

# Plan To Keep Your CIO

CIOs are in demand, and they've got a demanding job. Here's how to keep yours on staff.

by Carolyn Heinze



## TOP-PERFORMING CIOs ARE UP FOR A CHALLENGE,

and Dan Roberts, CEO at Ouellette & Associates Consulting and co-author (with Brian Watson) of *Confessions of a Successful CIO: How the Best CIOs Tackle Their Toughest Business Challenges*, notes that one reason CIOs leave companies is because organizations simply want them to "keep the lights on" or conduct business as usual.

"Many times CEOs are hiring a new CIO with the stated goal of desiring a transformational leader. They want some one to come in and transform the culture, transform the talent, and position IT to be a game changer in the business," said Roberts. However, a few months into the job, some CIOs discover that what the organization sold them and what it is actually willing to support doesn't match up, and they start to think about leaving.

There are also those firms that delegate innovative projects to others instead of involving the CIO, noted **Dora Vell**, managing partner at **Vell Executive Search**. "[For example,] a retailer wants to create an e-commerce platform and gives that initiative to a 'new age' executive [who] doesn't report to the CIO," she illustrated. "The CIO, stuck with the old systems, goes looking for better pastures"

Martha Heller, founder of Heller Search Associates and author of *Be the Business: CIOs in the New Era of IT and The CIO Paradox: Battling the Contradictions of IT Leadership*, notes that many CIOs are eager to play a key role in positioning their organizations to win against new sources of competition. "The reason CIOs are leaving now is the executive

[leadership] of the company does not truly understand the amount of investment and change that it's going to take to thrive in a digital marketplace, essentially," she explained, adding that doing business as usual is not what is going to take today's organizations into the future.

This means that CEOs wield great influence when it comes to CIO retention. Not only should they be communicating the importance of IT transformation to leaders and managers throughout the organization, but also they should be interacting with the CIO on a regular basis.

"The only time a CIO should report to a CFO or a COO is if you really do view the role as operational," Heller said. "If you see the role as strategic, then that role has got to report to the CEO." And, she added, that CEO needs to support transformation: "If my business partners aren't driving the same IT agenda that I'm driving [as a CIO], I lose. [You need to] ensure that the IT strategy is part of the business strategy so you don't have this 'us and them' situation going on."

As a direct report to the CEO, Roberts noted that CIOs need to demonstrate leadership. "They should be expected to show up as a business leader first who happens to bring technology savvy to the strategy discussion," he said. They should also be meeting with customers so that they can gain a deeper understanding of the business and the client experience.

One of the issues with retaining CIOs is that while they may have been hired to conduct a challenging transformation, once the project is complete, the question becomes "what's next?" If it's more of the same, the CIO may seek more interesting opportunities elsewhere.

"Once CIOs have successfully transformed IT, give them another strategic function to lead where they can leverage their secret sauce to help the company disrupt their industry," Roberts advised.

*Dora Vell is the CEO of Vell Executive Search, a premier retained technology executive search firm in Boston. Ms. Vell is an internationally recognized expert in recruiting technology executives including: CEOs, COOs, CTOs, CMOs, CROs, board members and others. She works with VC-backed, PE-backed private companies and public companies. She can be reached at [dora@vell.com](mailto:dora@vell.com).*