

MY TEN YEARS AS CIO

By Wang Quangeng

CIO EFFECTIVENESS = GOOD ATTITUDES + COMPREHENSIVE SKILLS + RIGHT TIMING, WHERE NONE OF THESE THREE CHARACTERISTICS ARE DISPENSABLE.



Five years ago, out of my ignorance of what a CIO should do, I focused on analyzing the existing problems in corporate management, observing the development trends and characteristics of competition in the industry, and then detecting the bottleneck in the company's current and future development. I have devoted more than 60% of my energy to analysis and research of these problems and didn't hesitate to implement the solutions once a clear idea came forward. Of course, my thinking has been mainly directed by IT-based solutions. Reflecting on this information focused practice that I have been undertaking for the last ten years, I find that this may be what a CIO does and should do.

SKILLS ARE THE BASIS

In my opinion, a CIO's utmost mission is to continuously promote change within the business, innovate its business model, enhance the company's core competencies, and build its core competitiveness through IT innovations. Such a mission requires the following skills of a qualified CIO.

CAPABILITY IN STRATEGIC PLANNING: Information can fully display its real value only when IT is combined with corporate strategies. If the design and implementation of information utilization in a company does not take this into account in its strategies, if its CIO undertakes information management on the sole basis of technology, commits most of their time to finding solutions for the company's existing problems, and is always compelled to address only arising problems, then the company will end up with two separate IT systems and business concentrations taking shape inside the company. These two may be mutually supportive in a superficial way, but are probably unrelated and may even be destructive to each other.

Therefore, a CIO is required to have a full understanding of the corporate

strategies. Currently, many domestic companies have no definite strategic systems at all. Under such circumstances, a CIO has to research the corporate strategies by themselves, which is, of course, very difficult and counts as the toughest job among their tasks. Personally, I like researching corporate strategies and have been responsible for making the annual budget and strategic plans for my company for four years. Such experience is greatly helpful for my job of setting up information systems.

CAPABILITY TO UNDERSTAND THE BUSINESS OF THE INDUSTRY: In traditional corporate operations, IT itself doesn't produce any profits. Its value lies in the functions of solving management problems and supporting the specific businesses which directly generate profits. As a result, if a CIO knows nothing about the industry and the business of the company, then their IT knowledge can neither solve problems nor help to increase profits.

Fortunately, I have engaged our company in strategic planning, market analysis, and management of the sales organization. Moreover, I have been running logistics delivery for about ten years and am now managing the company's production and sourcing. All these experiences give me a comprehensive knowledge of the industry and all the businesses of our company. The ERP system of our company has been developed internally. In its developmental phase, I worked as the general designer of management principles, management framework, and business process. By no means could I have become such a qualified designer without the professional background I acquired over the years. It is no secret that for all CIOs what are integrated into the ERP system are actually the corporate management principles, management framework, business process, and managerial experience of the company. These are where the core value of the information system will be found.

CAPABILITY TO COMMUNICATE: It is not an

exaggeration to say that all of a CIO's tasks need be accomplished through communication: they need to communicate with managers at all levels, for example, upper management and the Board of Directors, to secure investment, they need to communicate with all business departments to gain their support and to ensure smooth implementation and promotion of the IT system, they need to communicate with the professionals within the IT Department to organize project development and services, and finally, they need to negotiate and communicate with external suppliers when purchasing software, hardware, and IT services. Given the omnipresence of communication in a CIO's work, their communication ability determines their overall effectiveness in a company.

Communication is a science, a political skill, and more importantly, an art. It is a science, for it requires knowledge. It is a political skill, for success requires certain techniques and demands a political mind. It is an art, for it involves the pursuit of an ideal.

In my opinion, there is no so-called 'orthodox' way or mode of communication. It has to be done with the right timing, in the right situation, and with the right people. Generally speaking, it would be ideal if all IT projects could secure support from upper management, obtain the leadership of a team of senior executives, get all staff constructively involved, and be accompanied by dynamic change. It would be great if all of the above were ready beforehand. However, such a company is scarcely found. Should a CIO refrain from implementing a system until everything is prepared? To some CIOs, the answer is yes. They believe that no implementation of the information system means waiting for the last day, while implementation of the information system means heading for the last day. As for me, I have adopted guerilla tactics in communication, a strategy completely contradicting the 'orthodox' way and successfully realized transformation to effective information utilization.

CAPABILITY TO ADVANCE CHANGE:

When information strategy is aligned with corporate strategies, implementation is neither a purely technical task nor a managing job within the IT Department, but a systematic project involving business changes throughout the company. These changes will involve readjusting the interests of all parties concerned and also transforming people's mindset. Pushing change is the responsibility of the leaders as well as of all the staff. It would be extremely difficult for a CIO to influence or push forward the changes without help. However, information implementation can only be instilled in the soul of a company with real business change; otherwise, it will only be superficial.

