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Why you need a technology expert in your boardroom

By Marissa Levin

How many technology experts serve on your board of directors or advisory board? If you don't have a CTO or CIO in your boardroom, you need to find one fast. Information technology expertise is not a board option. It's a priority.



The role of IT in the board room has been slowly growing for decades. In the early days, when IT was viewed as an ancillary, obscure company function that was hidden away in a windowless back room, the idea of having an IT expert at the board table may have stirred up visions of Dilbert. Now, however, IT requirements drive practically every decision a company makes.

In the wake of massive data breaches experienced by Target, Home Depot, eBay, Anthem, Sony and JP Morgan Chase, companies are realizing that no one is immune to attacks. All businesses will be breached, and data breaches are now "simply part of doing business," says Lunarline CEO Waylon Krush.

"I don't know how many companies have told me they have not been breached yet, only to later find out their networks had been breached for months, if not years, once we conducted an advanced malware analysis of their systems. If no one is looking, maybe [companies] can continue to tell themselves they have nothing to worry about. [But] the ostrich mentality of management trying to ignore both inside and outside cybersecurity threats has not worked well for any organization. Each business faces different internal and external threats. It is just simple due diligence to ensure those security risks are mitigated and priority business functions can continue to run during a breach," Krush says.

CTOs and CIOs on the move

Clearly, IT's role in business is becoming increasingly crucial. And the momentum to move IT expertise beyond the organization and into the boardroom is growing. Consider these three recent appointments:

- **Padmasree Warrior**, Cisco Systems' chief technology and strategy officer, recently joined the board of directors for Box, a content management and collaboration platform company that started in 2005 and now serves more than 44,000 customers. The motivating factor behind her selection was her extensive experience in mobile technologies. She joins Gary Reiner, former CIO of General Electric. In addition, Box has tapped Aneesh Chopra, the first U.S. CTO, as a special advisor for consultation around the company's healthcare industry technology plan.
- **Mike LaJoie**, Time Warner's former executive vice president and CTO, recently joined the board of directors for Envivio, an industry leader in multi-screen video software solutions. He is bringing with him more than 20 years of technology experience to help Envivio remain a leader in digitized entertainment.
- **Brett Shockley**, Avaya's former CTO, recently joined the board of eGrain, a provider of cloud-based customer engagement solutions. He was brought on to help eGrain remain ahead of the digital curve in its customer contact centers.

How CIOs and CTOs can contribute

While CIOs and CTOs may be in high demand, the transition from the executive suite to the board room is not simple. In a recent *CIO* magazine column, board expert Adam Hartung points out that there is a big difference between being a good CIO and being a valuable board director.

"A good CIO's job is to do things right: budgeting, implementing, advising the CEO, executing. But a board director's role is very different: It's figuring out whether the company's executives (including the CIO) are doing the right things," he writes. It's the board's responsibility to ensure the CEO and CIO have the right technology strategies in place.

Hartung identifies some of the questions that a technology executive should pose in a board position:

- Does the company have the right processes in place to make good decisions?
- Is it fulfilling compliance requirements AND innovating for future growth?
- Does it have contingency plans?
- Is it meeting customer technology requirements?
- Is it closely managing and monitoring IT vendors?
- Is the money spent on IT making the company more competitive?
- Is the CIO keeping an eye out for disruptive technology and competition?

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IT is the driving force behind a company's operations. As Lunarline's Krush explains: "Technology touches every facet of business, and most businesses today are heavily reliant on their data and systems to simply conduct their day-to-day operations. Executives must implement a cybersecurity strategy. Cybersecurity is a strategic investment. A company must ensure the amount of protection aligns with goals and budget and, most importantly, the types of risks the business faces. A cyber board expert can ensure a company's cybersecurity strategy aligns correctly and initiatives are properly prioritized."

For any company, IT is an essential investment. How are you protecting it? Who are your go-to IT experts, and how are they helping you shape your growth strategy? If you can't answer these questions, it may be time to revisit your board members.

Marissa Levin is chairman of strategic communications firm Information Experts, and CEO of Successful Culture, a consulting firm that helps CEOs build excellent cultures. She is the author of Built to SCALE. www.informationexperts.com Contact her at marissa@successfulculture.com or on Twitter @marissalevin.

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