The 'New Normal': Change and Opportunity

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It's understandable if business leaders feel as though they've been buffeted by changes in recent years almost faster than they can adapt. Stock markets tanked and budgets shrank seemingly overnight, forcing many companies to rethink their business models and make drastic cuts just to ride out the economic crisis.

What emerged from this tumult is a "new normal" way of doing business, in which efficiency and flexibility—made possible largely through technology—are paramount. The increased emphasis on technology can be daunting for chief information officers, who must devise complex IT strategies—but it also provides exciting opportunities for companies with the vision to invest in their futures.

Following is a look at some of the hallmarks of the new normal, and the changes for which CIOs and other top executives need to plan.

Back to Basics

The natural response to crisis is for businesses to retrench and refocus on the basics. For CIOs, this process offers an ideal opportunity to partner proactively with the CIO and CFO to assess which products or activities are essential and mustn't be affected by cuts, and which are more discretionary. Once the absolute priorities are set, the CIO is in a strong position to recommend technical solutions that will help the company meet its goals.

In addition, strategic-minded CIOs can take advantage of the unexpected upside of crisis: The technologies that save companies money can also allow them to address other IT issues at the same time. For example, the company that is willing to invest $20 million in telepresence now might realize $200 million in travel savings. Part of that initial outlay is for increasing bandwidth required for telepresence, but beyond that, it boosts the speed of applications, which is a priority for many CIOs.

A Flexible, Happier Workforce

The new normal features a far more distributed workforce. Many companies struggle with the issue of employee mobility, but the smart ones want their workers to be flexible. Why force them into the office every day if they can work from home a few days a week? Why should the salesforce come to the office to pick up instructions when this can be done

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remotely? Flexibility leads to efficiencies and a happier workforce, so CIOs need to plan for and enable this trend.

Video

Video is another piece of the new normal that is becoming ubiquitous. Video webconferencing, telepresence, and other applications will become the preferred way for companies to work with customers and suppliers, and for employees to work together. The travel savings alone can make these collaboration tools worthwhile, but they also have the advantage of providing a richer, more productive experience.

The Transient Workforce

In the not-too-distant future, flexible security technologies will pave the way for a more transient workforce, particularly when markets such as India and China open further. Companies will be able to hire short-term workers when they need them, for perhaps two or three weeks at a time. CIOs will need to bring those workers through firewalls and onto networks within 24 hours, rather than the weeks it can take now. Likewise, when the temporary workers' assignments are completed, their accounts will need to be closed down and the networks quickly secured again.

Speed of Innovation

As the speed of innovation continues, CIOs will face vast possibilities that require strategic vision. Here are some of the scenarios and questions they'll need to consider:

- What will it mean when many more devices have IP access?
- What if every shipping box has its own IP address? What would it mean if companies could track everything from employees to a cardboard box? What would they do with that information?
- If processing power, storage, and network speed become essentially limitless, which information would companies want to provide to their customers? Imagine if a customer could pick up a can of tuna in the grocery store, and without the customer having to do anything, the can could transmit three recipes to the customer's cell phone. What might businesses do with that capability?
- What will it mean to corporations when every employee can carry all of the company training materials, instruction manuals, and other information on their mobile phones?
- How can companies help customers manage information if storage is limitless?

These are some of the issues that will arise for business leaders as the new normal takes hold. The challenges can be met, but they must be thought through at the highest levels, because the implications can be enormous. The first supermarket that offers the ability for phones to serve up recipes, for instance, will attract more customers, and if competitors lag too far behind, they'll lose their customer base. The same concept holds for other industries as well.

Conclusion

These transformative technologies will present challenges for CIOs, but one of the biggest might be organizational: the need for business executives to see IT in a new light. More than ever, the business community should look to the CIO as a principal partner and ally, someone who can help solve problems throughout the organization. The CIO, in turn, needs to translate business requirements into technical realization. The best ones will be proactive leaders, stepping to the plate and telling CEOs, "I have some ideas on how I can help."

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