CIO thought leadership
The sum of all brands
**Introduction**
This discussion report summarises the key themes discussed during the recent CIO thought leadership dinners at Claridge’s in London. In keeping with this series of private dinners, the discussions focused on enhancing the CIO’s strategic relevance. The major themes centred around brand management and skills development.

**Customer-centricity**
The convergence of market volatility, the empowered worker, globalisation and accelerating technological developments is making it harder than ever for organisations to maintain a sustainable advantage. Gone are the days when businesses created a unique selling proposition and lived off it for years on end. Today, at best one can only hope for a temporary advantage. Today reinvention feels more like a daily habit than a major event.

Customers are in the driving seat and, as such will simply migrate to where they are best served. Acquiring new customers is very expensive so organisational survival is dependent on the organisation’s ability to retain its customers.

Consequently customer-centricity must lie at the heart of the organisation’s strategy. This has significant implications on every aspect of the organisation’s operations.

**Digital-centricity**
The customer experience is strongly influenced by the nature of their interactions with the organisation. These are increasingly via a digital interface. Poor user interface design will of course frustrate customers and prospects, and in turn damage the organisation’s brand.

But the user interface is merely the (admittedly important) front end of a process chain whose point of origination might be a field or a quarry. Inefficiencies along this supply chain will lead, in these scenarios, to potentially overpriced dairy products or malfunctioning cars; both passion-dampening from a customer’s perspective.

Given that IT permeates a significant element of most supply chains, this quickly brings us to the conclusion that, to be customer-centric, our organisations need to be digital-centric. No doubt this realisation has triggered the need for the so-called chief digital officer (CDO).
It is thus not difficult to understand why business leaders are recognising the importance of digital to their business strategy, but it is a cause for concern as to why the associated responsibilities do not naturally drop into the CIO’s lap.

Clearly given the criticality of digital to the organisation’s brand, some business leaders are not comfortable handing the associated brand responsibility to their CIOs.

**Digital leadership**

The CIOs at both dinners recognised this challenge and concluded that the CIO can only take on this responsibility if:

- IT operations are running smoothly
- their personal brand reflects a genuine capability in respect of digital leadership

The former point needs to be addressed as a priority otherwise any investment in the second point will be wasted. So assuming you have your technology estate in order, brand management is now your next most important activity.

There are two main issues when it comes to brand management and digital leadership. Firstly the personal development paths of CIOs rarely intersect with the topic of brand management. Therefore there is the tendency to think it is irrelevant to being a CIO; a topic perhaps more suited to the marketing department.

Secondly there is the perception that brand management implies being larger than life, hyper social and possibly even vain. This of course doesn’t sit very well in an industry where introversion (not to be confused with shyness) is richly represented. Thus any guidance in that direction, by well-meaning learning and development specialists, might well be met with a show of teeth and an ominous growl.

It needs to be stated that brand management is not a concept limited to rock stars, football teams and luxury clothing. Everyone has a brand. The question is whether we take charge of it or just let others create their own perception. Certainly those in attendance at the dinners felt that the CIO’s brand needed to convey service-orientation, innovativeness and business leadership.

Business leadership is in your hands. This requires having a vision that inspires your people and the business leadership, and of course ultimately improves the condition of your organisation’s customers.

You do have the power to demonstrate innovation and service orientation by the manner in which you engage with the business leadership. However a large component of the ensuing perception will be created by your people.
So your branding is built upon the branding of your people. Consequently digital-centric organisations are only as good as their IT staff. Thus poor recruitment and underinvestment in IT staff development is an early indicator of an organisation’s imminent fall from grace.

**Digital followership**

When it comes to asset management, do you give more attention to your laptop count than the skills matrix of your people?

Are you sufficiently on top of talent management to assess whether your IT function is a rest home for those who just couldn’t cut it on the vendor-side, or a stable of thoroughbred digital rock stars (to mix metaphors)?

If you don’t know, your career and the future of your organisation are at risk. If the business leadership is not prepared to show you their risk register, you should be concerned. From a business leadership perspective, they need to resolve this before analysts and investors wise-up.

As a former technologist, if someone mentioned paying attention to my brand, I would have assumed that was a strong hint to buy a shiny suit and develop my own catch phrase, such was my ignorance. There is clearly a danger of sending the wrong message if the focus on raising one’s game is focused on brand rather than skills. That stated, everyone in the IT function needs to understand the correlation between business strategy, service, brand and their skills.

CIOs in turn need to develop a programme that aligns the skills of the IT function with the business strategy. Whilst we must endeavour to pursue best practice, if we are to increase our influence in digital matters there must also be a focus on ‘next practice’, ie what are the skills that will define the next generation of IT professionals?

