



Quality *conversations*
with the **CIO**



The power of stories

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Introduction

Quality conversations with the CIO: the power of stories

“To survive, you must tell stories,” novelist Umberto Eco is noted for saying.

Being a board-level CIO is unique. CIOs, today, need to be storytellers, advising and evangelising the impact data and technology can have on the organisation. But, the CIO is not a board member just to excite, and interest; data and technology are so intrinsic to the operation of the business, delivery of customer service, future direction and regulatory compliance, that the CIO has to be a business professional, sharing the responsibility for each of these and helping their peers achieve outcomes.

Enterprise executive boards are charged with steering the business through the day-to-day and, at the same time, to chart a new course for the organisation. Technology has become the dominant factor that will challenge and provide the opportunities that the executive board must explore. As a result, CIOs are spending more time operating at the board.

Having the right conversations with the board is, therefore, a key attribute to being a successful CIO and successful board member. In this eBook, leading board-level CIOs share their insights into how they ensure board-level conversations lead to the right results, and

60%

of CEOs believe there will be
a post-pandemic economic boom

Source: Gartner

how data is playing a role in both board-level debates, but also the transformation of organisations and their marketplaces.

Technology was already reshaping organisations, and a recent survey of CEOs by analyst house Gartner found that 60% believe an economic boom will follow the pandemic, and those same CEOs see technology as a major theme in the revival of economic activity ([Source: Gartner](#)). In today's data-led and cloud computing enabled economy, that revival will not be reserved solely for the established players in any market. Data and cloud computing will enable startup and scale-up businesses to challenge the market. As a result, CIOs and CTOs at the board



need to use data to tell a compelling story about how the business is operating, how the business could operate and how those minnows are operating using data and technology, and will potentially disrupt your organisation. It is for this reason that leading CIOs and CTOs believe a technology leader should be on the board.

“Every decision at the board level involves an element of technology or the implications of technology, so there is a real requirement to understand that digital is an accelerator, and then to articulate the risk,” says Richard Williams, CIO with the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

“As the Chief Technology Storyteller, the CIO must therefore have a place at the table,” Williams says.

Dirk Ramhorst, CIO and CDO for Wacker Chemie AG, a major polymers manufacturer in Germany, reveals that creating lighthouse projects and then storytelling about these to the board demonstrates the potential for data and technology to make a difference to the Munich headquartered business. “We pay a lot of attention to showcasing what we have achieved,” he says.

“We have a very unique position as technologists, as many people in the organisation don’t understand what we do, so we have a duty to articulate that in a way that they understand,” Williams adds of showcasing and explaining data and technology at a board level. “At the same time, we see and touch every part of the organisation, and that is one of the privileges of being a CIO, so we have to tell stories in a way that relates to the business strategy.” In retail Anna Barsby, CIO with supermarket chain Asda in the UK, says board-level CIOs must have a

strong understanding of the business strategy and always be focused on how technology is an enabler to the business and be able to easily point to examples.

Storytelling in the boardroom is about more than inspiring; there is a very practical element too: “These are very busy people, with a lot to get through, so tell a story and make it short and snappy,” says Darren Sharp, Group Head of IT at Tokio Marine Kiln, a global provider of specialist insurance services.

With technology moving to a position of business enabler and disruptor, executive boards are going to need good stories backed up by the insights their data provides.

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Data driven board

Data driven board

Board level debate and conversation has to be more than just a compelling narrative, data has become a critical life force in organisations. As a result, CIOs are spending their board-level time helping the leadership discover insight, consider new ways of using enterprise data, analysing the business opportunities the insight demonstrates and tackling the challenges many organisations have in managing their data effectively.

Business advisory group McKinsey says it is vital for organisations to effectively identify, capture and store data, and then to complement this with analytics and domain knowledge in order to gain insights. At Wacker Chemie AG, CIO Ramhorst has embarked on educating the entire organisation on the value of data in order to gain those insights.

80%

of data-led businesses consider data
a critical advantage during the pandemic

[Source: YouGov](#)

Understanding the customer and operational efficiency were highlighted as main priorities for CIOs in the 2020 Harvey Nash KPMG CIO Survey, one of the largest studies of CIOs. “Times when the organisation cannot find the data to justify a decision, those are not a comfortable place for the business,” says Dan Peacock, CIO with AIG, UK and Global Speciality, the global insurance organisation.

