INFLUENCE FOR IT GURUS

WHITE PAPER
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Value delivered

Today's IT team is charged with delivering value to their organisation through the effective use of information and technology. This is a simple enough mandate to understand however delivering on this is easier said than done.

CIO's and their teams face a number of barriers that make delivering value difficult. One of the biggest issues that IT teams face is that delivering value through technology requires a joint effort between IT and all other departments within the organisation. No other department is so dependant on effective cooperation as IT is. Why is this?   Because IT value is not delivered within IT. IT value is delivered across the business when capabilities developed by IT are used. Value in use. This is largely unique within an organisation.

To be fair, all teams are dependant on others to some extent, but most teams have much more control of the value they are producing within their team than an IT team does.

This interdependence, which IT has on other teams, means that to be successful IT teams need to operate predominantly through peer to peer influence rather than through direct management and leadership. As a result, ensuring your team can work effectively across the organisation is a critical component of your ability to deliver value and get to the top of the IT Hierarchy of Needs.[1]

How important is influence?

Well let's start with this quote from a recent McKinsey global survey.

[1] More information on the IT Hierarchy of Needs can be found in my white paper Delivering Value From IT

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"IT organizations that play a partner role—that is, actively collaborating with the rest of the business to shape an overall business strategy that effectively leverages technology—tend to perform better on a number of dimensions, including the delivery of core services and the creation of a healthy organizational culture. But while most respondents, from both the business side and the IT function, believe the IT organization should be a partner to the business, few say IT plays that role today."

Becoming a business partner is seen as the peak of IT influence (more on this later) and while it is true that partnering and influence needs to be led by the CIO, for IT teams to be truly effective in delivering value to your organisation, you need all of your senior IT team to be able to engage effectively with their business peers. Unfortunately, it is a very rare IT team indeed that has widespread influencing skills within their team.

Let's face it, influencing others is not a skill that comes naturally to a lot of IT people.

We shouldn't be surprised by this, after all IT has always been full of introverts and most people do not go into technology because of their love and desire to be with others. In fact, for many it's exactly the opposite. We are attracted to technology because we find the solace in our own company and often enjoy the logical challenge of working out solutions to problems on our own.

This problem solving skill, sometimes wrapped in superb creativity, is one of the superpowers that many IT people are blessed with. But it comes at a cost. While our very best technical people are awesome problem solvers they sometimes struggle to effectively communicate with their non technology peers.

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Let's face it, IT has a language all of its own and when we talk to non IT people we tend to use this IT language. Most of our customers, the users of our IT services, don't understand this IT language and as a result we often come off as geeks that don't understand business. We are seen as necessary because someone has to keep the IT running, but largely irrelevant. If only we had a Babel fish[2].
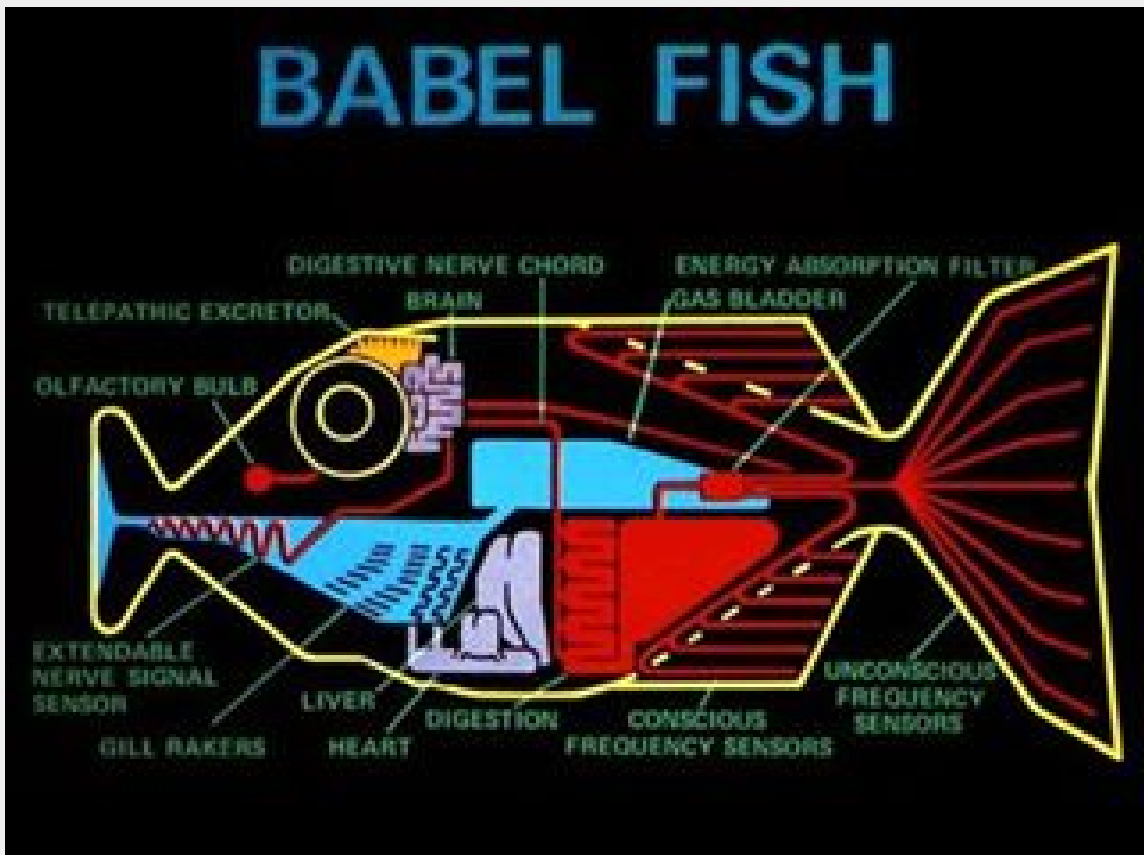

