



Technology and Innovation

Getting Buy-in from the Board – Advice for CIOs

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Biography

Tom Turner is CEO and President of BitSight (<https://www.bitsighttech.com>). Tom has extensive security industry experience, and has helped build category-defining companies. Prior to joining BitSight, Tom was a founding member of the executive management team of IBM Security Systems, a new division within IBM Software group that was created on the heels of the Q1 Labs acquisition.

Formerly, he was Senior Vice President of Marketing and Channels at Q1 Labs, where he was responsible for all product management efforts, demand-generation programs, and channel sales and marketing initiatives. Before joining Q1 Labs, Tom served as Director of Marketing for endpoint security at Cisco Systems, where he helped elevate the company to the number two position in the host-based, IDS/IDP market.

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Abstract

Today, the expertise and guidance of Chief Information Officers (CIOs) can have a direct impact on the future of an entire organization. Failure by CIOs to deliver clear and persuasive proposals can risk projects being overlooked, a breakdown in communication and may lead to budget not being granted. CIOs must carefully consider the way they communicate with other senior executives if critical IT initiatives are to receive that all important buy-in from the Board. In this article, the author offers five recommendations to senior IT professionals who are required to obtain Board-level approval before implementing strategic IT projects.

Introduction

IT and security conversations are moving away from the confines of remote IT departments and are finding their way to the top of boardroom agendas. As they do so, CIOs need to carefully consider the way they communicate with other senior executives if critical IT initiatives are to receive that all important buy-in from the Board.

Indeed, CIOs are in a unique position within the C-suite. Their expertise and guidance can have a direct impact on the future of an entire organization. As a result, and quite rightly so, CIOs and security professionals have secured a more important seat at the top table.



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However, despite the fundamental importance of IT, many organizations continue to treat it separate from the rest of the business. One reason might be due to the difficulty other departments have in understanding the complexity of many IT functions. Nonetheless, failure by CIOs to deliver clear and persuasive proposals can risk projects being overlooked, a breakdown in communication and may ultimately lead to budget not being granted.

So here are my five recommendations for senior IT professionals when talking to the Board

1. **Keep it short, sweet and salient**

An idea is only as good as your ability to communicate it. Keep it short and to the point. Include only the salient facts. If, for example, you're trying to illustrate potential risks to the business, then an objective measurement, for example, the use of security ratings¹, may help contextualize your case.

2. **Know your audience and speak their language**

It is a good idea to consider all your arguments from the perspective of the executives in the room; don't assume everyone has the same vision as you. For example, a CFO may be interested in driving organic growth, while a COO is more concerned with improving efficiency targets. If you can help others meet their objectives and minimize risks, you will secure more support than if you talk generalities.

A polished presentation should appeal to everyone in the room. Avoid talking in detail about technical features and focus on the wider benefits for the company. As soon as you mention the intricacies of cloud-based unified communications platforms or the workings of border gateway protocols, you risk losing your audience.

Consider how your proposal may impact others within the business and try to anticipate potential challenges. For example, will employees require additional training? How will new infrastructure impact the roles and responsibilities of staff? Will large capital investments require a reallocation of funds away from a major marketing effort? These externalities will be a driving force behind any eventual rejection of your proposal. Frame the value your plan brings to the company through a lens that is aligned with both the IT department's goals and those of other departments. In other words, speak the language of your audience.

3. **Impact assessment**

If your plan has unintended negative consequences on operations beyond the scope of what you considered, there's a sure chance it will meet with disapproval from senior executives. It's essential to evaluate how even minor changes may impact an organization, particularly if there's a risk to customer service level agreements.

Focus on the positives. Not every unintended consequence of your initiative will be negative. For example, if you are tasked with implementing an



effective vendor risk management programme, this could help mitigate cyber risks and reduce potential data breaches; something senior execs will support.

4. **Furnish the facts**

No doubt, you have heard the phrase, 'All publicity is good publicity'. Well, that's questionable. If your company hits the headlines because it has failed to implement adequate security protocols, resulting in a massive breach of data, then the fallout can be catastrophic.

In today's connected world, cyber threats pose a constant danger for businesses of all sizes. CIOs can use this to their advantage when lobbying for programmes that will strengthen their security posture. Hard facts about the current cyber risk landscape will resonate with senior management. Information about internal threats and how third-party vendors can leave your organization vulnerable should force any Board to sit up and listen and take you seriously.

5. **Hitting the 'suite' spot**

Major IT projects need partners and allies, not bystanders. Ensure you have the understanding and buy-in from *all* C-suite execs and that decisions haven't simply been deferred to the CEO – something we refer to as 'passive acceptance'.

Passive acceptance can have serious consequences for CIOs. Other executives might lose interest in an initiative as it progresses. Approval might be withdrawn, budgets changed, and resources reallocated, preventing IT departments from accomplishing their goals. CIOs should focus on bringing their colleagues on board with their ideas, as well as the details of the project itself. That means keeping other executives up-to-date on project progress and milestones long after approval has been granted.

In summary

Being a CIO requires strong business instincts; something that serves them well in most situations. However, the same strategies that might work perfectly for other members of the C-suite cannot always be adapted for IT initiatives. CIOs wishing to improve communication with senior decision makers and secure buy-in from the Board should consider how their proposal might impact individuals within the C-suite, and not just the IT organization. Likewise, they should understand the unintended effects their initiative might have outside of their own department. They should tell the terrifying truth about cyber threats and use this to their advantage. Finally, they should work to secure continued buy-in from board executives, not just project approval for one initiative.

Reference

- <https://www.bitsighttech.com/security-ratings>