“Digital leaders are committed to managing data as a critical asset, one of the strategic crown jewels of the organisation,” the Harvey Nash KPMG CIO Survey 2020 says of the rising importance of data as a business opportunity. The survey says there are “clearly established data accountabilities across the C-suite. They also understand that data must be available to anyone within the context of their role”.



EBRD CIO Richard Williams suggests that: “The core of an organisation’s data is the data that it has been using for some time,” adding that if organisations are to digitally transform, then they will need to move away from using spreadsheets and move towards visual analytics formats: “based on reliable sources, then augment that to give it richness so that it tells some stories.” A number of CIOs add that it is also important to be careful about losing valuable data as part of a modernisation programme, whilst Anna Barsby at retailer Asda reminds peers that data is still a new, and possibly scary, proposition to some parts of the organisation.

Wealthy, but poor

CIOs in all vertical markets report that one of the greatest challenges they and their teams face is collating the myriad data sources that arise in the modern enterprise so that the board can discuss its strategies, secure in the knowledge that it is working from a single source of the truth.

International technology publishers O’Reilly found in a 2020 study that over 60 of its respondents - of which 20% were Vice Presidents and Directors - suffered from “ too many data sources and inconsistent data.” ([Source: Oreilly](#)).

“One of the challenges is that there are so many versions of the truth in a business,” Ramhorst says. “Insurance organisations have huge amounts of data and legacy technology, and when that data is hard to get to or is of varying ages, bringing that together is a challenge,” says Peacock at AIG. Former insurance CIO and now banking CIO Richard Williams say this is vital for the board. “They want the data to triangulate and inform decisions...and they are legally responsible for these decisions.”

“You cannot blame your colleagues for their scepticism towards internal data as it is often in such a mess, and there are hundreds of different reports,” says Anna Barsby, which Darren Sharp agrees with: “A lot of organisational data has built up over time...and a lot of organisations have not really invested as they have had so much to do, such as GDPR and Brexit.” Both business technology leaders add that it is important to work with the organisation to consolidate the number of reports, as too often multiple reports deliver the same information.

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Anna Barsby, CIO, Asda



Business priorities



Business priorities

Following the banking crisis of 2008, CIOs and technology departments gained a new appreciation at the board level. Technology was pivotal in necessary cost saving projects that would see organisations through the recession that followed. A decade of technology-led disruption followed as mobile computing, and cloud computing empowered startups and forward-thinking businesses, but the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic demonstrated that many organisations need to do more with their data and technology. In a post-pandemic economy, there is expected to be further demand on CIOs by their board peers and customers for data-led technology strategies.

In financial services, CIOs report a demand for new products and services to be developed. Or the board wants an insight into what technology-led challengers they should be watching for, and considering acquiring. The digitisation of most vertical markets is leading to CIOs and CTOs becoming key commercial assets, with CIOs in financial services, retail and logistics stating that they take part in partnering and sales proposal opportunities for their organisations.

This means that the technology team is transforming; Ramhorst says that as data-led factory production takes off, IT is moving from a commodity to a business enabler, which means the team has to work in new ways and have a high level of agility. “I am CIO and CDO, which is about bringing in new technology to our products,” the Munich based CIO says. “We are a very innovative business, and we are the market leader by volume, but also the quality of our innovation, this means we have to react to what is happening in the outside world,” he says. Williams at European bank EBRD similarly sees wider digital macro-economic trends driving the need for data-led innovation and board engagement. “Many of the economies we are operating in are jumping from being technically behind economies to bang up to date and in doing so, bypassing where many evolved economies are.” Data and digitally savvy customers are, unsurprisingly, driving demand on retail CIOs like Anna Barsby: “The rapidity of what we have to provide is unprecedented,” she says.

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Anna Barsby, CIO, Asda



76%

of data-led companies will continue / increase spending on data skills training and development in the near future

