

What It Takes To Be A CIO

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WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A CIO

An accurate reading of your leadership and management skills is imperative.

The current economic climate has affected the IT executive career path as significantly as any other, perhaps more so. Companies are cutting back on IT projects, and high-salaried technology positions are under scrutiny, particularly in certain industries such as financial services but across the board as well.

At the same time, the combination of business and technology skills demanded of a chief information officer, director of IT, or chief technology officer has never been more important. While cutting expenditures, companies are still looking to get the most out of the technology investments they've made. This means, along with broad technical expertise and experience, IT executives must display talents in leadership, organization and project management.

What does it take to be a CIO? And how do executive technology leaders judge themselves in terms of their skills, abilities and performance? This report will examine briefly the insights and opinions of a group of technology executives, compare those with information from other sources, and offer lessons on meeting the management challenges of the evolving IT landscape.

This report is based on an ad hoc survey of 36 CIOs, CTOs and directors of IT, conducted for the most part at the *Computerworld* Premier 100 IT Leaders Conference in March. These technology executives were asked to assess their skill levels, job performance, and other aspects of the IT executive's role. While this number of survey respondents isn't a statistically significant enough sample to extrapolate the results to the wider population of technology executives, it offers a snapshot of raw observations on high-level technology management.

WHAT IS A CIO?

As has been suggested for some time, the CIO, CTO, director of IT position is a managerial position, not a technical one. Almost 70% of respondents say they were hired for their managerial skills or a combination of technical and managerial skills, not technical skills alone.

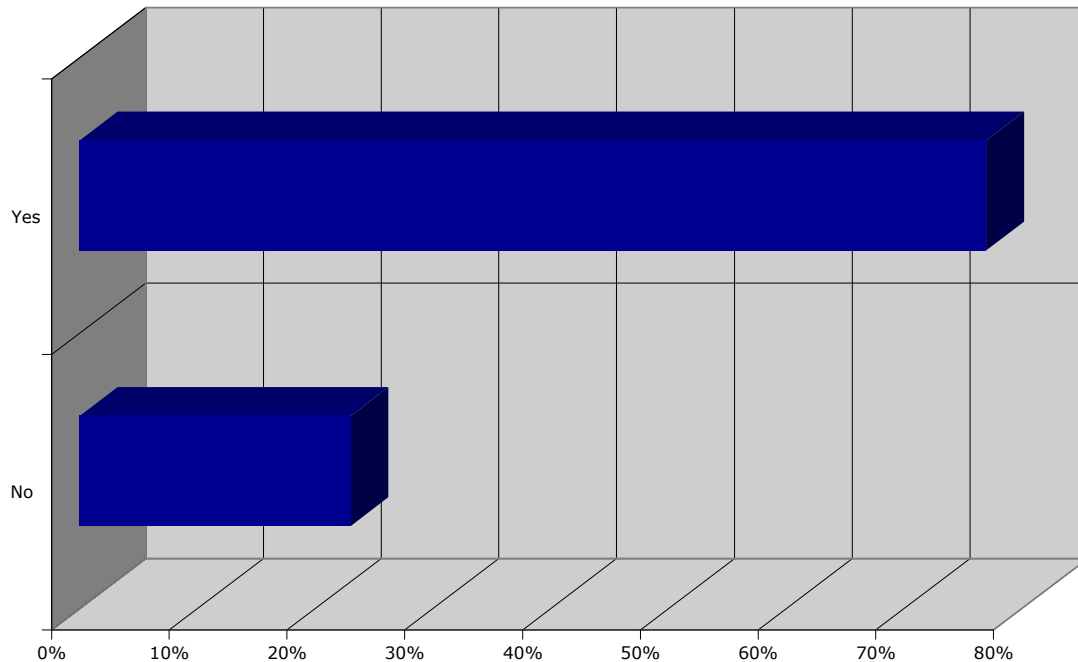


Indeed, technical training isn't necessarily an indicator of advancement into IT management. Many technology executives come from areas other than IT. The technology management ladder – programmer to administrator to IT director to CIO – is no longer the de facto route into the executive ranks, if it ever was.

