

# What Should You Do?

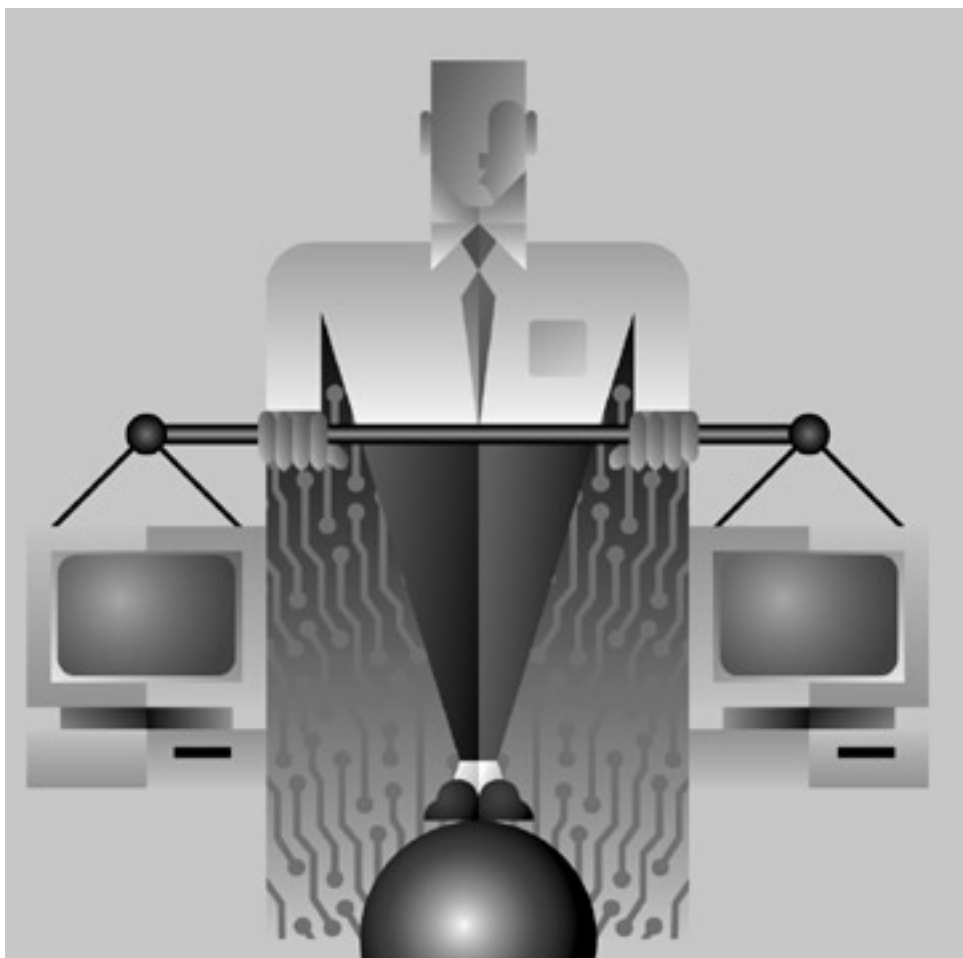
*Technology managers must determine their ultimate career goals before deciding whether to pursue technical certifications or higher education degrees*

By **Wayne A. Brown**

**“W**hat should I do?” Technology managers have asked me this question many times, and I suspect most IT leaders have heard similar concerns voiced as technical staff begin thinking about their next career steps. Should they continue pursuing technical certifications or work on the next academic education level (usually a master’s degree)? My answer: What do you want to be? A hands-on technical manager? Or an IT director or chief information officer (CIO)? Those divergent goals require different education and skill sets.

A technical manager might work with technology every day, or perhaps only when the lead technologist is gone or an extra pair of hands is needed. Your technical skills should be current to perform the job well, which means keeping up with your technical education and certifications. Additionally, management and leadership professional development courses will enhance your ability to provide effective supervision and leadership for your group.

On the other hand, if you want to become an IT director or CIO, you need to take a different path from technical certification. Technical directors and CIOs should have, or be actively pursuing, a master’s degree. In higher education, a doctorate might be a prerequisite or at least a differentiator for the CIO position. While management and leadership professional development courses are needed, you can reduce or eliminate ongoing technical training, leaving the server administration or network router



configuration to the smart and motivated staff around you. That said, you should keep up with technology trends, capabilities, and standards.

The natural follow-up question for those who want to move on to a director or CIO leadership level is, “What kind of advanced degree should I pursue?” My advice depends on your

undergraduate degree. If you have a technical undergraduate degree, you should consider an MBA or a graduate degree in higher education leadership. If you have a business degree, you may gain balance through a computer science graduate degree. One trick to this selection is to stay as versatile as possible for as long as you can. When

you select a terminal degree, you might pigeon-hole yourself. For example, a higher education leadership PhD could set you on a higher education career path that will be difficult to abandon if your goals change. To stay flexible, consider earning a business degree or a leadership or management degree.


My only caution about deciding between the technical and CIO paths involves the time invested. It can take a long time to complete a degree or a technical certification. If your aspirations change, the time invested could be wasted. Or, you might miss an unexpected career opportunity while retooling yourself to fit the chosen job description.

As you plan a career path from manager to director or CIO, consider other elements necessary for success. As simple as it sounds, try gaining experience in the job area you've chosen. For example, a network manager who wants to become an administrative computing director should spend time

learning about the other areas within the director's purview, perhaps including telephony, application support, application development, and database administration. Seek opportunities to work with some of those other areas for short periods of time or to manage a project with the other groups. An understanding of and some experience in these other areas will make you more competitive for the director or CIO position.

To be ready for the next level, you should hone written and verbal communication skills as well as other skills such as business (or, in our case, academic) knowledge, technical knowledge, customer service, process improvement, leadership and resource management, and political savvy. In addition, you should know how to align the IT department's mission and goals with those of the college and how to implement effective governance. You could learn these attributes through participation in intergroup projects, formal education,

and professional development opportunities. Another approach to learning the institution's business functions would be to spend time working with the different functional areas. This "shadowing" of a functional area provides an IT employee a good view of how other departments operate, things that impact their effectiveness, and how they fit into the broader college mission.

Answering the question of what you should do with your career gets tricky if you don't know your career goals. Once you decide what you want to be, however, you can begin working on the technical certifications or formal education that will benefit you in your chosen role. Round out your capabilities with skills and experience that promote success in your chosen role, and make yourself the most competitive candidate. Good luck! 

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