CAPABILITY TO UNDERSTAND IT TECHNOLOGY: The invention of the steam engine started the industrial civilization, while the emergence of IT brings human beings into the information society. Therefore, during the process of pushing forward information systems, a CIO should never underestimate or ignore the power of technologies, since a strong business capability does not mean everything to them. At present, without a sound technical framework, the value of a good business model and a vanguard management framework can hardly be fully displayed. In this light, without a deep understanding of IT technology you cannot be counted as a qualified CIO.

I have no IT-related background, but I was once addicted to computers and acquired a great deal of IT technology knowledge by myself. At the same time, with my experience in the IT field for about 10 years, I have obtained sufficient knowledge about all aspects of IT technology.

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

I often hear that the success rate of ERP implementation in China is very low and was even zero several years ago. In my opinion, an important reason for this is that China has a great shortage of CIOs with the aforementioned skills. However, given China's large size, there should be countless CIOs who have these skills. Therefore, a question comes to mind, is it true that a CIO is bound to succeed in pushing forward information change as long as they have all the skills listed above?

In fact, skills only indicate the potential of a CIO to succeed in implementing information systems. However, the extent of their success will be determined by their attitude. A good attitude lays the foundation for success.

Determination: Information management is a revolution taking place inside the company. No change or innovation can be achieved in a short time period without some degree of difficulty. Moreover, many domestic

companies are not yet ready for implementing information management. For this reason, the IT revolution can never be accomplished with IT technology alone. It has to rely on the CIO's determination, confidence, and perseverance.

This is what I've learned from my first-hand experience. During the past 10 years of the information management process, I have many times been pushed to the brink of giving up. However, I managed to overcome it. What has been sustaining me until today is my will power rather than excellent pay and an attractive working environment.

Motivation: No one will keep asking or forcing you to do a job. Even if there was someone like that, it would be of no use to you at all since no one other than yourself can manage to keep motivated. As for the incentives from the outside, such as excellent pay and good environment, their functions are very limited and short-lived. Therefore, without enough motivation from within, you can never achieve anything.

Motivation requires that a CIO has a vision for their work. People are always inspired by their beautiful wishes and longing to go ahead. A CIO should never wait passively or blame others for failure. Only by taking initiatives can they possibly change the situation.

Methodology: A good methodology is indispensable for the success of any work. To find the best way of doing things, a CIO should know themselves thoroughly, always keeping a clear understanding of 'who I am'. It is of great importance to be adaptable to various circumstances. Keep telling yourself that success and failure are routine, praise and criticism come hand in hand; and achievements and obstacles always follow each other. By managing and adjusting emotions and behaviors, a CIO will not stumble during the process of information management implementation.

In addition, a CIO should learn to understand other people and the surroundings. Without sufficient understanding of other people, you cannot communicate effectively with them. How can you turn your ideas into reality in the absence of effective communication with others? A CIO should effectively influence their superiors, peers, subordinates, and partners so as to influence, promote, and push forward change.

Curiosity: IT professionals are usually not as interested in business as they are in technology. Their single-mindedness results from the concentration on IT technology. However, successful information systems require both professionalism and a CIO with a

business-orientated mind. Therefore, only when they become interested and curious of matters outside of technology, can a CIO acquire business expertise and comprehensive knowledge.

Perspective: What is the aim for a CIO to implement information systems change? Is it for the success of your career or for the success of the company? How do CIOs evaluate themselves when the information system implementation comes out as a failure or a success? How can a CIO curb their complacency when they realize their increasing significance in a company where IT is becoming more and more indispensable for running the business?

In fact, both the failure and success of a company's information systems can bring risks. Therefore, a CIO's perspective counts a great deal. It has been proven that a CIO who sees things in perspective can ensure sustained success. Otherwise, success is only transient. I think that proper values and beliefs are prerequisites for having a good perspective.

Once the company's management understands the skills and attitudes a qualified CIO is expected to have and sees more clearly the crucial role a qualified CIO may play in the company's information system implementation, they will probably ask where they can get such a CIO.

Indeed, society is requiring more and more competencies from their CIOs. They are expected to have an understanding of strategy, business, technology, and, more importantly, soft skills that facilitate communication and change. Such a CIO is an expert in almost all aspects. But how on earth is such a qualified CIO produced? Without rich experiences and plenty of opportunities, you can never develop the skills and attitudes listed above. The reason is as simple as this; the comprehensive competencies regarding strategy, business, and communication have to be acquired from practice. There is no other way of training a competent CIO. Given plenty of opportunities for practice and advancement, a qualified CIO can be produced. As for me, the right timing offered me the opportunities that I needed.

Now looking back and thinking about my past 10 years as a CIO, I acknowledge that, probably, it was proper timing that eventually led to my success. In whole, what determines a CIO's effectiveness? In my opinion, a CIO's effectiveness = good attitudes + comprehensive skills + right timing, where none of these three characteristics are dispensable. **THELINK**

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