At the same time, many CIOs, once established, are being asked to perform duties in their organizations outside the information technology function. Often, those additional duties relate to skills in leadership and project management, such as overseeing operations or resources.

So it's not surprising, then, that 77% of respondents believe their leadership skills are as well developed as their technical skills. The question is, how are these respondents defining for themselves what constitutes "leadership" skills, and how realistic are they in assessing them?

Do You Believe Your Leadership Skills are as Well Developed as Your Technical Skills?



Project management is one thing; successful people management is another. Technology managers are notorious for ignoring "soft skills" – interpersonal skills that can spell the difference between long-term success and failure in a management position.

By promoting communication, cooperation and team building, these soft skills often play a significant role in the successful completion of projects. They also influence how executives relate to each other and to their superiors, and how their superiors relate to them.

Ignoring the potential impact of interpersonal skills on management success, and failing to identify and develop those skills in themselves, means technology leaders risk failing in their efforts to establish a well-rounded management strategy.

CONFIDENT BUNCH

Certainly, CIOs don't lack for confidence in their ability to execute. One hundred percent of survey respondents say their organizations are satisfied with their performance.

That suggests that a large percentage of technology leaders don't aspire to the position unless they're confident they can perform at a high level. Supporting that is the fact that almost 90% of respondents say they're satisfied with their personal performance on the job.

CIOs believe they know what makes them successful. The vast majority of respondents (94%) say they've identified their key strengths. This also is not surprising. The CIO position is extremely demanding, perhaps the most demanding executive position in the corporate world today. It would be surprising if CIOs weren't confident that they have the skills to tackle such a high-pressure role.

Such self-assurance is admirable, but the potential for self deception shouldn't be ignored. According to our survey respondents, their average tenure in their current positions is five years. When asked how long they think they will be in that position, the average response is 9.2 years, and that includes respondents who expect tenures of 10, 15, even 20 years.

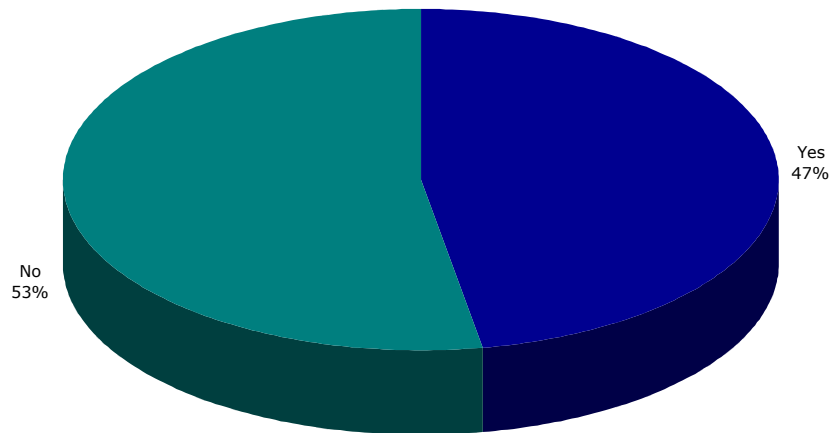
However, a recent survey by the publications *CIO* and *Human Resource Executive* pegged the average CIO tenure at about six years. It also found that one in four CIOs gets let go for poor performance. It's not for nothing that a long-standing industry joke says CIO stands for "Career Is Over."

NEED FOR INFORMATION

So it's understandable, even commendable, that the confidence these technology executives display in their abilities and accomplishments does not blind them to the need for objective information.

While not all, a significant number of CIOs and IT leaders indicate they've taken steps to provide themselves with feedback about their effectiveness and standing in their organizations. Almost half (47%) have used a 360-degree assessment tool to objectively measure their performance on the job.