Image by Rod Lord http://www.rodlord.com/pages/home2.htm

[2]"Invented" in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy the Babel Fish is a small, leech-like, yellow fish, and by putting this into one's ear one can instantly understand anything said in any language; this is how Arthur Dent is able to comprehend the other beings he encounters on his travels. "Probably the oddest thing in the Universe." —The Guide

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To make matters worse, our business people are being constantly sold to by well funded professional IT sales teams. These sales teams, usually full of extroverts, have been taught the arcane arts of influence and persuasion. They have money to burn and can paint a very rosy picture of what the new world will look like if our customers buy their product. Shadow IT is born as our business begin to work around us and do their own thing. We struggle to compete because we're not sales guys and we don't have the budgets and resources or training that they do.

Training. There is a distinct lack of training for our senior technical people. Sure we support them to continue to develop their technical skills so they are up to date with the latest technology. This is necessary, however as awesome as it is that our most senior people know about the latest technology, they struggle to be able to explain why this technology is important in a way that the business can understand. They have spent years learning their technology skills but now to be successful they need to be able to connect and understand "business". In the end their inability to communicate reflects on all of the IT team from the CIO down and is undercutting your ability to be influential around the executive table and to deliver on your goals and commitments.

As I mentioned above, a CIO's job is to add value through the use of technology and information. The issue is that the CIO is often the only executive role where you are not directly responsible or involved in the delivery of organisational value and there is no legal or compliance need for the role. Think about it. Value creation is usually led by a COO with support from sales and marketing and some form of product or service delivery function. Other executive mainstays include the CFO, human resource and often risk and legal. While these are clearly important business roles they have significant legal and compliance issues at their heart.

