

Becoming a CIO: Six Enterprise Architect Skills to Learn and Master



Introduction

As a result of participating in many different projects throughout your career as an Enterprise Architect (EA), you will gain a significant amount of knowledge across a wide range of business and technical domains.

This broad array of expertise and experience is often a substantial foundation for moving into the role of Chief Information Officer (CIO).

This eBook will explore which skills are most relevant and valuable to becoming a CIO. While there are other areas to potentially consider, focusing on acquiring and mastering the six highlighted skills will give you a solid grounding to become a CIO.



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Promotion to a CIO – why bother?

Before we dive deeper into the skills you have developed as an EA that could be transferable to a role as CIO, let's explore why you should even consider the move. Why would you want to jump to a more significant role with more responsibility – apart from the potential salary increase, of course!

As an EA, you have a rewarding role that enables you to get involved in a range of new and innovative projects where you are challenged by various topics covering everything from business processes to technology innovations. As a result, the role is varied and allows you to learn about new subjects and broaden your experience across business and technology domains. Your role is unlikely to be dull due to you being “stuck in a rut” doing repetitive tasks day after day. Why would you want to change if the work is engaging?

A step up to CIO would allow you to drive innovations forward – which you are probably already doing today in your current role – and let you be at the heart of the decision-making process. You would be working with C-level peers to determine which new initiatives and innovations should be implemented to support significant business change and growth. Your decisions would have a direct (and hopefully positive) impact on business outcomes at a strategic level.



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As well as being responsible for determining the future direction of your company's technology, CIOs run large teams and are responsible for significant budgets. This level of responsibility, power, and authority isn't for everybody. Indeed, many EAs are content with the amount of variety and responsibility they have in their existing roles and may progress as far as running the EA practice within their company while still adding significant business value. However, if the idea of a C-level role with substantial responsibility for driving forward innovations with your team and budget sounds attractive, you should be aiming for a promotion to CIO.



Developing your existing EA skills

So, if you want to progress to become a CIO, there are specific skills you may already have but can certainly develop further to stand a better chance of getting and then being successful in the role. Over the following few pages, we will look at the top six skills you should continue developing.

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Increase Technology Knowledge

As an EA, you have a solid appreciation of how your company deploys technology to achieve desired business outcomes. You have this appreciation not only because you understand exciting technologies but because you have an interest in keeping up to date with emerging technologies and appreciate how they could fit into your existing infrastructure to provide business benefits to your organization.

Your broad knowledge of existing technologies and ability to understand upcoming innovations gives you a good foundation for the role of CIO.

While a deep understanding of technology is not always necessary for a CIO, you will need to have more than a basic appreciation of various technologies and their business value. This knowledge will give you credibility as a technology leader when dealing with the rest of your team, contractors, and vendors. In addition, it will allow you to question decisions made by your team to ensure they are applying a high degree of rigor when determining appropriate technology to address business situations.

In addition, due to your understanding of the bigger picture across the entire company, you will be able to suggest appropriate technologies to match the challenges posed by future business requirements. These recommendations could give your organization a competitive edge when looking for efficiencies or introducing market-changing products.



ACTION

Learn about new technologies and processes beyond your current remit and keep up to date with advancements and innovations across various technologies. An understanding of technology will help you get the role of CIO and help you be successful once you do.

Understanding Budget Spending

Unlike many technologists who work in business, you understand how the allocation and spending of budgets can positively impact business. This knowledge is relatively rare within IT departments and is a valuable skill when combined with your technology and business knowledge.

CIOs are constantly making trade-offs between the budgets and resources available to them and the demands of the business. While they want to support as many worthy initiatives as possible, it is not always possible. The experience you have in prioritizing the most critical business projects transfers well to those decisions that must be made by CIOs daily.

ACTION

Work with your finance team to understand how IT budgeting works in your organization and how return on investment (ROI) is calculated and used to prioritize and justify spending. These skills will help you prioritize projects as a CIO.



Link Technology and Business

While many employees in your company will have a good understanding of technology and how the business operates, very few understand the intersection of the two disciplines.