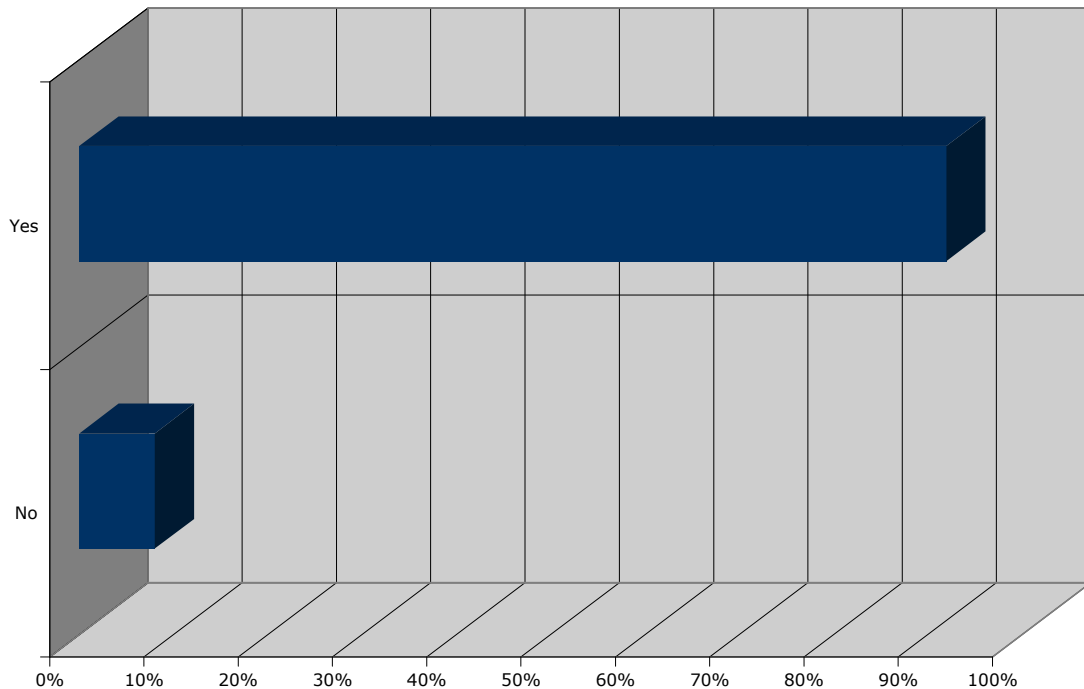
Have You Used a 360-Degree Tool to Objectively Measure Your On-The-Job Performance?



In the same way, a significant number of these CIOs attempt to ascertain objective information about the people with whom they work. Approximately 40% of respondents have used a 360-degree assessment tool to measure the performance of their direct reports.

To an even greater extent, the desire on the part of technology executives for comparative information concerning their assets and effectiveness extends out beyond the specific environments in which they work. More than 90% of respondents say they would like to know how their particular skills compare with those of their peers.

Are You Interested in Comparing Your Skills With Those of Your Peers?



Unfortunately, this is feedback that technology leaders – or potential technology leaders -- are not receiving from their employers: Only a quarter of respondents were given profile assessments when they were hired. Tellingly, almost exactly the same number of CIOs who were given initial profile assessments require those same types of assessments when they hire their direct reports.

LESSONS

What lessons can be gleaned from this brief survey for those who aspire to the position of CIO, CTO or director of IT – or at least to transition from a technical position to a management position?

First, IT professionals should be aware that technical skills are moving to least-common-denominator status, and that many, if not most, IT positions in the corporate world today involve management demands and challenges – a trend that will only accelerate as IT is absorbed into every aspect of the online business environment. This means that a strong awareness of one’s strengths and weaknesses in terms of leadership and organization is a necessity for advancing in the evolving IT landscape.

As for the highest IT executive positions, it is informative that the CIOs interviewed for this survey are well aware of the significant management skills required for the position, and confident – if perhaps overly so -- of their strengths and capabilities in that area. At the same time, they still desire ways to measure those skills for themselves and for their direct reports. They also have a keen interest in comparing their attributes with those of their peer group, which speaks to a need for objective assessment and measurement, and may reflect the transitory – and competitive -- nature of the CIO position.

It’s true that the demands of the CIO role, as with almost any executive position, force a high degree of self awareness. As evidenced from this survey, that does not necessarily rule out a desire on the part of technology executives to hone their management skills and seek more insight into their strengths and weaknesses.