The days of a CIO being viewed as head of IT may finally be numbered. In today’s business world, CIOs spend less time in the server room and more in the board room, looking to contribute to business growth in meaningful ways. On 13 March, CIO Asia organised a conference at the Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur to pool industry specialists and delegates to share their thoughts on the growing responsibilities today’s CIOs claim, the new challenges they face, and the tools and methodologies by which to manage them. The event, entitled Shifting Roles of the Corporate CIO, was sponsored by EMC Computer Systems Malaysia, Shneider Electric, Blue Coat Systems and Hitachi Asia.

Consumer Devices
One of the common themes among the speakers was accommodating new devices among users, such as tablets, and social networking websites to facilitate work. In his opening address, T.C. Seow, editor of CIO Asia magazine, talked about the change in scene from Blackberry and Nokia to Android and iOS devices. “The crux of the problem is conforming to new user needs. The CIO is expected to know not only what technology can bring but how business can grow, and provide services to match these new needs,” he said.

In his presentation on getting support and buy-in for projects, Andy Tan, senior general manager/CIO informational technology department, Employees Provident Fund Malaysia, mentioned how you need to get buy-in from senior management in any way you can. “Today, all our board and procurement papers are electronic. Even some of our 70-year old board members are forced to use the iPad,” he said.

John E. Goeres, managing director (principal), technology, media and telecommunications practice, at Deloitte Consulting SEA called it the ‘consumerisation of IT’, or bringing consumer devices from our homes into the office. “The mentality these days is more of ‘Why can’t I use this device?’” he said.

In this regard, John Clifford, director executive briefing

**THE MANY HATS OF TODAY’S CIO**

At this year’s CIO Conference, delegates and speakers gathered to discuss the growing responsibilities of CIOs and how their jobs have grown to encapsulate other C-levels.

By Lau Chak Onn
The Great Debate: CIOs, Are You Ready to be CEOs?

YES team (from left)
1. Andy Tan Eng Teik, senior general manager/CIO, EPF Malaysia (captain)
2. Delesh Kumar Chandrakant, director, ICT practice, APAC, Frost & Sullivan
3. Bobby Varanasi, global ambassador, IAOP / chairman & CEO, Matryzel Consulting
4. Tony Wong, general manager for group IT, IGB Corporation
5. John Clifford, director executive briefing program Asia Pacific & Japan, EMC.

NO team (from left)
1. John Atherton, business vice president, Schneider Electric
2. Rob Cayzer, director, business and market development division, Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) Malaysia
3. Cheah Kok Hoong, group CIO, Sunway
4. Michiel de Boer, director consulting Asia, Quint Wellington Redwood
5. Hood Abu Bakar, general manager, ICT, MISC (captain)

Now a “tradition” at the annual CIO conference, the main event was the fun but stimulating Great Debate, which pitched the day’s speakers against one another, together with a few key industry leaders, to discuss a hot topic pertaining to the conference itself, with the audience deciding the outcome through ballot votes.

The topic of ‘CIOs: are you ready to be CEOs?’ was hotly contested from the start of the debate. Andy Tan from EPF headed up the YES team with the argument that organisations, big or small, cannot function without ICT,” he said. “On top of this, CIOs have intimate knowledge of all systems which puts us in a very strong position to be at least COO, if not CEO.” He posited that it was primarily Asian culture that valued more traditional training grounds such as finance and law that prevented CIOs from making the transition.

Hood Abdul Bakar from MISC, leader of the NO team, argued back with statistics showing that only four percent of CIOs have become CEOs historically. “Let’s look at KPIs. Cashflows, equity ratios, profits, intellectual capital (not just IT), customer satisfaction, the COO also needs to monitor shareholder satisfaction. A CIO’s KPI is mainly budget. How do we link deliverables to profits? Our SLAs – it’s mostly internal.”

Delesh Kumar from Frost & Sullivan then threw history back at the NO team, throwing light on the recent shenanigans on Wall Street. “We’ve proven time and again recently that accountants should not be put in charge of running the world,” he said. “Valuation, processes, R&D, intellectual capital… What is amazing about the CIO is that he is the only person in the entire organisation who ensures that all these things work.”

