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Developing the Role of CIO in Healthcare Management: From "the IT Guy" to CIO



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The chief information officer (CIO)—also known as the chief digital officer (CDO), chief information digital officer (CIDO) or “the IT guy”—can be a difficult title to inhabit, precisely because it is such a new and developing role. If you join an organisation as an accountant people know what to expect, because they have been around for thousands of years, but many organisations have no preconception of a CIO's role and ensuing responsibilities, because they have never had one on board. This can be very difficult not only for the CIO themselves, but for all those involved in the organisation, especially at the “C-Suite” level.

The history of the CIO, however, dates back over thirty years: the role was first officially defined in 1981, which might sound like a long time ago, but when you consider that accountants have been around since ancient Egyptian times, the CIO role is relatively young in terms of both its definition—and understanding—within an organisation.

CIO in Healthcare

From the point of view of a CIO in healthcare, there are opportunities to develop and define this distinctive role. You are in the unique position to understand how your organisation delivers care, and how IT can be used as an enabler for the delivery of patient care and ultimately to achieve value and improve best patient outcomes. Regardless of what stage of your career you are at, if you are given the opportunity to take on a role as CIO, grasp the opportunity with both hands, as it places you in a privileged position to drive the future of your organisation and to contribute to and shape the future of how healthcare is delivered. Healthcare is in a constant state of flux and transition—but this is where you can deliver success by leading change. However, this is also where the problems can begin in making that transition from “the IT guy” to CIO.

As CIO, a subtle change in your skill sets is required. The focus must shift from everyday technical challenges and problem solving to concentration on the larger vision and strategic objectives of the organisation. There is a transitional change required from traditional IT technical jargon to everyday business language of an organisation.

A CIO needs to be able to inspire, influence and motivate the people around them. Particularly in healthcare, technology must be there to support the clinician and positively impact the health of a patient. A healthcare CIO must always remember that a clinician is there to do one job: to improve the health of a patient. Changing care pathways and clinical processes must provide benefits for the clinician and the patient, otherwise any technology implementation will not succeed. Changing these pathways and processes requires constant collaboration and perseverance, therefore IT needs to be part of what the clinician does and must enable that process, not hinder it.

Working with the CCIO

With the emergence of the CCIO (chief clinical information officer) role within healthcare organisations, the CIO now has a person to complement

their drive for technology enablement. The CCIO tends to be a clinician who has experience in delivering technology and is therefore a champion of technology among their peers. This relationship between the CIO and CCIO must be fostered and the CIO must listen to and learn from their CCIO colleague.

In large technology implementation projects within a healthcare environment, the technology is usually the easy part, because the technology usually does what you want, but humans, by our very nature, can be resistant to change. Changing the work practices of clinicians and patient care pathways can therefore be challenging.

Healthcare CIOs must understand that, if not implemented correctly, these changes can impact on clinical time with patients, resulting in less time for treating and consulting and more time trying to use technology. Therefore, before any IT system or piece of technology is implemented you must speak to your clinical colleagues and those who will be using the system and listen to what they want and what will work for them. If you forge ahead from a technical perspective with technology that you know is functional but clinicians and users are voicing objections to, the technology will never be used (or will be used inefficiently) and the project will not deliver value.

As a CIO in healthcare management it is your responsibility to bridge that gap between the technical and the clinical elements to ensure that both sides fully understand what is required and what will be used. If you are lucky enough to have a CCIO as part of your team, listen carefully to what they say while keeping in mind that the primary focus of a clinician is to treat the patient. If the technology does not support this and you do not listen to the users, your role as CIO will be short lived.

The Evolving CIO Role

The evolving role of the CIO in healthcare management touches upon many different aspects of an organisation and will be specific to each individual organisation. A person's transition to that role can be particularly challenging if they have developed and grown within the organisation. A title can be awarded to a person, but only time will tell if they earn that title and the respect of their colleagues by delivering the goods. It is important to lead by example and learn from others. To be accepted to the "C-Suite" can be difficult though, as the CIO role is not a traditional member. This is where a return to "the IT guy" must be managed appropriately. The CIO is not in the meeting to fix the projector when it breaks—they are there to bring innovative and new ideas using technology to strategically advance the organisation and future goals.

It is important, where possible, to speak to other CIOs and learn from their experiences. Do not underestimate the value of making connections and networking at conferences, events and even through social media. Learning and listening to others will galvanise you on the shared issues of making the CIO role part of the "C-Suite" and part of the business.

Integration. Integration. Integration.

It is very important not to isolate your role from others within your organisation; it is not good enough to be a separate "IT department" that functions independently. Technology must be a seamless part of the organisation that people cannot do without, just like finance. An organisation cannot operate without the chief financial officer (CFO), and the CIO role should be equally important. It is up to the CIO to ensure they become an essential member of this group by leaving behind the technical day-to-day problem solving and by demonstrating original thinking as well as embracing the "art of the possible" to further the goals of the organisation.

Ultimately, whether you are a new CIO, aspiring CIO, or have been in the role for a while, it is important to believe in what you do and in your vision for your organisation. It is important to take risks and trust in yourself when you know something is right, listen to others and always take other people's opinions and suggestions on board. Finally, self-belief is key: if you are implementing a large scale project you, the CIO, must believe in it and believe that it will be successful.

Key Points

- Healthcare CIOs in unique position to develop role to enhance patient care
- Technology must support and enable clinicians
- Healthcare CIOs must be the bridge between technical and clinical

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