Driving business innovation and growth

To help organisations transform, grow and flourish, the BCS IT Leaders Forum believes a new approach is needed. It believes people who have been developed to combine both IT leadership and entrepreneurship are ideally placed to enable change.

The IT leadership role was created so me decades ago, during a time when computers, software and systems were first introduced into organisations. The role focused on technology and followed the organisation's needs. However, in those early days, where pre-trained IT resources were not available, it was common practice to seed the IT department with business people who would train to become IT professionals.

This helped to address the shortage of trained IT people but it also broadened the impact of IT away from the traditional focus of accounting applications. By contrast, organisations have now evolved. Today, technology is not simply a 'servant' but a differentiator, a tool for competitive advantage, a disruptor and a business driver in itself. However, the IT leadership role, or how it is frequently seen, has not necessarily evolved in the same way. It is time to encourage your technical leadership to drive enterprisingly forward into the business.

IT leadership usually entails inventiveness (solving problems using technology) and innovation (doing things differently or doing different things). To date, creativity and innovation may have only been principally focused on managing the technology itself, its application in business, and how it operates within its commercial and social context. However, and not least because of increasingly widespread and growing 'digitalisation' generally, the way we do business is either already, or is becoming, fundamentally different. Companies need people with 'digital domain' knowledge and vision to see how things can work differently. IT leaders with a flair for understanding business opportunities and how they may be exploited become important, if not vital, to the successful development and growth of their organisations and enterprises.

We use the term 'leaderpreneur' to describe an IT leader with experience, technical knowledge, and entrepreneurial business vision; somebody who can conceive of and implement successful new business opportunities and ventures.

The next level – IT leaderpreneurs

A leaderpreneur may be focused on transforming the core business, be capable of creating new lines of business or opportunity which can be spun off from the core business, or may take an idea away and develop it independently (or resource, encourage, motivate and manage others to do so). The leaderpreneur can quickly end up becoming a mentor or facilitator for young entrepreneurs and new startup businesses, whether within the IT Leader's organisation or externally. Leaderpreneurs are, therefore, not just a combination of IT leadership and entrepreneurship but trainers and mentors for future IT and business leaders.

IT leadership is vital in businesses for several reasons:

- Competitiveness: it promotes the development of innovative ideas and products, helping businesses stay ahead of the curve in a rapidly evolving technological landscape
- Coordinating complex teams: IT Leaderpreneurs can bring together a diverse range of skills and perspectives, creating groups that are both creative and effective

- Developing future IT Leaders: by encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation within organisations, IT leaderpreneurs foster a sense of purpose and motivation amongst their colleagues and employees

The encouragement, resourcing and promotion of IT leaderpreneurship within organisations clearly could and should deliver great value; however, its development faces challenges, and begs a number of questions or points to ponder, for example:

- Where the IT has been totally outsourced there will be a reluctance amongst the business people to discuss future business plans with third parties, driven by concerns over competitive advantage, confidentiality and disclosure. Is it wise then to outsource what has become such a critical resource?
- Technical leaders are the experts in technology within an organisation. It is frequently the case, however, that they are still not consulted in the preparation of organisation plans but they are presented with a fait-accompli and told what should be delivered. What can be done to convince top management that technical leaders should be part of the organisation planning process from the start?
- Technical leaders frequently have great ideas regarding where technology can take the business, how processes and delivery can be improved using technology and how business results can be better driven through technology. Should there be a focus then on training technical leaders on how to pitch and promote such ideas to the right audiences?
- Businesses work against a strategic plan that has strong financial elements. Do technical leaders routinely have access to this when developing their future analyses and proposals to boards or to top management?
- When creating, developing and presenting a project or an innovation, technical leaders are able to give many detailed technical reasons why the project would be beneficial to the business. When pitching this to business leaders, such suggestions typically fall on deaf or uncomprehending ears and they fail to invest. What can be done about it?

The case for promoting IT leaderpreneurship needs to focus on emphasising and supporting the technical vision and leadership of IT leaders while ensuring that this vision is not only aligned, but fused with the organisational strategy. It is also a matter of educating IT leaders in business, finance and presentation skills, while revealing to organisations the value that can be realised by giving more prominence to IT leaders at higher organisational levels.

Some tangible actions

Developing IT leaders into leaderpreneurs and harnessing the IT leaders' technical and entrepreneurial skills requires concerted action from multiple angles. Some aspects here could be:

- Make IT leaderpreneurship a job requirement: company boards, and company HR functions, should add 'IT leaderpreneurship' to CTO and IT team leader job roles and specifications in order to ensure that the IT leadership is fused with entrepreneurship. This would result in employing technologists who can see business opportunity, and can lead and speed up the digitalisation and transformation of the business to realise the opportunities these bring
- Develop leaderpreneurship qualities: IT professionals should actively promote their IT leaderpreneurship awareness and talents, seeking encouragement, responsibility and trial projects to exercise and develop skills and experience in order to better prepare themselves to add value to their companies and to society as a whole

- Supplement IT studies with entrepreneurship: educational institutions teaching IT qualifications should consider supplementing these with business or entrepreneurship modules. Also, professional bodies could be engaged to undertake reciprocal mentoring of IT leaders in order to start to create an awareness of business strategy, management and organisational behaviour theories that the IT Leader will use as a foundation to develop leaderpreneurship traits

The ultimate level – the business IT leaderpreneur

Ultimately, enlightened businesses will foster the most business-focused IT leaderpreneurs to prepare them for a career move into innovative business management and development.

In conclusion, IT leaderpreneurship has the potential to drive significant innovation and growth to organisations across a range of industries. A lot needs to be done from multiple angles in order to grow these traits. By nurturing and supporting IT leaderpreneurs, we can help create a more dynamic and entrepreneurial business landscape which will ultimately benefit society as a whole.

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