The Realities

of a New Senior-Level IT Position

As you start that new CIO job, take some tips from the experts

This article focuses on some specific actions and activities that a senior-level information technology manager in higher education (like a chief information officer) might use after starting a new job to help ensure his or her success. The information comes from a panel presentation we made at EDUCAUSE 2000 in Nashville, Tennessee.

In the few months between the conference presentation and this publication, our coauthor and colleague Barbara Horgan died after a long illness (see the sidebar "Editor's Note: Barbara Horgan" at the end of this article). That she continued her professional activity despite her illness testifies to her professional commitment and personal bravery. We and many in our profession will remember Barbara as a courageous, kind, positive, and inspirational individual — a competent colleague and a good friend. We're grateful we could include her contributions to the CIO panel in this article.

As the basis for our discussion, we started with an assertion by EDUCAUSE President Brian Hawkins. He said that a CIO needs three primary skills: communications, alliance building, and collaboration. Our experiences — based on more than 100 aggregate years of managing IT organi-

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zations over the past 30 years, at more than 20 institutions ranging from small, private, liberal arts colleges to large, public, research universities — confirm that observation. This article provides some pragmatic advice to help new CIOs apply those skills.

First Steps

When you take that new senior-level IT management job, you face a host of challenges. Addressing some people issues up front helps get you off to a smooth start. You can start by establishing friendly relationships, meeting with constituents, and getting familiar with staff.

Making Friends

No one approach will work in every new position. But before you even begin a new management position, you can establish relationships with some of the key players at the new institution. Introduce yourself, ask about their expectations, and find out what they think it would take for someone to succeed in this position. Ask about the institution's strengths and weaknesses.

An e-mail message to some of the key administrators, faculty, and even student leaders before you arrive on campus will probably surprise and please them. You want to befriend these leaders. Go beyond the president, chief financial officer, director of facilities, and deans, and identify other, more hidden leaders. You need to identify your peer group on campus. Also seek out the complainers.

The first and most important task with all these individuals is to listen. You can often defuse their issues simply by listening. However, as a leader you'll be expected to have some plans and suggestions. So identify some basic problems with easy fixes and see to it they get fixed quickly. This builds others' confidence in you and demonstrates an ability to lead.

Meeting with Constituents

The choice is, "Do I first meet with my own staff or with the faculty, staff, and students?" While both are important, a new CIO should quickly focus on understanding the customers'

needs. If you focus on the customers, you can avoid getting mired in the siege mentality often present in an IT staff. When you meet with these constituencies, try to identify and emphasize collaborations and partnerships.

Two levels of constituents are important. First, get yourself invited to meetings of the deans, the faculty senate, the student senate, and the board of trustees. You'll also want to meet externally with corporate advisory groups, those community groups critical to the institution, and state boards if you work at a public institution.

What do you do when you meet with these key constituencies? As when meeting with individuals, you want to spend time listening and asking about needs and support. Rely on a stump speech as an effective tool — something you've prepared in advance and repeat over and over again, a "sound bite" that briefly describes your goals and plans. You may need to tailor your comments to the interests of your audience — students, faculty, administrators — but be

careful to be consistent in what you say and in your tone. Again, encourage partnership, communication, and collaboration.

Understand and Reorganize IT

After meeting with constituent groups, your focus can switch to the IT staff. Many different approaches to staff organizational issues exist. Most people prefer to "tinker" or adjust organizational constructs, rather than completely reorganize. It's important to decide what will work given other priorities and the size of the staff. Clearly, you'll have some mandate to shape things up, but usually not the support to clean house. Your task is to determine what's practical.

The starting points are obvious — your direct reports. Are those functional reports? Are they getting the job done? Are they properly structured? And do they know what their jobs are? You should plan lengthy interviews with each of your direct reports (see the sidebar "Basis for Direct Report Staff Interviews").