Identifying how technology-led change enables the business to meet and even exceed its objectives is a key function in your role as an EA today and will be even more critical if you leap to CIO.

CIOs are constantly looking for productivity and operational efficiency gains or to improve customer experiences to ensure that the business remains competitive.



ACTION

Don't limit yourself to just speaking to the IT department. Get to know a wide variety of stakeholders across the organization to understand how technology can enable their business requirements. This will help you understand how technology supports business priorities and will foster relationships with key decision-makers.

Communication and Stakeholder Management

One of your primary functions as an EA is to communicate the technology roadmap to stakeholders across the business. This requires you to use language that is context-relevant and appropriate to each, so they fully understand what is needed to either maintain or deploy new business capabilities and balance the associated benefits and risks.



The skill of communicating to different levels and functions across the business becomes critical as you move from the role of EA to CIO. CIOs typically interact less with technologists and more with C-level and other line-of-business stakeholders who don't understand (and may not want to understand) the underlying technology that delivers business capabilities.

Closely related to this skill of communicating to different levels and functions across the business is the idea of stakeholder management. It is critical in both the EA and CIO roles to ensure that a wide variety of potentially interested parties are not only informed about critical technology activities but are fully onboard with any decisions. Without this buy-in, EAs and CIOs often face roadblocks that delay or, worse, block projects from being successful as stakeholders either feel that they were not involved in the decision-making process when they thought they should have been or feel out of control due to not being given the full details.

Managing relevant stakeholders across the business for all key projects is an EA skill that will be critical in your role as CIO.

ACTION

Continue working with a wide variety of stakeholders across the business to understand the drivers, goals, and language they use. Work with them to deliver their goals and, where possible, use the language and terminology they use to frame conversations about their drivers and goals.

Match Long-Term Vision to Short-Term Delivery

EAs need to focus on the long-term strategic goals of the business and consider the short-term tactical activities to “keep the lights on.” Sometimes, it is necessary to prioritize work on the here-and-now to address an immediate business need, even if it means being distracted from the bigger picture objectives.

EAs who can prioritize short-term requests from business stakeholders while delivering on the future vision will find this skill invaluable when transitioning to being a CIO as senior managers constantly have to balance budgets, resources, and expectations of short-term and long-term priorities.

In addition to walking this tightrope, EAs sometimes have to push back and say no to short-term requests because they would be too disruptive to more significant projects. This can be a difficult task and requires an understanding of the bigger picture and a considerable amount of diplomacy – again skills that are critical in the role of the CIO.



ACTION

Constantly monitor projects that contribute to the long-term vision but do not dismiss short-term initiatives without a good reason. Work with stakeholders to ensure that short-term projects are delivered when deemed necessary, providing they do not harm the long-term vision.

Embrace Pragmatism

All experienced EAs know that there is no such thing as a perfect blueprint for any project. Projects don't start with a completely clean sheet of paper. Many internal and external forces need to be considered. These forces include messy data, the need to integrate with legacy systems, existing processes that run the business, and an ingrained attitude that 'we've always done it this way.'

Over time, EAs learn to adapt and accept that their vision of the ideal project execution is highly unlikely to happen. Instead, they make the best of the situation and adapt to ensure that any projects are as successful as they can be given external circumstances beyond their control.

The skill of learning to deal with the reality that is acquired as an EA is just as important when you move to become a CIO – life won't be perfect. Adopting a pragmatic approach to projects rather than being stubborn and dogmatically insisting that things should be perfect will help you achieve your goals.



ACTION

Realise that it is ok to start with a perfect blueprint for a project, but remember that you need to consider external factors beyond your control. Learn to adapt your initial plans so you can implement them successfully, even if not as you initially envisaged.

Summary

As an EA, you will have already built up many relevant and transferable skills for the role of CIO.

In this eBook, we have examined essential skills and suggested actions you can take to continually improve these skills so that you are ready to take on the role of CIO – either in your organization or at another company – in the future.

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