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Reforming Business Education

– Martha Heller, CIO Executive Council

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The most powerful weapon in the fight against the CIO Paradox is an educated business community: CEOs, CFOs, and line-of-business execs who understand what IT can do for their companies and what they need to give in return. But who should be providing that education? I can hear the Greek chorus of CIOs in my head proclaiming that the onus is on CIOs. But shouldn't we expect our business partners to show up with a little IT knowledge? CIOs are expected to know finance, operations, sales and marketing. Isn't it time the business was expected to have a baseline understanding of IT?

Imagine a world where every newly minted MBA came into the job with a healthy respect for IT and the organization that delivers it. Imagine if every business leader understood that "sponsorship" isn't just a word; it's budget and staff and a visible, lasting commitment to project support. Imagine if every general manager understood the difference between his home network and the one you run for 10,000 employees. Imagine a world where every MBA program included courses like these, suggested by CIOs:

Basics: Covers hardware and software and technology as a business sector. "As consumers, students think they understand how technology works, but often they just know buzzwords," says Rick Roy, CIO of CUNA Mutual Group, who teaches an IT course in Marquette University's MBA program. "They need to fill in the blanks around hardware, software, databases, networking and security, so when someone in a meeting says, 'That was a firmware problem,' they don't think it's an app on their iPhone."

Development and Delivery: Gives an overview of software development lifecycle (SDLC) methodologies such as waterfall, prototyping and agile, and explains the role business plays in project delivery. "If executives had a stronger grasp of SDLC, we could all get better at solving the universal challenges of locking down requirements and securing business resources and support," says Bill Krivoshik, CIO of Marsh and McLennan.

Governance: Describes the process of IT investment decision making, including steering committees. "This course teaches MBAs to know when the IT organization should make key decisions and when it should not," says Roy. Krivoshik adds that the class should explain why it's important not to bypass good vendor-management structures when dealing with vendors.

Financials: Covers fundamentals such as ROI, amortization, depreciation, and fixed and variable IT costs. "It would be helpful for MBA graduates to understand the build-versus-buy trade-off and why customized packages are expensive to maintain," says Krivoshik.

Emerging Trends: While business execs don't need the technical details of virtualization, software as a service and cloud computing, they need a better understanding of the business implications of these trends than vendors give them.

The Dark Side: Charles Beard, CIO of SAIC, is a guest lecturer for MBA programs, where he often adopts a "scared straight" approach. "As CIOs, we tend to focus on all the great things that the Internet can do, but there is a dark side that MBA students need to understand," he says. "What happens to their business case for acquiring a company when that firm's intellectual property is stolen through a cyberattack? MBA programs lack tracks on the business implications of our increasingly wired world."

If you believe academia is a good place to take on the CIO Paradox, send me your MBA IT course suggestions or ideal syllabi. The CIO Executive Council will pull them together into a recommended IT syllabus for MBA programs. Let the education begin!

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