The Shrinking CIO?

Some years ago the Chronicle of Higher Education published an opinion piece entitled “A CIO’s Question: Will You Still Need Me When I’m 64?” in which I wrote the following:

For information technology, at least in higher education, invisibility constitutes success. . . . So it is bad news when a dean at my university not only knows who I am and what I do, but doesn’t like it. Suppose the dean wants to buy non-standard equipment through a nonstandard channel. On the university’s behalf, I object to those choices. . . . The dean responds by arguing that the interests of individual schools should outweigh collective university interests, and that having a chief information officer—that’s me—serves no useful purpose. To the dean, my job seems to consist entirely of interfering in school affairs.1

I later quoted this passage2 as an example of how CIOs can make mistakes. Although the passage was loosely based on a particular dean in university A, a different dean, at university B, thought it was about him. He wasn’t happy, and his unhappiness had me in the doghouse for a while. The lessons I drew from this—that specificity is sometimes better than generality, and that readers identify with abstracted characters—remain important. But that’s not my main theme here. Rather, I want to revisit some arguments I made in the article and reappraise their validity.

Technologies have a life-cycle. Initial implementation often requires central initiative and guidance. In due course, however, many technologies mature sufficiently that they no longer require central oversight. In the Chronicle article, I gave examples: “Most colleges and universities now have pervasive networks, accessible to everyone everywhere. Users interact directly with administrative and academic systems. E-mail, instant messaging, and cellphones are everyday tools. Information technology is a utility like electric power, available consistently and pervasively across most of higher education.” Therefore, I suggested, some IT elements require crisp operational management, and not necessarily high-level leadership. I cited some other examples of areas no longer requiring central attention: the promotion of instructional technologies; the support of local computer users.3

Even so, my core argument was that it remains important for colleges and universities to have a Chief Information Officer, or CIO. By “CIO,” I meant not necessarily someone with that exact title or an analogue like “Chief Technology Officer” or “Vice President for Information Technology” but simply an individual charged to provide central, comprehensive leadership for the institution’s IT activities and policies. I cited four good, interlinked reasons for colleges and universities to have CIOs:

1. Properly integrating central systems
2. Securing economies of scale in operations and procurement
3. Promulgating and accepting standards to enable those first two
4. Advocating for strategic applications of information technology across the institution’s academic and administrative domains

In my view, these remain valid justifications for the CIO role today.

Yet one hears challenges to the premise that colleges and universities need CIOs. Some argue, as the dean did in my example, that responsibility for information technology should be distributed across separate academic and administrative entities on campus. Since central leadership is therefore unnecessary, the argument runs, the role and importance of the CIO should be downgraded or eliminated. It follows that what remains of central information technology should be managed as merely one campus utility among many.4 Based on arguments like these, some institutions have eliminated or divided the CIO role and/or subsumed it under other campus entities. Often this means the CIO no longer sits at the executive decision-making table.

Trends like this appear to signal reduced importance for campus information technology. But before reaching this conclusion, we need to parse the trend carefully. What appears to be coherent movement in the wrong direction—that is, eliminating or downgrading IT leadership and therefore information technology itself—may actually be a logical consequence of discrete movement in two right directions: toward higher-level responsibility for information technology on the one hand; and toward productive distinctions between day-to-day operations and strategic leadership on the other.

Here’s the argument why pessimism may be premature. Institutions may not be downgrading the importance of IT leadership but, rather, placing it more appropriately within the larger administrative context. At the same time, they may simply be better integrating IT operations and support with other operational domains. If this is the case, then what is diminishing is not the central importance of information technology but, rather, the degree of central administrative authority over campus information technology. Authority is not the same as leadership.

This brings us to the $64 question: can there be effective campus leadership for information technology without central
control of information technology? We need to consider the possibility that although central leadership for institutional information technology remains vitally important, central control may no longer be important—or even feasible.

As technologies mature, I suggested earlier, they can enable decentralization. As the strategic importance of information technology increases, entrusting it to a single individual can be dangerous for an institution, especially if that individual speaks the language of technology rather than the language of higher education or if that individual is organizationally and geographically isolated. At the same time, a large fraction of information technology is indeed critical utility, one whose failure can jeopardize the institution. Much information technology thus must be managed as a critical utility. It may be difficult—and not necessarily productive—to seek CIOs who combine the strategic and communications skills necessary for leadership with the day-to-day management skills necessary for mission-critical operations. The evolution of CIOship might stem, in other words, from productive rather than pathological developments.

The changing CIO role, which to many observers signals disrespect for information technology, may instead represent an evolving recognition—however imperfect—of the increasing importance of information technology. That a CFO or provost takes on responsibility for information technology, for example, may entail a very real diminution of the CIO’s heretofore autonomous authority over information technology, but it may also mean that information technology is better woven into the institution’s administrative fabric and thus less likely to be pigeonholed.

But let’s be clear: that may be a Pollyannaish interpretation, and so there may still be grounds for pessimism. Downgrading the CIO role may in fact mean that a campus is devaluing information technology, or it may be nothing more than a political dilution of authority without any transfer of leadership responsibility to others. If that’s the case, then the diminution of the CIO role is indeed a harbinger of diminished IT effectiveness, leaving the campus ill served in the four central respects I listed earlier.

We need to think about the evolving CIO role thoughtfully, assessing how well the institution’s organizational choices advance IT effectiveness. The CIO’s scope of authority, the CIO’s precise location in organization charts, and the CIO’s title and reporting lines are part of this assessment, but they are by no means sufficient to decide whether things are getting better or worse for information technology.

The challenge for a CIO is to ensure that his or her institution uses information technology to its maximum long-term benefit. To achieve that, the CIO needs to hold on to what’s important in his or her particular institutional and technological context—while letting go of what isn’t.

Notes
Much of this column is based on a post in the author’s blog Ruminations (http://ruminations.gjackson.us).

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