

# IT CAREER EXPERT

## Building an IT Career in the Midst of Change

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By Jennifer Hay

It wasn't that long ago that many IT professionals were waiting for the economic downturn to subside so that employment could return to its pre-recession times. This was a very practical approach to take since, in the past, IT always seemed to come back strong even when the rest of the economy struggled. Now current measures suggest that employment is slightly up but it's not a stable environment. What the numbers really imply is a completely different story that will have staggering impacts on the careers of IT professionals.

What does this mean to you as an IT professional or executive? How does this change the way you'll market yourself for future career opportunities? Let's examine the major factors that are driving this incredible change, and explore some of the ways that an individual can be positioned for success and skillfully navigate these turbulent waters.

**Business Value.** Communicating value to the organization in technology terms won't change the business' perception of IT as a cost center. To state that IT has delivered 99.99% network uptime completely misses the mark because it relates only to hardware and software maintenance, and not to business performance. Instead the IT professional should describe accessibility, availability, and business capabilities that are network dependent – communications, business processes, work activities, etc. – that are provided by a network with 24/7 uptime.

The same mismatch can be said of the IT executive who describes 'delivering IT strategies that align with the business.' No other department in the organization – marketing, sales, HR, or finance – describes aligning their activities with the business. They are the business. Aligning IT with the business is a confusing concept that hasn't worked in three decades or more of trying. The concept of alignment, if anything, has broadened the gap between the business and IT. Complete integration of IT into the fabric of the business is the way of the future and the key to turn-around in the steady decline of executive confidence.

IT professionals and executives who can connect their achievements with the business value that truly matters to the organization, and who can measure and communicate the results will be able to write their own ticket.

**Agility.** Agile is much more than development methodology. It is business beliefs and behaviors. An agile business is nimble – quick, responsive, and proactive about change. For agile methods to succeed, the business and IT must be equally committed to the process. Creating clear and defined expectations is the responsibility of CIOs and CTOs. They must gain consensus by educating the executive team about all aspects of agile processes. Without executive buy-in and stakeholder commitment from the top down, agile projects will see the same high failure rates as iterative and waterfall. Poorly executed agile methods become a means of doing the wrong things faster.

IT executives who demonstrate competencies working in the inner circle already have a proven track record of talking to the business in terms they can understand. Being able to describe the agile process, its impacts, opportunities, and risks, to the executive team in language that both engages and communicates is a sure step towards getting your resume noticed.

Insightful analysis of unemployment data by Foote Partners, an independent IT benchmarking research and advisory firm, concludes that “A lot of the jobs lost during this recession are not coming back because employers have changed their human capital investment models and practices. Instead of focusing on jobs, the accent is on skills acquisition.” Let’s further review how these issues are impacting IT professionals.

**Do More With Less.** Moving email systems to the cloud is becoming common and the cost benefits are easy to demonstrate. But email is only the beginning. With software as a service (SaaS), platform as a service (PaaS), infrastructure as a service (IaaS), and data as a service (DaaS) you can expect to see a major shift in the way that technology is provisioned across the entire spectrum from infrastructure to business applications.

Many organizations are making the business transition to managed services for very practical financial reasons. It’s an easy decision to choose SaaS, PaaS, and IaaS during volatile times when investments in long-term projects, costly infrastructure, and permanent employees are beyond an organization’s reach. Cloud-based services are the next generation of IT outsourcing. Yet cloud computing is no silver bullet; it resolves some long-standing problems and creates some new questions. The wise business will move forward cautiously, avoid the temptation of optimistic projections that lead to ill-informed decisions.

It is the responsibility of IT to engage the business in discussions and to educate them about all the issues surrounding this new outsourcing model. IT executives who can clearly describe how they developed their strategy for moving to the cloud, and the business issues and risks they considered will find a responsive business.

**IT Transparency.** IT departments that are shrouded in secrecy amplify the perception of IT as a massive cost center with questionable business value. Hidden processes, priorities, and finances cause IT to be viewed as a black box – or worse yet as a “black hole into which we throw money.” Some estimates indicate that IT accounts for nearly one-half of all capital expenditure in US corporations. For such large investments,

business executives need to believe that they are receiving value for their money and that the services provided by IT are at the right level and at the right cost.

In the book ‘The Real Business of IT: How CIOs Create and Communicate Value’<sup>1</sup>, the authors write that successful CIOs ‘link the cost of IT operations to the quality and volume of service. And they use unit costs and standard performance metrics to compare their services with those of other units or enterprises in an apples-to-apples way.’ IT needs to address this method of substantiating costs and demonstrating business value in language the business will understand and appreciate.

**Collaboration.** Before we discuss collaborative relationships, we need to understand its meaning. Collaboration is a style of working together that is characterized by communication, discussion, and collective decision making. It is important in two ways: (1) because business/IT collaboration is one of the ways to create real value through technology, and (2) because connected and collaborative are defining behavioral traits of the new generation of business managers.

It should come as no surprise that tech-savvy business professionals are changing the IT landscape. They have radically different expectations of what technology can and should do that signals the decreased need for outside technical skills. The closing of the skills gap between technical and business professionals will continue to shrink.

IT professionals and IT executives must embrace technology and technical skills outside of their own domain and give business units the acknowledgment that they can implement their own technology solutions; IT will provide enough standardization to enable technology use and selection that doesn’t result in chaos. Engaging business people in these conversations creates a collaborative IT that is tightly woven into the business infrastructure. Creating a resume that describes an ability to balance independence, autonomy, and standards will speak to the business.

In conclusion, let’s review the final issue that is essential to professionals building their careers in the new IT landscape. Finally, I’ll provide specific issues that need to be addressed. Technological change has always been common in IT but now the speed with which management must also change has created an uncertain future.

**IT Federation.** While IT departments continue to be largely centralized, information technology itself is widely distributed. Much of the actual technology – hardware, software, applications, and data – resides in and is managed by individual business units. Widely distributed technology goes hand-in-hand with distributed technical capabilities. A wise IT executive views departmental and business-unit technology not as competitive but complementary to centralized IT.

A career that positions an individual as fostering a culture of federated IT resources – one of strong relationships that achieves the right balance of business unit autonomy and enterprise-wide technology standards will send a powerful message about their ability to work within the entire enterprise.

## Summary

The mandate for IT professionals has three major elements:

- Create real and visible business value
- Enable business agility – it is less about agile development than eliminating slow-moving IT processes as a barrier to business responsiveness
- Do more with less – not just create more value but eliminate the waste and inefficiency of traditional IT processes

The tools to respond to this mandate include:

- Transparency – getting rid of the black box and letting the business “see inside” ... breaking down the us-and-them relationship and replacing it with communication and trust ... building a foundation that leads to collaboration
- Collaboration – with transparency and trust in place true collaboration becomes possible ... both business/IT collaboration and information-enabled collaboration among business processes
- IT Federation – built on the foundation of transparency, trust, and collaboration ... federation makes it possible to harness all of the technology and all of the IT skills – both inside and outside of the IT department – to deliver maximum value with a high degree of agility and with minimum redundancy, waste, and rework

The careers of IT professionals need to address the issues that are important to the business. This is a straight-forward statement of a very difficult task. But any hopes of becoming a trusted strategic partner mandates that IT executives change how they think about themselves, how they act toward others, and how they work with their team and within the organization. Anything less means being excluded from the inner circle.

<sup>1</sup> Hunter and Westerman, *The Real Business of IT: How CIOs Create and Communicate Value*, Harvard Business Press, 2009