As a CIO I felt like someone who was being looked after by the FBI's witness protection service. After all, in my time, the name of the most senior IT positions have changed from the data entry manager, to data processing manager, to the information technology manager, to IT director, to IS director, to chief technology officer, to chief information officer and so on (I've had quite a few).

I'm sure you can tell me of some other options, for example now there is the chief technology evangelist.

Promises, promises, promises!

Well, whatever we are called, we are not famous for our stability. We keep doing the silver bullet thing, whilst praying it will work this time. We go from machine language to assembler language, to the next one. From Algol to Fortran and finally, in 1968, to a language that was capable of being used by 'end users' and was self documentig: Cobol.

Cobol has been pronounced dead many times (along with all programmers)! We chose to use structured programming techniques, with no proof as to whether they were efficient or effective.

In fact we generally didn't have a clue about what we were doing. Do the terms structured techniques, methodologies, case tools (upper-case and lower-case), object orientation, RAD, extreme programming, or even if you can remember its brief life – the IPSE (integrated project support environment) mean anything to you?

So what's the problem? Speed of change versus lack of change?

Accountants came up with double entry book keeping in the 1600s and still use it. Sure, every now and then they tweak the rules, Enron and Worldcom notwithstanding. Maybe in 400 years we would have some clear direction if we can wait that long.

Nicholas Carr said in a Harvard business review magazine in 2003 that technology was no longer a competitive weapon and was now a commodity. In the early days of the 20th century large organizations had vice presidents of electricity or electrification and when electricity became a commodity these jobs and job titles disappeared.

The CIO would go the same way according to Nicholas Carr; he believes the role is now defunct. Other views differ, but there is agreement that something needs to change.

When you examine what the CIOs themselves think, they believe that major change
is necessary. They also say that the next generation who fill their roles will have different skill sets and will need to deal with the organizational problems. But this is, as they say, sometime in the future and someone else's problem.

Where do we go from here?

Well compare the technology department to the finance department. The CFO typically ensures that it is very small and efficient. It does not continue to grow and it does not continue to use more and more resources. This may be something to do with the fact that they are naturally cost sensitive, and therefore make sure that whatever can be eliminated from the finance department is.

What can we do?

- We have to look at the tactical versus the strategic, and ensure there is a clear distinction between the two, and that everyone knows it.
- We also have to look at commodity versus strategic, we must not allow our focus to dwell on commodities, or that is where the organization will position us.
- We have to look at change versus transformation. We are, by the nature of what we do, at the very centre of change. We must take advantage of this position and consider transforming, not simply changing.
- We have to look at supplier and end-user management, and ensure we have the skills to perform these at the highest levels.
- We have to use standard technologies wherever we can, to commoditize.
- We have to make it so that we start looking like a small department. One who also has massive added-value.
- We have to change from the position where the CIO is described (by a CIO!) as a 'trophy wife', who was the last to know anything about what's happening in the organization.

And a final word from Tom Peters, who says that any CIO who does not change his organization and his behaviors will be removed at some point.

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