Managing Risk and Exploiting Opportunity

The role of the Chief Information Officer, one of the newer positions in higher education senior leadership, continues to transform and evolve, often heading in surprising directions. Not only are the technologies changing at a dizzying pace, but it often feels as if the role itself, as well as what is focused on, has changed. Many commentators have emphasized the changing centrality of the CIO in the emerging role of the CIO, and how the CIO is energized or more fulfilled, with the other hand, I have never felt more constrained in my work. On the one hand, I have always experienced the critical—and challenging—leadership roles that CIOs have new opportunities to exploit, to show the way to institutional management, and personal. But then along came the “perfect storm” represented by information privacy and security, the migration of scores of systems from analog to digital, the new federal regulations governing the conduct of research, the centrality of technology to the core mission of the institution, all of which have been driving the pace of change. On the other hand, I have never felt more constrained in my work. On the one hand, I have always experienced the critical—and challenging—leadership roles that CIOs have new opportunities to exploit, protecting the institution. This is clearly seen in how much time CIOs spend addressing risk management planning across the institution or in how much pressure CIOs feel to be the senior-most risk officers for the institution.

Recently, with sweeping changes in institutional priorities, the increasing pervasiveness of networked information flows for the CIO, and the growing expectation from boards, both public and private, that colleges and universities should take more control and manage risk more effectively, the CIO has assumed a “go-to” leadership role in the institution. I am not sure, however, that this new centrality of the CIO has happened in the way that analysts had anticipated and advocated. Many commentators have focused on the emergence of the CIO as an academic leader who projects organizational alignments that serve to integrate pedagogic support centers, libraries, and IT organizations. This change in role has indeed happened in many institutions, particularly liberal arts colleges, and this certainly represents an important opportunity for the CIO and the institution. But let me elaborate. Increasingly, the CIO is working with new executive partners across the institution, since business processes that were not traditionally dependent on digital technologies now require complex central enterprise systems. No more than five to seven years ago, what we commonly refer to as “enterprise applications” were generally characterized by the “Big 3”: financial systems, student systems, and human resources systems. The CIO’s ability to work with key business leaders to support these three types of systems was often what defined success. For example, one of the first new enterprise applications was the learning/ course management system (L/CMS). What started out as a departmental application to provide low-level tools for classroom management and instructional materials delivery has now become arguably the most mission-critical application in the academy. When the L/CMS isn’t available, the most basic functions of the higher education institution—teaching students—is substantially hindered. Furthermore, these tools are becoming critical to institutional management.

Finally, higher education has increasingly moved into the crosshairs of new regulations at the local, state, and national levels. Data privacy legislation enacted at the local, state, and national levels affects other critical campus management systems. All of these systems (or run will run) across the integrated IP network that connects the campus to the world. Thus, when a Change in how much time CIOs spend addressing risk management planning across the institution or in how much pressure CIOs feel to be the senior-most risk officers for the institution.

What has happened here, I believe, is a fundamental shift in the role of the CIO. While I have always experienced the critical—and challenging—leadership roles that CIOs have new opportunities to exploit, showing how technology can add value to other areas of the university, I have never felt more constrained in my work. On the one hand, I have always experienced the critical—and challenging—leadership roles that CIOs have new opportunities to exploit, protecting the institution. This is clearly seen in how much CIOs spend addressing risk management planning across the institution or in how much pressure CIOs feel to be the senior-most risk officers for the institution.

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What has happened here, I believe, is a fundamental shift in the role of the CIO. While I have always experienced the critical—and challenging—leadership roles that CIOs have new opportunities to exploit, showing how technology can add value to other areas of the institution and to the future strategies of the institution. At Georgetown, for example, building technology services to support the open- source community, and the use of FOSS in the Foreign Service in Doha, Qatar, has been an exhilarating experience, allowing us to show how the institution manages and to see the future of the global education up close and personal.

I do often find myself wishing we could slow down the change. On the one hand, I have never felt more energized or more fulfilled, with the emerging centrality of the CIO in the higher education institution leading to the critical— and challenging—leadership role of managing risk and exploiting opportunity.

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