Basis for Direct Report Staff Interviews

In conducting interviews with your direct reports, you can structure the discussion around the following questions:

- What kinds of tasks and activities do you work on during the work day?
- What do you like most about your job? What do you like least? When you go home at the end of the day, what kinds of things excite you about the idea of going to work the next day?
- Who are your customers? How do you know you're doing a good job for them?
- What do you consider your strongest technical and nontechnical skills? What skills do you want to acquire and why?
- How would you like your job responsibilities and professional development to evolve over the next five years?
- Who do you team with most frequently to solve problems or offer services? What might we do to make that teamwork more effective and efficient?
- What were your last two professional development activities? Are you active in any professional organizations associated with your job function? Would you like to be?
- What are two or three things you think the IT organization should be doing to serve its customers better and to anticipate the evolving needs of the university?
- What questions do you think I should have asked and didn't?

Thanks to H. David Todd for suggesting these questions.

It's also valuable to schedule time with all staff members in the first six months for an hour or so. Ask what they think their jobs are and compare those to organizational structures. While this might not be feasible in large organizations, individual meetings with directors and managers of the various areas may meet the same goal. Listen to them and let them hear your message, your stump speech, your vision and direction.

Get to know what motivates staff members and use that in managing them. Sometimes they respond to things about you; sometimes they want you to listen to them. Obviously, you have to be careful with this. Also, take time to learn some of the organizational structure's history. It's amazing how people like to talk about "how things used to be."

Finally, go slowly with reorganization, since that's something that should be done methodically and carefully. Pay a lot of attention to people's personalities as well as the structure and the history of things that go into making an organization what it is. Always consider the mandate from your boss in your reorganization plans.

Working with Governance Structures

Every institution has its own quirky modes of governance — the committees and groups that define agendas, set policies, promote particular interests, and raise campus issues. Two levels of the governance structure will be of immediate importance to a new CIO: the external, in terms of the ultimate institutional governing body; and the internal, in the form of a constituent committee. For both levels, the pertinent dynamics involve politics more than technology.

The Board of Trustees

Educational institutions almost always have some overarching governing body, such as a Board of Trustees, that has the final level of fiduciary responsibility for the institution and to which the president reports. On campuses where IT has a very high profile, you'll typically find a committee of the
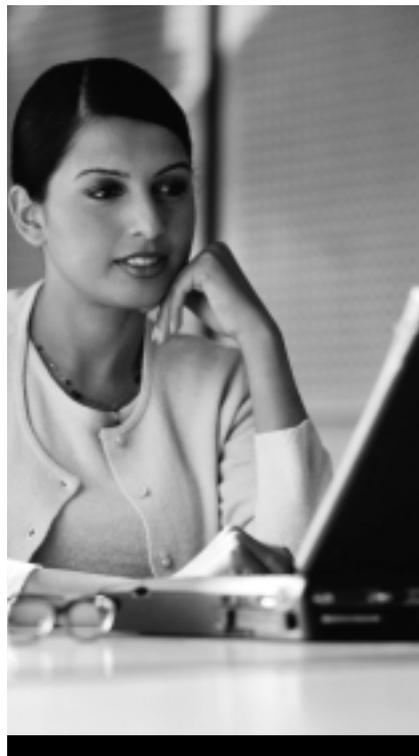
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board that's involved with IT issues. Such a committee can be a strong ally for the CIO — or another management problem to deal with.

If the institution has a board IT committee, a new CIO must quickly determine the committee's purpose and style. When the board IT committee works effectively, it can provide various kinds of support. The members of the committee might be very helpful in providing insider advice and counsel to a new CIO and obtaining funding for IT.

Getting the board itself involved in funding issues can be tricky because generally board members aren't expected (or invited) to micromanage the institution's business affairs. But if a fund-raising campaign is underway, the IT committee might help introduce into the campaign the notion of

philanthropic gifts to fund some aspect of the IT program.

The CIO should also assess how the institution's president feels about the board IT committee. If the president doesn't believe that the committee is useful, then a close relationship probably won't be effective and may put the CIO at risk.

Depending on how the institution handles such things, the CIO might even have a hand in creating the committee, writing its charter, and picking the members. All in all, when a board IT committee functions well, the CIO and the committee can become effective allies in dealing with major IT issues at the highest governance level of the institution.

The Computer Committee

A college or university may not have a board IT committee, but it's a rare institution that doesn't have at least one internal committee — including faculty, staff, and students — involved with IT. This level of governance is also of great importance to a new CIO.

