

BEYOND THE ORDER-TAKER

Order-Takers by Design

A view from the delivery side — how the CIO's seat at the table was built to marginalise the person sitting in it



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“A seat is not a vote.”

1. The Strategy Nobody Asked For

There is a scene that repeats itself in boardrooms so faithfully that it has become almost a ritual. The CIO is given a slot — usually the last one before lunch — to present the technology strategy. The slides are good. There is an architecture that will simplify a tangle of systems, a plan to turn the infrastructure from a liability into a platform, a case for spending now to avoid spending more later. The board listens politely. There are a few questions, most of them about cost and risk. The chairman thanks the CIO warmly. And then the meeting moves on, and nothing the CIO proposed changes what the business decides to do. The strategy is received the way one receives a gift one did not ask for: with courtesy, and without obligation.

I want to argue, from the delivery side of the house — from the place where technology strategies either become real or quietly do not — that this scene is not a story about weak individuals. The industry's stock explanation for the marginal CIO is a personal one: he is too technical, cannot speak the language of business, lacks the presence to command the room. Sometimes that is true. But it explains far too little, because the pattern holds even where the CIO is articulate, commercially fluent, and personally impressive. The CIO became an order-taker not chiefly through personal failing but through a set of structural forces that would turn almost anyone in the seat into one. If we want strategists in that chair, we have to change the forces, not just coach the incumbents.

2. How the Seat Was Shaped

Three forces, in particular, have done the shaping.

The first is the legacy of the last two years of remediation. The enormous effort to make systems safe for the century date change was, for most technology functions, the defining programme of the recent past — and it was, by its nature, defensive. It produced no new capability. Its entire purpose was to ensure that nothing broke. For eighteen months the CIO's job was framed, in front of the whole board, as the prevention of catastrophe: find every date field, fix it, prove it, and let nothing fail. That framing does not wash off quickly. A function that has just spent two years being valued for making sure nothing bad happens is a function that has been trained, and has trained its board, to see it as an insurer rather than an investor. The strategist's question — what should we build? — sits awkwardly on a function the organisation has just learned to prize for building nothing new, only for keeping the lights on.

The second force is the budget model. In most organisations the technology budget is constructed and defended as a cost to be minimised. The CIO is asked, each year, to deliver the same or more for less, and is rewarded for doing so. This is a coherent thing to ask of a utility. But it is fatal to a strategist, because it means the CIO's institutional skill —

the thing he is selected for, measured on, and promoted for — is cost control, not value creation. A leader spends years becoming excellent at driving down unit costs and then is surprised to find the board treats him as the person who drives down unit costs. The budget model does not merely constrain the CIO; it slowly makes him into the kind of leader who is good at the thing it rewards, which is not strategy.

The third force is the absence of real decision rights. The rhetoric of the era gives the CIO a seat at the table, and the phrase is repeated so often that its emptiness goes unexamined. A seat is not a vote. The CIO is invited to advise on decisions — about which markets to enter, which businesses to acquire, how to compete — that have enormous technology consequences, but the decisions themselves are made by others, and the CIO is brought in afterward to make them work. When the technology implications of a strategy are discovered only after the strategy is set, the CIO's role is definitionally reactive. He is not in the room where the choice is made; he is in the room where the choice is implemented. That is the very definition of an order-taker, and no amount of personal polish changes a structural position into a strategic one.

A seat at the table is not a vote at the table. Invite someone to advise on decisions made elsewhere and then implement them, and you have not created a strategist — you have created a very senior order-taker and given him a chair.

3. The Case for the Order-Taker

It would be too easy to treat this as simple injustice, so let me put the strongest opposing case, because it is not weak.

The board's instinct to keep the CIO on a short leash is not mere philistinism. It is a response to real history. Technology functions have a record, well earned, of pursuing elegance for its own sake — of gold-plating, of chasing the architecturally beautiful over the commercially necessary, of embarking on grand platform rebuilds that consume years and fortunes and deliver capability the business never asked for and does not use. Against that history, a board that insists technology should take its direction from business strategy rather than generate its own is behaving prudently. We — and here the collective is deserved, because the profession as a whole earned the suspicion — have given boards ample reason to want us aligned rather than autonomous. Keeping the CIO an order-taker is, on this view, a sensible defence against the CIO who would spend the company's money building monuments.

This case is right about the failure mode and wrong about the remedy. It is true that an unconstrained technology function can waste enormous sums on the strategically irrelevant. But the cure the board has adopted — reduce the CIO to a cost-controlling implementer — does not actually protect it from bad technology decisions. It simply moves those decisions to people who understand them less. When a business chooses to acquire a competitor with an incompatible systems estate, or to enter a market whose service model its infrastructure cannot support, and discovers the technology consequences only in the implementation, the cost of that ignorance dwarfs anything a gold-plating CIO could have squandered. The order-taker model does not eliminate expensive technology mistakes. It relocates them upstream, to the strategy itself, where they are more expensive and harder to reverse. Prudence about the CIO's autonomy is wise; prudence that removes technology judgement from the moment of strategic choice is not prudence at all. It is a false economy that the delivery floor pays for, over years, in

programmes that were doomed before they began.

4. What Would Have to Change

If the CIO's marginality is structural, then the remedy is structural too, and it does not begin with sending the CIO on a course to become more commercial.

It begins with moving the technology judgement to before the decision rather than after it. The consequential moment is not the annual strategy presentation before lunch; it is the moment the business decides to acquire, to enter, to reposition. If the CIO — or the technology judgement he represents — is genuinely present at that moment, as an input to the choice rather than a recipient of it, the whole dynamic inverts. The question shifts from how do we implement what has been decided? to what should we decide, given what our capability makes cheap or dear? That is the strategist's question, and the CIO cannot ask it from a chair he is shown into after the choice is made.

It requires, too, a change in what the function is measured on. As long as the CIO is rewarded chiefly for spending less, he will be a cost-controller, and the organisation should not be surprised when he behaves like one. Some portion of the measure has to attach to value created — to the revenue a capability enabled, the market the infrastructure opened, the option the platform preserved — or the incentive will keep manufacturing order-takers no matter who sits in the seat.

And it requires the board to want the harder thing. A CIO who is merely an order-taker is comfortable: he does what he is told, costs less each year, and takes the blame when delivery disappoints. A CIO who is a strategist is less comfortable, because he will sometimes say that a chosen strategy is undeliverable on the current estate, or that a cheaper path forecloses a future the business will want. That is an inconvenient voice to have in the room. But it is the voice that would have stopped, before it began, more than one programme I have watched consume years and budgets in pursuit of an outcome the technology could never have supported.

The CIO became an order-taker because every force acting on the seat — the defensive legacy of remediation, the cost-minimising budget, the seat without a vote — conspired to make him one. Coaching the incumbent will not undo forces of that kind. Changing where the judgement sits, what the function is measured on, and what the board is willing to hear just might. Until then, the technology strategy will keep being presented in the slot before lunch, received with courtesy, and left on the table when the room clears — a gift nobody asked for, from a leader nobody quite empowered to give it.