

AI Will Evolve the CIO Role

Transformational CIOs Must Seize the Opportunity That AI Offers Them in the Boardroom

AI is a leadership opportunity for CIOs. Why? AI is fascinating and frightening executive boards. Yet the technology has the potential to disrupt as well as benefit your organization. As a result, CIOs are well-positioned to support the board, prepare the organization for AI and, most importantly, lead the business into the age of AI.

“Everything starts with the board, who are asking, ‘How can we anticipate the unexpected threats brought on by AI?’ says Dr. Arthur M. Langer, Associate Vice Provost, Professor of Practice and Director, Center for Technology Management and Digital Leadership at Northeastern University. “So there is fear in the boardroom. “It is the amazing rate that AI is reaching people. Government, companies and people are struggling.

Not all boards are in a state of fear, according to Langer. AI enables growing data that organizations are generating and capturing to be used more effectively, and this is something the entire senior leadership team is aware of.

“There is more and more data, and there will be rapid advances and that will create an acceleration,” Langer notes.

Mark Read, CEO of global advertising giant WPP recently told shareholders “AI will also offer the ability to develop new business and financial models.” And this is why Langer believes CIOs must use AI as an opportunity in the boardroom to inform the leadership about these new opportunities.

“This will be a huge opportunity for you and your career,” Langer advises.

Taking the Lead

“The amount of money, timing and risk factors need you to advocate AI, as this is not a time to cut costs on technology innovation,” says Langer, explaining why CIOs must champion AI technology.

Dr. Norman Jacknis, professor of practice, innovation and entrepreneurship at Northeastern University notes that leadership as well as intellectual curiosity about AI is crucial. “As CIOs, you need to be open to surprises in this world of AI,” says Jacknis.

Business leaders and academics say that AI can support an organization in its existing operating model, but it is also a technology that will drive change. Therefore, CIOs should lead the adoption of AI as a business driver and support system.

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“As a support technology, AI works on data that is dependable, proven and secure,” says Langer. He also warns CIOs to be mindful of AI’s current status as a disruptive technology at the base of the S-curve will eventually become commoditized.

As AI becomes a commodity, it will shift to a supporting technology, but new opportunities to drive the business will be identified by transformational CIOs. “Lead the conversation with the board on risks, pros and cons, and talk like a business person. Do not dismiss yourself from being the driver, and reinvent yourself,” Langer advises.

This means that CIOs will have to harness their ability to communicate to the board and the wider business about the impacts and benefits of AI. Jacknis advises CIOs to focus on the three reasons why AI is such a hot topic.

“It is back to Moore’s Law,” says Jacknis. “We have already seen that AI depends on a lot of compute power. Secondly, the software is getting better, and thirdly, there is a lot of data available. Your job is to explain this to the board.” He advises CIOs to use all the available visualization methods to ensure the board understands the impact of AI.

Jacknis says it is important that CIOs explain to their boards how generative AI uses data. “A lot of these tools are based on digesting what is out there on the public internet, and all of us know that what is on the internet is not always accurate or nice,” he says.

Lead AI Disruption

Langer urges CIOs to be prepared when dealing with disruptive technologies. “One of the things about disruption is that the legal sector is always so far behind,” Langer says. “The reality is that enforcing laws such as copyright is going to be very difficult. We have enough problems with intellectual property as the fact remains there will be bad actors out there.”

Jacknis agrees, noting that “It will be one of the great legal debates of this century” but reassures CIOs that this is a well-traveled path for technology adoption. “This is not new,” he observes. “One-hundred years ago Picasso said good artists copy, great artists steal, and he would take traditional pictures and modify it into what became cubism. Was he stealing?”

The challenge for CIOs who are tasked with protecting their organization’s intellectual property and data is that AI tools make it easier for cybercriminals to launch an attack that can lead to a devastating breach.

AI is already within organizations and CIOs are embracing or witnessing the use of Copilot technologies from Microsoft, Salesforce, SAP, Workday, and others. Whether Copilot technologies or open AI tools, Jacknis says CIOs have an opportunity to harness these technologies by strategically incorporating their data into these tools.

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“The cloud providers have made this easy with tools and libraries,” says Jacknis “There are also specialized versions of ChatGPT from companies like Bloomberg.” AI within edge computing is another benefit CIOs should be leading.

Preparing for AI

If CIOs are to lead the adoption of AI in their organizations, they must also deliver the foundations for the technology to be successful. “If you are building your own models, then you need to make sure that you get the confidence levels in the data right,” says Jacknis. And the organization will need to increase its cybersecurity posture.

Langer agrees that “We need to protect better. There are individuals and countries using this technology, so there will be an acceleration in ways to protect the business and break into it,” while Jacknis notes that “You need to put in your own controls and test them.”

AI bias has already got organizations such as online retailer Amazon into hot water, and here again, the CIO must play a pivotal role in protecting the business.

“The computer is only learning from the data that you put into it,” Jacknis observes. “So you need to make sure that the models represent the behaviors your organization wants to model, and don’t end up using a data set that is so limited that you end up with bias.” He reminds CIOs that the data will need constant attention.

AI is an opportunity for CIOs. Enterprise cloud computing, mobility, collaboration, and remote working have given transformational business technology leaders a place at the boardroom table. AI has the power to increase that influence.

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