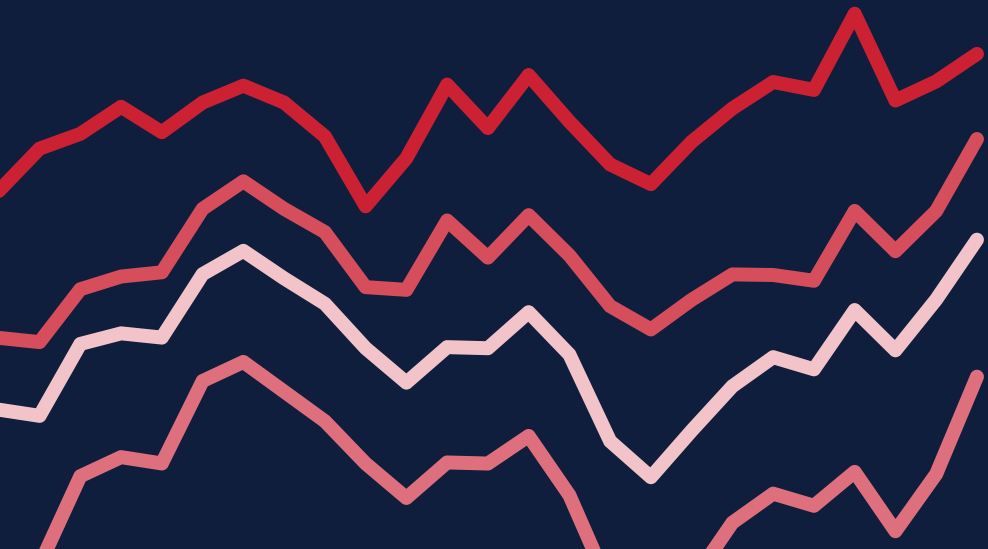
[Source: YouGov](#)

“The brokers are being very demanding on how quickly we can turn things around and the data we can provide them,” Darren Sharp at Tokio Marine insurance says of how internal customers have developed from being paper-based to demanding the very latest forms of insight, such as interactive analytics.

No matter the vertical market, the demand both internally and externally for data-led change is increasing and demands innovation.

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Board demands

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Board demands

The monthly board meeting has a rarefied aura about it, but in truth, it can be a gruelling experience with a significant workload to be achieved by its members. As a result, it is important for CIOs to empathise with the board and tailor the storytelling to the audience, which means understanding the language that will get the story across. Williams says it is important that the board is steered to what they should be looking at, and any areas of concern. “You need to know their knowledge of technology... and work out what is the currency that they will understand. There is no point talking technology to bankers. You must play a straight bat, and you have an obligation to tell them when they are at risk of cyber. If you are known as someone who is a bit fast and loose with their words, then you damage that side,” he says of knowing the tone to take at all times. Ramhorst backs up Williams on the need to get the language right: “Understand boards and their way of thinking and use the words they understand, so they see and understand the data. But, it will be different for the CFO or the COO.”

Ramhorst adds that this is as important outside of the boardroom as well, so that he can communicate with the internal customers of the business. “I use pictures to explain where we are,” Sharp in the insurance sector says of using storytelling methods to get the conversation across accurately, but in respect of the time constraints. As the saying goes - a picture is worth a thousand words.

This can be particularly important when tackling complexity. Williams says the ubiquity and quality of a lot of technology give the impression to board members that solutions are easy, the truth is somewhat different and it is the role of the CIO in those board-level discussions to describe - perhaps in pictures - just how complex the

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Dirk Ramhorst, CIO, Wacker Chemie AG





“You need to know board members' knowledge of technology... and work out what is the currency that they will understand.”

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environment or project is. Peacock at AIG reminds peers that the day job of a technologist is often consumed with the ‘nitty gritty’, but the board don’t want to delve into that, it is therefore vital, he says, that conversations are always brought back to the strategic imperative, both of the business and the technology strategy that forms part of the overriding business direction.

CIOs report that being on the board is not only vital in terms of ensuring the organisation understands and is engaged with data and technology, but also for the CIO to be part of the wider business discussion and decision making. Business technology leaders state that board-level discussions are also an important opportunity to set or recalibrate priorities, which then will change prioritisation when they return to their departments.



How to be an effective board member

How to be an effective board member


For over a decade, there has been a debate as to whether the CIO should be at the board and in the 2020s, the debate shows little sign of abating. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Harvey Nash KPMG CIO Survey finds six in ten CIOs say they feel more influential in their organisations as a result of the global lockdown. The ability for technology teams to keep businesses operating from their employees' kitchens, spare rooms and home offices has benefitted the community as a whole. But the report found that the number of CIOs on boards has, in fact, declined to 61% compared to 71% in 2017. Despite the decline, the two organisations believe that influence is more important, and the pandemic will have given CIOs just that. A number of CIOs state that the time commitment of being a board member can be detrimental to the ability to deliver data and digital transformation, and therefore influence is more useful.