Michiel de Boer from Quint Wellington Redwood argued that CIOs aren’t used to looking after shareholder interests. “My job as a CIO is to understand the business strategy and to support it using the right processes, controls and risk management,” he said. “As a CEO, my objective is to get the biggest market share and to keep my shareholders happy.”

Bobby Varanasi from Matryzel Consulting returned by highlighting the importance of information. “Without the information, it doesn’t matter if the CEO keeps shareholders happy.”

Of Boys and Girls
Cheah Kok Hoong from Sunway Group then gave a memorable rebuttal using the analogy that CIOs were girls and CEOs were boys, which registered more laughs than votes with the audience. To transform a girl to fit into a boy’s shoes would be impossible, he implied to the chagrin of the audience.

Tony Wong from IGB argued that CIOs already had that knowledge from managing their own P&Ls. “And not just our own, but approving budgets for our users’ projects as well. It’s practically like managing an entire company,” he said.

Rob Cayzer from MDeC replied that by that rationale, all C-levels should become CEO.

To this, John Clifford replied for the YES team with the experience CIOs have with getting buy-ins from other C-levels. “If you look at the characteristics of any good CEO, it’s not your technical knowledge or financial knowledge — it’s leadership,” he said. John Atherton from Schneider Electric then concluded for the NO team arguing that there were no parts of a CIO’s job tied specifically to revenue generation and communication, which was key in managing a company.

After the votes were counted, the YES team won with about 65 percent majority of votes.
program Asia Pacific & Japan, of EMC, summed it up best, by separating today’s workforce into two categories – Digital Natives and Digital Migrants. He described the Natives as people who were born after 1990, who grew up with the Internet, and Migrants as people who were born before, and had to be accustomed to the new technology-driven lifestyle.

“These Digital Natives are about to hit the workplace and they’re changing the way we do business – forever,” he said. “In certain instances, they’re an inspiration to us, like, the way they embrace cloud computing is entirely different to us.”

Keeping the Lights on
Another recurring theme with the speakers was the CIO’s expansion of responsibility beyond maintaining a stable platform for the business to operate on. At his organisation in particular, Tan of EPF stated that it was no small task, and at the same time, of great importance. “EPF as a trustee of public funds, needs to ensure that security and confidentiality is paramount,” he explained.

He gave advice on how to gain trust from management: “We have to do an IT master plan every three to five years and when we do one, we link the IT strategies with business strategies. This is how you gain trust,” he said.

Clifford echoed similar sentiments, stressing that IT needs to be run like a business. “The CIO of today has to be technologically aware, but completely business focused,” he said. He broke down the evolution of IT into consolidation, which is the basics of a working system; standardisation, which worked with efficiency and reduced cost; and finally transformation. “That’s where a company takes the changes in technology and spurs that back into benefitting the business,” he said.

Bernard Tan, Principal Consultant, APJ and GCN, Schneider Electric also introduced tools that could help a CIO take his mind off the lights, through proper data centre infrastructure management. “A well-managed data centre can save you up to 20 percent on energy,” he said. “One of the biggest concerns among CIOs according to a Gartner study, is space and power.”

Besides cost and energy savings, he told audiences that software like this was powerful in reducing the amount of monitoring that was necessary, through proper reporting and automated allocation of resources.

Strategise the Business
Goeres talked about how CIOs were well-positioned to strategise the business. “Now more and more we’re a catalyst, mirroring the roles of other C-levels, and strategist, because we know the data better than anybody else,” he said. He talked about changing metrics as well, for CIOs, from staying on budget and supporting the business in the past, to current metrics like customer service SLAs and time-to-profitability.

“This is a trend line that’s simmering to a slow boil. It is changing the value contribution of a CIO from a business enabler to a strategist — someone who converts efficiency into effectiveness.” He did, however, say that Asian countries were behind in this mentality, but that they would be catching up sooner rather than later.

To end, he urged CIOs to take the driver’s seat. “We need to be willing to take, or at least share the wheel with other C-levels,” he stressed. “We need to learn how to change the tyres while we’re driving down the highway at 80 km an hour.”

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