Technology skills can be acquired by training; the big challenge is finding staff with the right attitude. This was recently alluded to by futurist Seth Godin when he rephrased the ‘war for talent’ as actually a ‘war for attitude’.

This is a recruitment challenge. But technology competence and attitude aside, there are other skills that are needed in a service-oriented value-adding IT function.

**Communication skills**

Each engagement with the users is an opportunity to add or remove value. A poorly written functional specification (costing the organisation millions) or badly handled service desk transaction with an influential user (eroding the trust capital of the IT function) are obvious examples. But there are also the communications that take place internally within the IT function. Your technical architect may have a large brain but her day job seems to be draining the esprit de corps of your department.
Commercial skills
The user is not always right. And in any case that last ‘bell’ may add inordinate complexity to the system architecture. Having the commercial skills to explain what lies within scope and what doesn’t, in an objective and reasonable manner, is important as is having the commercial sensitivity to identify scope creep.

I am not suggesting that the IT function becomes hard line commercial lawyers. The ability to trade requirements for concessions can lead to positive outcomes without the need to reach for the legal documents. IT staff who have worked for service companies understand the link between time and money, particularly if they have spent time as part of, or running, fixed price projects. But there are many who appear hermetically sealed from commercial reality because of poor commercial practices within the IT function.

Service skills
A five star hotel with a one star reception is a one star hotel in the eyes of the users. So IT staff need to understand that the value they deliver is not constrained to the artistry of their technical solution but to how they engage with the recipients.

Creativity skills
In a world where more is expected for less and frugality is seen as a virtue, the ability of IT staff to ‘make meals out of leftovers’, or to redefine the problem to facilitate a simpler solution, is important.

Collaboration skills
Possibly this is a subset of communications skills (or even vice versa). The ability to work with people within the IT function and beyond, locally and globally, is very important given how organisations and their supply chains are increasingly fragmented and distributed.

Many of these skills have a high emotional quotient (EQ) element. This says a lot about our industry. But this needs to be addressed without delay.

Again linking the strategic imperatives to the development needs of your staff will ensure you devote your development resources in a manner that will yield the best business return. Your learning and development function is encouraged to create career paths so that IT staff have a sense of career direction.

These need not be overly prescribed, because nobody can anticipate the skills that will be needed beyond the very near future. However a framework in some form is required otherwise your IT function is just a swirling pool of resource that will leave the staff disoriented and insecure.
Skills identification is important, but skills fulfilment is more important. Your L&D function needs to establish what it can reasonably deliver in-house, and from where in the outside world it will source the outstanding development requirements. Then once the developmental needs of an individual have been identified, the associated engagement can be put in place in a timely and cost effective manner.

The shortfall between the demand for IT staff and supply means that staff retention will increasingly be a challenge for organisations. Treating IT staff like commodities, e.g. ‘we need 2 Oracle DBAs and a Java Eclipse developer’, will not yield the desired results. They know their worth and will gravitate to organisations that do not just provide employment, but provide the skills for sustained employability.

Conclusion
CIOs that do not put sufficient focus on their own personal branding, as well as the branding of their IT function, are in danger of slipping into operational obsolescence. The associated morale decay will impact the organisation, and thus the customer, in a detrimental manner.

Business leaders can paper over the cracks by appointing a CDO. But the tectonic movements of the market will expose this sooner rather than later. Herein lies an opportunity for the CIO to play a central leadership role in the organisation’s market relevance. However this is not a ‘one-man’ show, and so strong leadership is required to ensure your people take up the challenge of moving centre stage.

Again strong leadership is not enough. Moving incapable IT staff centre stage will just raise the bar in terms of the IT function’s ability to damage the organisation.

Following the logic of this document, the perception your customers have of your organisation might be considered to be directly proportional to the sum of the individual brands of your IT staff. Thus your organisation’s ability to acquire, retain and develop your IT talent lies at the heart of your business strategy.
About the author
Ade McCormack is a former technologist who is now an advisor on the digital economy and digital leadership. He is a judge on the annual CIO 100 awards and has an opinion column in the Financial Times advising business leaders on IT issues. Similarly Ade has a column in CIO magazine advising CIOs on business relevance.

He lectures from time to time at MIT Sloan School of Management on digital leadership and has written a number of books including The IT Value Stack – A Boardroom Guide to IT Leadership.

About BCS Enterprise
The BCS Enterprise programme brings together digital leaders to help enhance standards of professionalism and performance across the IT industry, enabling IT to drive outstanding business performance.

BCS Enterprise 200 is a growing group that welcomes 21st century CIOs and CHROs to events, dinners and roundtables to discuss the key issues and challenges facing them and the industry.

If you would like to be involved in any of our future events, please contact David Devine at david.devine@hq.bcs.org.uk

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