Whether invited to a board meeting to influence or as a paid-up member, experienced board operating CIOs state that there are a number of key attributes that must be exhibited. CIOs from financial services and retail both state how important listening is and keeping conversations targeted. That targeting is aimed both at the wider board, but as Barsby of Asda says it can also be towards the board

members that really understand what data and technology can do for the business, and will therefore be influential in helping other members support new data and technology initiatives.

It is therefore important to prepare for the board meeting, but don't go overboard. "I have seen presentations on a piece of A3 paper, and you still needed to use a microscope to look at the numbers," says Sharp. "You want to look at what those numbers are telling you, as it is the insight rather than the data that is important, so be clear, concise and relevant." For example, if a CIO is informing the board of helpdesk

61%
of CIOs are board members



Source: Harvey Nash KPMG CIO Survey 2020

usage, a number neither tells them that demand on the helpdesk is rising or decreasing. “Keep it simple, there is a lot to get through and a lot of detail in a board meeting, but also be memorable; in my last board meeting, I used just two slides.”

“I rehearse with my team and talk about the outcome we want from the board meeting. I then talk to the chair about what they want from the board meeting,” adds Williams. “Be sharp and on-point, the board does not have a lot of spare time, and you have to show results,” adds Ramhorst.

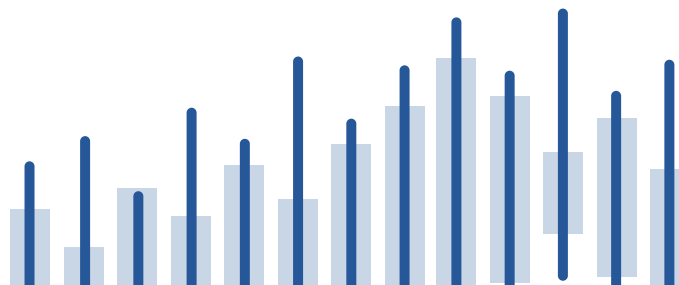
“The key thing is to be seen as the person who comes with candour, a degree of empathy and recognise that not everyone understands technology,” says Williams. If there are members of the board that avoid the topic of technology, the European banking CIO says: “It is always powerful to say ‘you are using this technology anyway, let’s try and use it in a more strategic way’”

The boardroom is meant to be challenging; as has already been portrayed in this eBook, there are legal responsibilities to being a board member. However, it is also a meeting of peers. “We are all humans, you do need time to go off the agenda for a really deep conversation about something, and the coffee break chats can be as important as the meeting,” says Barsby. Williams agrees: “Enjoy it; they are a bunch of human beings that are trying to do their best. You are all on the same team, and it is a great place to be.”

“Good leadership has diversity of thinking and background, and you get that from people with different day jobs and emphasis.”

Anna Barsby, CIO, Asda

The greatest benefit CIOs report from board-level involvement is the diversity of thought and insight that comes with the role. “It is so interesting to have those wider conversations,” says Barsby at Asda. Adding that this then improves the role of the CIO for the business so that they see the breadth of challenges the organisation faces, and as an enabler, they are able to contribute to dealing with these. “Where boards get the most out of their CIOs is when they are asking them to go deep on their expertise with that view across the business,” she says.



All agree that deeper business access and insight drives the ability to horizon scan where technology can make a difference, and to then become that storyteller of the possibilities. The board can also be where the CIO puts forward a challenge the business faces to get it aired and dealt with. “As a leader, you have to think about the root cause and the knock-on impact of a problem,” Peacock at AIG says. Barsby adds that board members from commercial, supply chain and finance will bring completely different views and directions to the table. “Good leadership has diversity of thinking and background, and you get that from people with different day jobs and emphasis,” she says.

Talking shop

The board meeting has to make major decisions and with full agreement. That agreement is reached by discussion and consensus. Too much discussion, though, and decisions are not reached. It is, therefore, vital that CIOs as board members ensure their conversations are meaningful and enable decisive action. Williams says he learned: “If the relationship becomes more important than the outcome, then that organisation is a political body.” Peacock at AIG advises: “Talking about issues without saying ‘what are we going to do about this’ is when as a leader you have to cut through.”



Final thoughts

In a world where everyone has had to be kept apart, technology has ensured that communication was possible. But being able to converse and making sure the conversation is insightful, fruitful and leads to an outcome is a skill that successful CIOs have and will continue to require. As the business technology leaders that have shared their insight for this eBook have revealed, having the data and insight to hand to ensure the conversation is well informed is not easy for CIOs or many at the board table, but if the right conversation is to take place, then data must be released from silos, given democratic agency and as a result, insight will follow.





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