The IT committee will be a crucial part of what a CIO inherits in a new job. The IT committee may have been set up as a shadow organization to manage IT, in which case the committee might turn out to be both dangerous and meddlesome. Conversely, it might offer a group of strong allies who really can help the CIO.

Learning to work with the IT committee is likely to be a very important part of the CIO's job. It's important to understand the history of the committee, since this provides a useful view of the IT environment at the institution.

The new CIO also needs to determine (or define) the committee's purpose. Does the committee endorse, recommend, or make decisions? The committee could be a liability to the institution and the CIO if it has authority without responsibility.

The new CIO will be able to work most effectively with the IT committee if it has a clear, substantive charge and if it's populated with knowledgeable, concerned campus citizens who are genuinely interested in improving the insti-

tution's IT environment and helping the CIO succeed rather than enhancing the individual members' desires.

Preparing for Success

Some basic research into the institution you're joining, both cultural and financial, will put you in a stronger position to move forward confidently. You also need to understand who's your boss — more than one person may play that role depending on the different responsibilities of your new position. Finally, you need to set and manage expectations, both those affecting you and yours regarding your staff.

Learn the Institutional Culture

As you begin in your new institution, consider the various characteristics of institutions. How do the characteristics of your new institution differ from previous institutions? Is it a public institution and you're coming from a private, or vice versa? Focused on teaching versus research? Relatively affluent or relatively poor? As you settle in to your new environment, you'll need to pay some attention to those differences and adjust your behavior to accommodate them.

It will help to learn something about people, ceremonies or traditions, institutional values, and defining historical moments. You should take every opportunity to participate in events such as convocations, receptions, hosted parties, and so on, and learn something about the community.

As you begin to work in the job, determine how this new institution differs in operational details from your former. Things like budgeting, staff time cards, travel vouchers, and personnel actions will probably differ significantly. Find a few prototype cases in key areas and work through the procedures to understand the differences. Ask the functional areas for help. You need to understand exactly how to work with the system. While this may seem trivial, understanding the new environment shows your willingness to adapt and can serve as a model for others when it comes to your area. One of the most difficult but

important behaviors to avoid is referring to how it was done at your previous institution.

Don't expect that you can make your observations scientifically and dispassionately. You'll be lobbied as you're attempting to learn facts. The perspectives shared with you may include personal biases and will perhaps aim to influence your future decisions. That is, you'll receive information intended to establish your expectations and working patterns. Try to ensure balance in the perspectives by soliciting opposing viewpoints.

Learn about Budgets

Obviously, money is important. You need to learn the institutional budget as soon as possible. Find out who the financial people are on your campus and tap into their expertise. Investigate the financial ethos of the institution. What role do budgets play? What's the timing of that budget process? How does that money flow?

Also, immediately explore and understand your own unit's budgetary strengths and weaknesses. The budget process will determine strategies that you may need to use to obtain project funding.

Build a Relationship with Your Boss

It's important to know who really is your boss. It may be the person above you on an organizational chart, but usually you'll find other bosses you have to pay attention to as well.

We strongly recommend that when you take a new position, you quickly figure out what the relationships will be. You may encounter confusion, but it's important to interview your actual boss very early on and ask lots of questions.

Your stump speech needs to have input from and acceptance by your boss, who needs to know what you'll be saying around campus. A good boss will become a sounding board. Learn the level of detail your boss wants to hear from you on a regular basis and how much communication he or she really wants.

A way of helping your boss become a productive sounding board is to learn what major issues he or she is facing and discuss how IT might become part of the solution. Ask about your boss's personal experiences with computing, such as problems with PCs, e-mail, Web service, or anything else.

Finally, remain loyal to your boss at all times. Sometimes it's difficult, but this loyalty forms the basis of your support. Don't throw it away.

Setting and Managing Expectations

When you first get to campus, expectations (both yours and the institution's) about what you can accomplish will be very high. It's likely that you were hired to make changes and address ongoing issues.

You will find people expecting you to focus on administrative systems, people who want you to work on academic issues, and a different set of people who want you to work on networking issues. The community as a whole needs to understand just how broad the dimensions are for the job that you've taken on.

