49 Interview questions that any prospective CIO should be prepared to answer

Whether you are choosing your successor or planning your own next move, discussing examples of managing business change will be critical to a successful interview process.

By Tina Nunno

Executives who are hiring a CIO have limited opportunities to assess candidates to find the best fit for their organisation. The interview is a critical step in understanding the capabilities of each CIO candidate and in assessing their individual strengths.

The following sets include questions intended to help hiring executives assess the capabilities of CIO candidates in the critical categories of leadership, strategy and planning, technical expertise, financial management, and operational excellence. Use them as a starting point to plan your interview process.

1) Leadership

Leadership is about understanding how to move people and the business forward. The most effective CIOs view themselves as business leaders first and IT leaders second. These questions focus on helping the interviewer assess a candidate’s leadership views, accomplishments, and likelihood of leadership success from then onward. Interviewers should focus on the candidate’s ability to communicate in business terms, articulate measurable business outcomes, motivate people and handle leadership challenges.

- Can you explain how you saw a business problem and applied technology to solve it? What was the outcome?
- What significant contribution did you make at your last company? How did you achieve it?
- What is your understanding of return on investment and how it applies to IT?
- Can you articulate your understanding of risk and how it applies to IT? Provide an example of how you applied this knowledge to mitigate risk.
- Can you give an example of when you improved a business process? What was the outcome? What role did you play?
- What is your view of your leadership style? Give an example that illustrates it.
- What is the most difficult decision you had to make as a leader? Why was it difficult? What was the outcome?
- How would you define the role of CIO?
• What determines whether a CIO succeeds or fails?
• Describe a situation in which you succeeded. What did you do specifically to make it successful?
• Describe a situation in which you failed. What did you do specifically that had an impact on failure, and what did you learn or do as a result?
• How do you lead your direct reports? Give an example of when you resolved a conflict among team members or improved their performance as a team.

2) Strategy and planning

A core challenge for any executive is balancing long-term versus short-term planning and execution. Many executives are strong in strategic vision but have difficulty gaining support in accomplishing that vision. These questions focus on the CIO candidate’s experience and ability to set long-term goals, while managing the complex task of gaining cooperation to actually accomplish those goals.

• What would you do in the first 90 days?
• Describe your own approach to governance and how you would determine the best framework for our organisation.
• Provide an example of when you explained and sold the concept of IT architecture and standards to business leaders.
• How do you gain agreement and co-operation from a diverse set of stakeholders? Provide an example of when you did this successfully.
• How do you deal with stakeholders who want to break away from a shared service or a standardised or centralised process?
• How do you decide what to outsource and what to keep in house?
• Provide an example of when you identified an opportunity to be innovative. How did you find the opportunity and what was the outcome?
• Provide an example of when you drove top-line growth or delivered competitive advantage to the enterprise. How did you do it?
• Provide an example of what you did when there was more demand for IT than resources to fulfil the requests.

3) Technical expertise

These questions focus on determining how the candidate thinks about technology from a value perspective and applies it to solve business problems. The questions can help an interviewer determine how a candidate stays current on technology issues and opportunities in the ever-changing technology marketplace. They also can help interviewers assess a candidate’s ability to communicate about IT in business terms, and in a business context.

• Provide an example of when you convinced senior leadership to make a major technology investment.
What is the most difficult technology-related investment decision you had to make? Why was it difficult and what was the outcome?

How do you stay current on technology trends and innovations?

Give an example of when you implemented a new or emerging technology. How did you manage the risks?

What are the top two or three ways that you and we can measure the value of the IT function? How do you influence each of these in the short term and longer term?

Do you set the technical direction, or does someone else? What process do you use to set the technical direction?

How reliant are you on technical advisors and how do you manage exposure?

What are the most important skills to have in the IT department? How did you go about hiring IT workers or developing those skills in your team?

4) Financial management

All executives must display sound financial management and invest limited resources strategically. This question set focuses on the CIO candidate’s ability to view the IT budget as a portfolio of assets, and to manage it in a manner consistent with the risk profile and strategic approach of the interviewing organisation.

Give an example of when you had to cut the IT budget. How did you go about it, and how much did you save?

Give an example of when you helped reduce costs for the rest of the enterprise by using IT. How did you go about it and how much did you save?

What percentage of enterprise revenue is your current IT budget? How does this compare with your industry peers?

How do you determine whether an enterprise is spending enough on IT, an appropriate level or too much?

What percentage of your current IT spending is for maintenance versus growth and transformation activities? Is that the appropriate mix and why?

What percentage of your IT budget is for outsourced activities? How do you determine what to outsource?

By what percentage did you overrun or underrun your IT budget last year? Why?

Describe any experience you have with chargeback models. How did it work, what were the benefits of the systems, and what problems did chargeback create? How did you manage the challenges?

5) Operational excellence

Leadership without execution is a formula for failure. This question set focuses on the candidate’s ability to adjust and course-correct as needed to ensure success. Interviewers should look for strong examples of success,
where the candidate has delivered clear business outcomes, and evidence of his or her adaptability.

- What is the largest IT-related initiative for which you were responsible, in terms of cost, elapsed time, scope or team size? How did you evaluate its success?
- What is the largest non-IT-related initiative for which you were responsible? How did you evaluate its success?
- How did this initiative deliver in terms of cost, schedule and quality?
- What percentage of the business case benefits were actually achieved?
- What impact did the initiative have on business performance metrics?
- How have you prioritised when there was not enough budget to meet demand?
- Provide an example of when the execution of an initiative did not go as planned and what you did.
- Provide an example of how you led, motivated and organised a team to achieve during a difficult situation.

While no candidate will display each of the above qualities and capabilities in equal measure, hiring executives can use this interview list to decide which are most important to their enterprises now. While all candidates should have some strength in each of these focus areas, the enterprise’s situation will determine whether leadership, execution or other capabilities are most important to acquire in a new CIO. Use this list as a starting point for your interviews, and then customise it to find a CIO who will not only be able to succeed in contributing to the enterprise’s goals, but also be a strong executive team member and fit for the enterprise’s culture.

6) Key findings

- When interviewing for a CIO, the hiring executives will focus on determining the candidate’s ability to deliver business value to the enterprise.
- During the interview, focus on the key CIO capability areas of leadership, strategy and planning, technical expertise, financial management, and operational excellence.
- The most effective interview responses require candidates to provide specific examples of their past accomplishments and explain how they achieved them, not describe their own personal qualities without putting them in context.
- CIO candidates can use these question sets to prepare for job interviews. This preparation will help ensure that they are focused and well-prepared for even the most challenging interviews.

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