7 Questions Every CEO Needs to Ask their CIO

The following questions are intended to help initiate stronger strategic dialogue between you and your CIO. (The CIO title refers to the top IT leader in an organization.) The answers are not technical, but focused on the business.

The more technical the dialogue you find yourself in, the more disconnected IT is likely to be from the business, and the more cost and risk IT presents to the business. The answers you get to these questions will be revealing, going to the heart of IT trust, focus and leadership.

1. What security issues do we have in the company?
   The point: No surprises…
   Phrasing the security question like this will get to the heart of any issues you have – big or small. Every company has issues and you need a straightforward answer – no surprises is the objective here. Data and systems security is about risk management - identifying, assessing, prioritizing and actively managing and eliminating business risk.

2. How are you ensuring that IT provides returns on IT spending?
   The point: IT efficiency and effectiveness
   This question gets to the heart of why IT organizations exist. IT must provide returns greater than the dollars invested in it. If the response is “we're rolling out Voice over IP (or some other technology or point solution), the CIO may be too technically focused and missing the point of IT.

   The answer is more along the lines of “We have a process in place to ensure that we are in continual alignment with the business…ensuring that we are working on the highest-return initiatives for the business. Internally, we continually seek to find ways to lower our costs and increase our efficiencies so that we free-up people and dollars to be invest in higher-return strategic business needs.”

3. How does IT enable business performance, growth and innovation?
   The point: Business-IT alignment is a very real and valuable pursuit…
   The answer is similar to #2, but goes deeper. IT organizations need to pursue tactical, strategic and innovative alignment with the business. Most IT organizations achieve tactical alignment, though many get stuck in the high-
cost, low-return mode of fire-fighting, becoming unresponsive to not only strategic, but also day-to-day business needs.

Business-IT alignment is ultimately about ensuring IT works on the highest-return, highest-value efforts for the business. And those efforts are almost always in support of strategic business objectives. So IT needs to continually make tactical alignment as efficient and cost-effective as possible, freeing up time and dollars to spend on high-return strategic efforts.

But a powerful thing happens when strategic alignment is done right… innovative opportunities appear almost effortlessly.

So the answer to this question is “IT enables greater business performance, growth and innovation through ongoing communication, education and collaboration with the business, ensuring tactical, strategic and innovative alignment with the business.”

4. Can you walk me through our strategic applications architecture?
The point: Ensure that IT’s current and planned applications strategy will meet current and future business needs …
Don’t worry…this isn’t a technical question. This question is about strategic planning, alignment, collaboration, business functionality and timely access to critical business data. Asked another way the question sounds like this, “The business knows where it’s headed — does IT understand and have a plan to help us get there?”

It is important for technology infrastructure (applications, networking, data, etc.) to meet current business needs, but it is also critically important that that infrastructure be ahead of the business growth curve. When infrastructure (technical or otherwise!) is behind the business growth curve, business at some point will have to slow down while the infrastructure catches up. This is costly.

Ensure that IT knows it needs to have infrastructure capacity for the business to grow into so IT doesn’t limit business growth, profitability or performance.

5. Where do you spend your time?
The point: At the CIO level, business leadership in IT is more important than technology leadership…
This question will tell you what is important to your CIO. If you hear about a technical problem or the technical aspect of a project, you need to be concerned. Your CIO should have talented resources with the technical aptitude and management skills to handle these types of issues. The strength
of a CIO can be measured by the strength of their management team, and the proven trust that he or she has in them.

Your CIO should be spending about half of his or her time interacting with business leaders, customers, vendors and partners in order to understand their needs, problems and opportunities. The other half is spent on organizational development - including IT leadership development, management development and business-IT alignment.

6. **How can we eliminate IT project delays and failures?**

   *The point: It is possible to have predictable, repeatable project successes…*

   There are only two valid answers to this question. First, increase project management discipline and project management skills. The combination of project management discipline (proven processes/best practices) and skills will enable the right business solutions to be consistently delivered on time and within budget.

   The second possibility is Agile software development (with Scrum). The Agile concept brings the end user closer to the engineering processes, helping to eliminate wasted time and effort.

   It is possible to have predictable project successes where delays and failures are nearly eliminated.

7. **What do you need from the business to be more successful?**

   *The point: Stronger relationships with business leaders builds greater trust in IT and drives tighter strategic alignment*

   The best answer is more time with senior business leaders for strategic business discussions. This will help ensure that IT has the right strategic focus.

   But if those conversations focus more on technology than business, it’s not surprising that business leaders are reluctant to meet with IT or include the CIO in executive or strategy meetings. Lack of strong relationships equals lack of a true partnership…which leads to lack of trust in IT.

   When trust is diminished, so is IT’s value to the business.

   You might also get the answer “more funding”. This could be a legitimate answer if IT is in fact under-funded for the demands placed on it. On the other hand, you certainly don’t want to pump more money into an already black hole. Talk this through and either come to a common understanding or
at least set metrics for current spending and expected returns, working toward higher funding as returns improve.

Final thoughts
Whether you get to all of these questions in a single sitting or several, take the time to dig deep into your CIO’s answers, but more importantly, their thinking. IT can be a significant contributor to business success, but it can also be a significant detractor.

Remember that leading IT isn’t about understanding or managing technology…it’s about delivering business value and results. Make sure this is your CIO’s primary objective.

And in today’s competitive environment, ensuring that IT delivers the right business results requires business leadership within IT and IT leadership within the business.

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About the company:
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