You need to delegate effectively. It's also important to set expectations early on. Let the customers know that you're not going to do everything personally. It's surprising the range of things folks might expect a CIO to handle personally. You can say, "I will not put that PC on your desk myself, but I will see that it gets done." You don't want to distance yourself from your clients, but you should make it clear that you were hired to provide leadership and not to take on everything directly.

It also helps if you set expectations for your staff. For example, you could explain that you'll have a can-do organization with a focus on customers and attention to budgets. Perhaps most important, your personal integrity and reliability are key aspects in the way you do business. You might even develop a list of expectations to share with the staff members, something to give everyone a common grounding for performance (see the sidebar "Setting Staff Expectations").

Setting Staff Expectations

During your initial meeting with your staff, you need to make it evident that directions will change and that staff must adapt to the change. It's important that your expectations are clear. One method for doing this is to initially distribute general expectations to all staff, such as the following:

- We must have a strong commitment to our customers by providing excellent service.
- We must be courteous and considerate of the general university population and of our coworkers.
- We must treat each individual with dignity and respect.
- We must be dependable and responsible in the use of work time.
- We must use with integrity the information and technology resources available to us.

This list derives from work Jerry Niebaum did at Kansas. He also spoke publicly about setting expectations and shared his ideas on communicating with staff in an e-mail to Robert Paterson.

Setting an Agenda

In setting your agenda for the new job, you'll need to identify outstanding problems and difficult issues. You'll also need to evaluate your role as a change agent on campus. In particular, has your boss communicated what role the university expects you to play? If not, you'd better find out. The answer may radically affect your plans.

Identify Difficult Issues

The problems you identify usually won't be technical, but rather political or organizational. After you've identified the difficult issues, you need to prioritize them. Specifically, you need to decide what you can do in the short term, what are long-term projects, and what things really lie outside your control. Also include the constituents in setting priorities. Use particular care to identify the issues that are institutional as well as technical so that you can address all facets of a problem when attempting to solve it.

Your Role as a Change Agent

A CIO often plays the role of campus change agent. The things that we do promote change in a very deep way. What's your role as a change agent? Does the institution expect you to help change the campus culture or simply manage the IT organization? Make sure you know — the campus change agent task is a big one. It's the kind of role we may hope for when we take on a new position, but that kind of institution-wide responsibility poses a big challenge.

If your mandate is to be a campus change agent and your staff isn't willing to come along, you should expect some staff turnover before you can accomplish your goals. Some technology staff members are relatively inflexible, for example. If coaching doesn't work, other opportunities for them on campus or elsewhere may become attractive.

You'll probably meet resistance from some customers as well. These individuals knew how to get what they wanted done, and now you're changing the process. This can cause consternation.

To succeed, you must seek and foster support from the highest level. If the reaction to a change is to go over your head, then you need to know that the person above you will support your decision.

Necessary Skills

We believe that if you become a CIO, you really don't "do" much technology. Based on our experience, a new CIO should work to develop five key skills:

- Flexibility in dealing with a new environment
- Pragmatism in approaching all problems
- Excellence in managing various relationships
- Excellence in managing budgets
- Excellence in managing everyone's expectations

These five skills are basic components of Hawkins' message about being an effective and frequent communicator, and building alliances and collaborations. Time spent learning and developing these skills will help ensure your success as a new CIO. *e*

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Editor's Note: Barbara Horgan

Many of our readers already know that Barbara Horgan, who participated in this panel presentation, died January 11, 2001, after a lengthy battle with cancer. At the time of her death she was Director of Information Technology at the University of Washington, Tacoma, Washington campus and a faculty member at the University of Phoenix. She was active in both CAUSE and Educom for many years, with terms of service on both boards of directors, as well as serving on the board of the Northwest Academic Computing Consortium. She also served on the CAUSE Professional Development Committee, the Educom95 Program Committee, and the program committee for Seminars in Academic Computing. For several years she moderated the active CAUSE/EDUCAUSE CIO Constituent Group listserv and convened the group's annual meeting. Her professional contributions were shaped by her quiet humor, thoughtful leadership, and valuable partnerships with colleagues — traits that enriched her many presentations. We deeply regret her loss.