

# THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE CIO IN THE AGE OF AI

Thought Leadership



Gone are the days when Chief Information Officers (CIO) were solely responsible for maintaining IT infrastructure and ensuring systems ran smoothly. With the explosive growth of artificial intelligence and cloud technology, the CIO role is experiencing a profound transformation. Now, they are at the forefront of innovation, tasked with using technology to unlock new sources of value and drive strategic growth. This shift has placed CIOs in a unique position where to remain competitive, they must combine technology with a deep understanding of business outcomes.

This transformation is not just about adopting new technology; it's about aligning IT strategy with broader business objectives to create value. In this context, the CIO's role is becoming more multifaceted, evolving through five key priorities. These priorities represent the CIO's journey from a focus on foundational IT responsibilities to a broader, more strategic leadership role that integrates technology with every facet of business operations.

## 1. From Cost Center to Value Driver: Elevating IT to Drive Business Growth

One of the most profound shifts is the transition from viewing IT as a cost center to positioning it as a strategic value driver. CIOs today are not just "keeping the lights on"—they're driving innovation and uncovering new business opportunities. One CIO from a global real estate firm told us, "We're not just managing buildings; we're delivering value to our customers in real, measurable ways." By using AI to predict maintenance needs, his team has minimized disruptions and created a new revenue stream through AI-powered services for external clients.

This change requires CIOs to align closely with their organization's strategic goals, transforming technology into a growth engine. Instead of focusing solely on operational efficiency, today's CIOs are helping their companies achieve tangible business outcomes—through better customer experiences, enabling new products, or improving processes.

## 2. From Technology Expert to Business Strategist: The Rise of the Bilingual CIO

As data becomes an increasingly critical asset for modern organizations, CIOs are becoming the stewards of data, making it accessible, usable, and valuable across the entire business. A CIO from a major consumer goods company shared how he led a project to consolidate data from various silos into a centralized data lake. As a result, his organization uncovered hidden insights, enabling teams to better understand consumer behavior and personalize marketing campaigns across multiple brands.

Yet, this transformation required a significant cultural shift. As one CIO explained, "We had to upskill our workforce to ensure everyone was equipped to use and interpret the data." By investing in data literacy programs, he built a data-driven culture where employees across the organization became adept at using data to inform their decisions.

Today's CIOs are becoming bilingual in the languages of technology and business, understanding not only the technical requirements of projects but also their broader business implications.

### 3. From Control to Enablement: Driving Organizational Change and Building a Data-Driven Culture

For CIOs, managing technology is only one part of the equation; they must also address the human side of digital transformation. In many organizations, the success of AI and digital initiatives hinges on employees' willingness to adopt and embrace new ways of working. A CIO from a leading healthcare organization described how his team introduced an AI-powered diagnostic tool that had the potential to improve patient care. However, gaining buy-in from clinical staff was a major challenge.

Recognizing the importance of a human-centered approach, the CIO organized workshops and AI immersion sessions to help doctors and nurses understand the technology and address their concerns about job security and data privacy. He explained, "We couldn't just force the technology on people. It was essential to create champions within the organization." This highlights the CIO's role in creating a culture of digital fluency, where employees feel empowered to embrace AI.

### 4. From Siloed Operator to Cross-Functional Collaborator: Technology as a Team Sport

Amid the boom of AI, CIOs must work across functions and embed IT into every aspect of the business. One CIO from a financial services firm took a bold step by embedding IT team members directly within other departments. This approach facilitated real-time collaboration between IT and functions like marketing, finance, and operations, ensuring that technology solutions were tailored to the specific needs of each area.

The results? Faster implementation times, more innovative solutions, and significantly less resistance to change. By integrating IT into the heart of business operations, this CIO showed himself as a true partner in transformation. "We're breaking down the walls between IT and the business," he stated, underlining the need for cross-functional collaboration to fully realize the potential of AI.

### 5. From Risk-Averse to Innovation Catalyst: Balancing Innovation with Security

The CIO of a multinational pharmaceutical company shared the complex challenge of balancing innovation with cybersecurity and compliance. "With AI and cloud, we have the power to analyze and act on data like never before," he explained. "But that power comes with a tremendous responsibility to protect our patients' data."

To address this, his team developed a robust cybersecurity framework that included regular security audits, multi-factor authentication, and comprehensive employee training. The modern CIO must blend a commitment to security with a willingness to explore AI's potential. As innovation catalysts, they are pushing boundaries but also ensuring that risks are managed. As he put it, "Cybersecurity is an ongoing journey, not a destination."

## Key Takeaways

- The role of the CIO is evolving—from overseeing IT infrastructure to spearheading business growth and innovation.
- Understanding five key priorities is essential for CIOs to thrive in the age of AI, ensuring IT strategies align with broader business goals.
- Real-world success stories and practical tips show how CIOs can tackle the challenges of digital transformation with confidence.

## The Value of a Strategic Partner: Navigating Transformation with Korn Ferry

As the CIO role expands, the journey to fully maximize AI's capabilities, the cloud, and digital transformation is a complex one. Today's CIOs are not just technical leaders—they're strategic business leaders, data stewards, and cultural architects. A partner like Korn Ferry, with its deep expertise in human capital and organizational strategy, is invaluable in helping CIOs navigate the transformation of expectations and the CIO role.

We bring a people-centered approach, understanding that AI implementation is fundamentally about aligning people, culture, and strategy with technology. In addition to our broad portfolio of human capital solutions, here are four specific offerings that support CIOs in these transformational roles:

1. **Innovation Accelerator:** A set of offerings that helps organizations create a culture of innovation and creativity, empowering leaders and teams to identify, cultivate, and operationalize bold ideas. Through a structured, hands-on approach, we guide organizations from ideation to commercialization, embedding methods that encourage curiosity, inclusivity, and adaptability across the workforce.
2. **Comprehensive Change Management:** AI and digital transformation require cultural adaptation. Korn Ferry's Movement Making Change Management Approach supports CIOs in assessing organizational readiness, identifying resistance points, and developing communication strategies that bring everyone along on the journey by building momentum and organizational movements. These programs equip employees with the skills they need to thrive in a data-driven, AI-powered workplace, ensuring smoother adoption and a more resilient workforce.
3. **Top Team Immersions:** For a successful AI transformation, alignment among the executive team is crucial. Korn Ferry's Top Team Immersions bring executive teams together to understand AI's potential, identify areas for value creation, and establish a shared roadmap. These sessions build excitement and momentum across leadership, fostering a unified approach to digital transformation.

4. **Technology & Digital Officer Recruitment:** Korn Ferry partners with organizations at all stages of development to help them recruit top Technology and Digital talent, including CIO/CTOs and senior executives across Information Technology, Data & Analytics, Artificial Intelligence, Product, Cyber Security, and Engineering

With the right partner, CIOs can navigate the complexities of digital transformation with confidence, knowing they have the support needed to bring their vision to life. Korn Ferry's expertise in aligning people, culture, and technology ensures that AI initiatives are not only implemented but transformative. Together, we're helping today's CIOs build the organizations of the future—adaptive, resilient, and ready to harness the power of AI.

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### About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organizational structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.