In the last year, the Wall Street Journal questioned the skill sets of CIOs, the Chronicle of Higher Education highlighted the downgrading of the CIO position at several universities, and the Harvard Business Review questioned whether IT organizations will survive in their current form.1 Far too often, the response of IT thought leaders was to rebut, belittle, or ignore these criticisms. I’m convinced that those of us in information technology must begin to take them seriously and acknowledge that our long-term success will be based on our willingness to accept a new maxim: that technical skills no longer matter.

In the current economic climate, the risks of centering organizational performance on technical skills are magnified. When IT organizations think and act in ways that communicate “IT is really about IT,” this can have a profound—and negative—effect on those outside IT. A gap may be created that, if left unchecked, can grow until it eventually causes the IT organization to lose control over its own purpose and destiny. When this occurs, the role of chief information officer may regress to the role of utility service manager.

Why Technical Skills No Longer Matter

In 2003, Nicholas Carr published his article “IT Doesn’t Matter.”2 Although the debate that he provoked occasionally became histrionic, Carr was simply recognizing the obvious: technology alone is no longer sufficient to ensure success in a competitive marketplace. Technology may be necessary in the sense that it can provide an important foundation for enabling efficient operations, productive employees, and collaboration, but technology, on its own, no longer provides competitive advantages.

The same is true of technical skills for IT organizations. Technology is foundational, but technical skills are no longer sufficient to ensure that the delivery of technology services is consistent, effective, reliable, and responsive to end users’ needs. Technical skills are quite different from competencies. Competencies—such as accountability or process orientation—are some of the traits that separate high performers from low performers. In the eyes of those outside the IT organization, competencies are inexorably linked to effectiveness.

By elevating competencies over technical skills, an IT organization becomes well positioned to increase the value of the technology that it delivers. Individuals leading the IT organization are viewed as institutional “thought leaders” and become advocates for the effective delivery and use of IT services. Their authority and credibility derive from the exceptional reputation of the IT organization in providing consistent, reliable, and responsive IT services. This reputation is best demonstrated and reinforced through regular cycles of assessment and strategic planning.

By contrast, an IT organization that centers on technical skills finds itself playing the role of utility provider. This situation is easily recognizable when the role of the IT thought leader at the executive level is played by someone other than the CIO. In this case, the IT organization may be at risk of becoming more reactive, if the basis of its credibility becomes too dependent on its ability to garner goodwill. Saying “yes” when saying “no” is more prudent leads to a repeating cycle of overcommitment and underperformance, until someone decides that it is time, once again, to make a leadership change and reorganize the IT department.

Many IT leaders argue that the latter situation is precisely why presidents and provosts must recognize the need for technology leadership at the executive table. However, authority and credibility derived solely from an organizational chart do not provide a viable foundation for effective IT leaders or IT organizations. Effectiveness rests on successfully mastering role performance up the “IT Value Curve.”3

Competencies and the IT Value Curve

Although Carr was right to draw attention to the transactional role for IT organizations, with its focus on consistency, efficiency, process, responsiveness, reliability, and standardization, other IT thought leaders have articulated the aspirational, thought-leader role, with its focus on building the alliances and partnerships necessary for innovation or organizational change. Both the transactional and the thought-leader roles are well understood within the discipline, yet we often think of them as all-or-nothing propositions. This is not the case. The right questions to ask are how can IT organizations progressively mature from the transactional to the thought-leader role and how can they define the performance attributes that allow them to do so. The IT Value Curve can help IT leaders answer these questions.

Putting these two roles within context requires an understanding of the twin concepts of value and versatility. The concept of value can be best understood as the difference between things that are important and things that have transformative potential. The concept of versatility highlights the difference between those who build and deliver technology and those who engage others around the effective use of technology. If mapped to a grid, these concepts form an IT Value Curve with “versatility of performance” along the horizontal axis and “value of contribution” along the vertical axis. The transactional role occupies the lower left-hand quadrant of the IT Value Curve, with its emphasis on skills-based technology services that are important but not strategic. The thought-leader role, in contrast, occupies the upper right-hand quadrant and emphasizes the transformative power of technology through engagement and evangelism.

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Competencies enable the successful role performance up the IT Value Curve. For example, for the transactional role, expectations are centered on the delivery of consistent, reliable, efficient, and responsive IT services. Yet although IT knowledge is necessary, competencies—such as accountability, initiative, problem-solving capabilities, teamwork, and thoroughness—define success in the eyes of those outside IT and form the necessary basis for successful role performance at the transactional level.

As performance matures up the IT Value Curve, other competencies provide the basis for successful role performance. When IT leaders play a consultative role with those outside the IT organization, competencies such as analytical thinking, business process knowledge, communication of results, openness to learning, and process orientation are key. When IT leaders engage and advise others, competencies such as business enterprise knowledge, relationship building, the ability to develop others, emotional intelligence, and the capacity to empower others are vital to successful performance. At the top of the IT Value Curve, thought leaders are those who have mastered the competencies of change advocacy and strategic planning.

Successful performance up the IT Value Curve—from the transactional role to the consultative role, from the consultative role to the advisory role, and from the advisory role to the thought-leader role—depends on the credibility derived from strong role performance down the IT Value Curve. For example, no individuals or organizations can sustainably perform the advisory or thought-leader roles over the long term when there are questions about their ability to provide reliable transactional or consultative IT services, regardless of their position on the executive organizational chart.

A Competency-Focused Leadership Agenda

Following are five suggestions for creating a competency-based leadership agenda that will help an IT organization perform up the IT Value Curve.

1. **Focus on completing unfinished business.** Realize that there is always a choice between doing new things and doing old things better. Choose the latter. Refuse to let the lure of new projects crowd out the ability to fully exploit previous investments. The technically oriented organization is one that relentlessly chases new projects, often irritating end users, who tend to prefer the refinement and improvement of existing services.

2. **Break the cycle of overcommitment and underperformance.** Building a reputation for consistent, responsive, reliable, and effective transactional services is necessary for effective and sustainable performance up the IT Value Curve. This requires the ability to focus. IT organizations must learn how to say “no” without relying exclusively on positional authority. Using evidence to set priorities can help.

3. **Adjust current human resource practices.** Hire, assess, and retain staff based on competencies rather than on technical skills. Drop the phrase “Degree in computer science or equivalent required” from job-announcement notices. Hire employees at the lower levels of the organization, teach them the technical skills they need, and aggressively promote them from within, whenever possible. Doing so will ensure that the staff has the right competencies, while reducing pressure on the salary budget.

4. **Begin brokering services instead of delivering them.** Transactional services are prime candidates for outsourcing because brokering reliable, consistent, and responsive services on a contractual basis is often easier than managing them in-house. However, consider outsourcing opportunities only when they offer substantially improved economies of scale, thereby reducing costs and freeing up resources that can be invested up the IT Value Curve.

5. **Take advantage of natural alliances.** Building alliances is a key leadership competency. Strategic alliances for IT leaders should include the heads of library services, institutional research and planning, and research support (at research-focused institutions). Building relationships with the heads of these areas can lead to new opportunities up the IT Value Curve. In cases where economic circumstances require service consolidation, these alliances are a natural fit for IT.

By emphasizing competencies above technical skills, this leadership agenda can provide a basis for performing up the IT Value Curve in a way that increases the effective delivery and use of technology. The promise of such an agenda is the reason IT leaders became chief information officers, vice presidents, vice chancellors, and vice provosts. If technical skills are allowed to predominate, the CIO role can diminish until it once again becomes a utility provider. When that happens, tearing down and rebuilding the IT department under new leadership is often the only way forward.

**Notes**


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