals. However, too many high-profile projects increase the demand for resources and increase the probability of the projects' failure. Realistically, only so many projects can be managed skillfully at the same time.

One of the clear signs of a CIO in trouble with project overload is lack of delivery. An abundance of projects often means that nothing gets done in a timely fashion.

Another sign is reduced quality. A number of things will be forgotten or too many slip-ups will occur. It is important to balance the workload and only go after a reasonable number of projects to increase the probability of successful delivery. Following the strategic plan and establishing yearly goals help address this problem. An annual retreat with IT managers to discuss the workload and the availability of resources will also help get a handle on the number of projects that can be managed successfully.

### Unmanaged Expectations

*"Why are we never a priority?"*

Hand in hand with too many high-profile projects are out-of-control expectations. The demands on technology services are extraordinary—all users expect their needs and priorities to be met. Unfortunately, there is a limit to the human and financial resources to meet such demands. The collision between

demands and resources can result in angry users.

The most significant sign of unmanaged expectations is a surge in user frustrations and complaints. Unfortunately, the CIO often does not hear complaints or hears them too late unless well-established lines of communication are in place. A CIO must carefully manage user expectations by clearly articulating priorities, timeframes, and resources. This conversation must be ongoing with the campus community. In particular, the CIO must work with executives to gain their understanding, support, and collaboration in making the hard choices among so many conflicting demands.

### Lack of Performance

*"We can count on them to fail."*

Integral to good project portfolio management is the effective performance of technology services and operations. All the politics and skillful communication in the world can come to nothing if not backed by a solid performance that users experience directly. It is possible for the CIO to select the right projects—and have resources to match the goals, timely implementation, and executive support—and still be in trouble if, in the final analysis, performance is lacking. Usually, an increase in user complaints and expressions of anger are trouble signs for a CIO. If users are angry enough about poor performance, eventually they will express their frustration to executives. Before this scene plays out, the CIO should deploy some of the best techniques of management by testing the systems and obtaining user feedback. The key point here is that the CIO should be among the first, not the last, to know of performance problems. This can only be achieved if the CIO is completely on top of the projects.

Let us expand on the importance of user feedback. Every CIO should assess the performance of technology services through user feedback. User feedback can take several forms, such as focus groups, surveys, or informal visits and conversations. The important message here is that there is no substitute for the facts. The CIO must be keen to obtain feedback indicating that what is being said matches what is being done. Additionally, the CIO must share user feedback with technology managers and staff. Then the CIO must act on the information and make changes to intervene in or correct any problem areas.

However, it is also important to share with executives and users changes that occur as a result of user input. Otherwise, users will feel their comments go unheeded and frustration will build with the work of the CIO. Continual cycles of user feedback are essential if the CIO intends to keep meeting user needs. If not, dramatic shifts in user demands can sometimes occur without the CIO's knowledge. If this happens, technology's ability to serve the campus is compromised, along with the CIO's credibility.

CIOs may face a special challenge when obtaining user feedback. Because CIOs possess extensive knowledge, they may think that only they know what is right for users. Users will pick up on this attitude and may respond by shutting down communication with the CIO. The CIO must be deeply committed to the importance and value of user feedback.

### Lack of Current Knowledge

*"I have students who are more up-to-date."*

Performance is powerfully linked to the ability of the CIO's staff to stay abreast of new technologies. One of the great challenges for a CIO is to keep technology staff up-to-date with current technology. This is a challenge on three fronts. First, the need for continual training is high because of the constant change in technology. Second, the cost of training is very high and can place quite a demand on a limited budget. Third, workload can be so intense that staff cannot spare the time that training takes.

The signs of a staff no longer up-to-date are quite clear. In fact, staff are usually the first to ask for more training to keep abreast of technology trends and new equipment or software. Staff can also become frustrated if they receive questions or trouble calls from users that they cannot readily answer.

Before it gets to this point, the CIO should establish a regular training program so that staff can maintain their edge. Attending training and keeping up-to-date should be part of staff's performance goals and evaluations. If staff are not kept up-to-date through a continual training program, users—who expect staff to know more they—become frustrated and lose confidence in the CIO's ability to manage technology services. Worse, out-of-date staff will run increasingly antiquated systems, which means that technology services will deteriorate in time.

## Conclusion

Few professions raft in as much whitewater as the CIO's. The risks are great, and there are multiple roadblocks to success. However, many organizational signs show how a CIO is performing. Every CIO should pay close attention to executive support, strategic directions, and project portfolio management in order to stay on track.

In the final analysis, a CIO's success hinges on his or her ability to understand the environment, manage effectively, communicate skillfully, know the technology, align with the mission, establish priorities, set clear directions, and support users. While the challenges are many, the rewards are great, as the successful CIO will make a vital contribution to the academic environment by using the full power of technology to support educational and research goals. *e*

### Endnotes

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3. "Was It Something I Said?," Report by RHI Consulting, *Canada NewsWire*, May 10, 2001, p. 1.
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