Then there is the CIO. In most traditional businesses the CIO is cast as a support function yet there is no legislation that says you must use technology. The only rationale for investing in technology is that you believe it will make your business better at what it does.
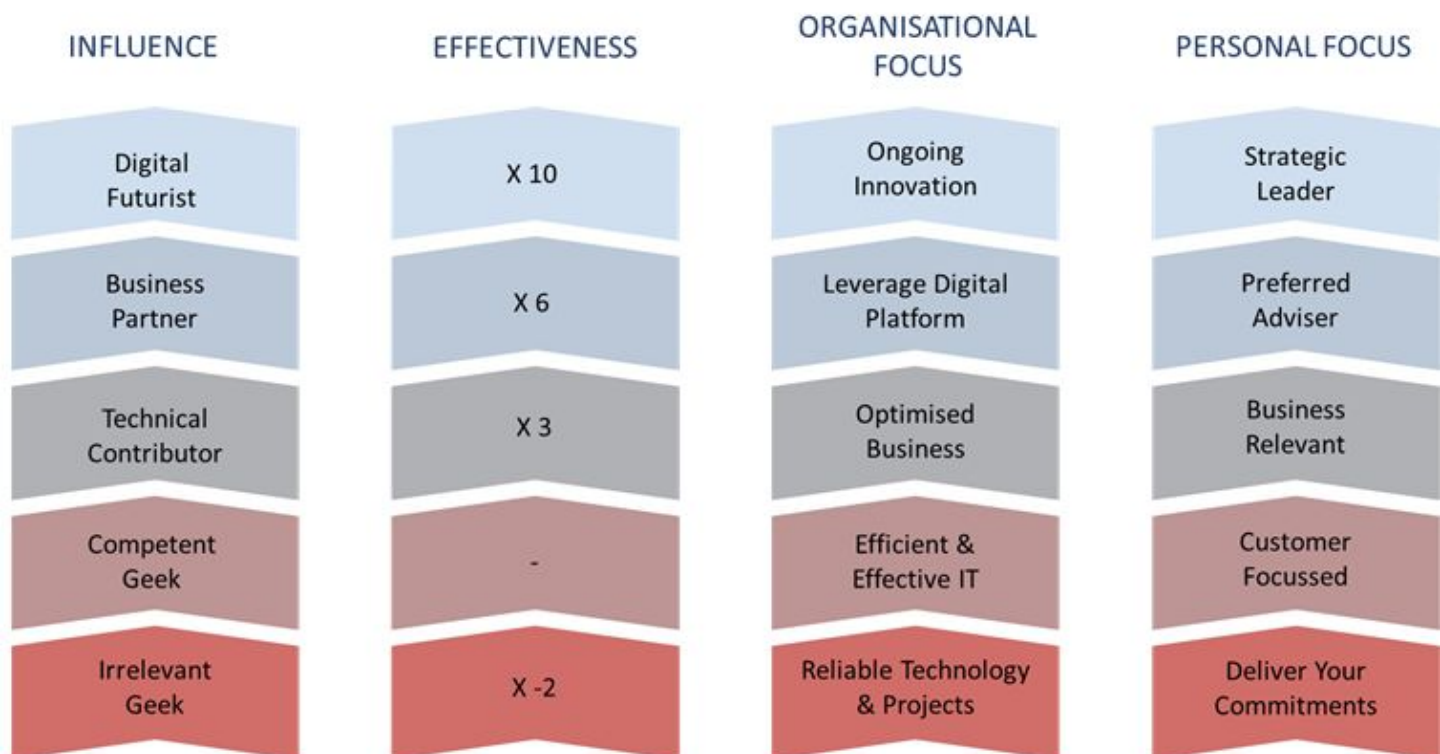
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Under these circumstances there should be no confusion on why the role exists, add value or perish, and perhaps the only real question worth asking is how?

How do you add value when there is no mandate and the role is not directly involved in value creation? The only answer I have come up with is by being influential with colleagues across the business, with the aim of being embraced as a business partner by your peers and their teams.

So how do you build influence? Well, it all depends how you are viewed today and whether you are thinking about this from a personal perspective or a whole of team perspective. The diagram below illustrates an influence hierarchy. Depending on where you currently are in the hierarchy the organisational focus and your own personal focus will change.

INFLUENCE	EFFECTIVENESS	ORGANISATIONAL FOCUS	PERSONAL FOCUS
Digital Futurist	X 10	Ongoing Innovation	Strategic Leader
Business Partner	X 6	Leverage Digital Platform	Preferred Adviser
Technical Contributor	X 3	Optimised Business	Business Relevant
Competent Geek	-	Efficient & Effective IT	Customer Focussed
Irrelevant Geek	X -2	Reliable Technology & Projects	Deliver Your Commitments

The Irrelevant Geek

You know the parody of the IT guy who you sit in the corner, never let him talk to customers and no one really understands what they do? And when things go wrong and you ask what happened they talk in a language that is indecipherable. In the end everyone, except their closest technical colleagues, just end up walking away because, well, what's the point in continuing.   I accept that these guys (and yes they are usually men) are beginning to decline but they still exist and most of your organisation see them as being Irrelevant Geeks. A geek because of the way they talk. Non technical people just can't understand him and he can't or won't try to talk in a way that people can understand him. Irrelevant because he doesn't appear to be any good at his job. After all, whatever it is that he does it doesn't seem to work as things keep going wrong. Projects don't get delivered, changes go wrong and systems keep crashing.

If someone is seen as an Irrelevant Geek there is really only one likely reaction. Avoid them at all costs. Interacting with them is not worth the emotional effort or toll and almost always ends unsatisfactorily. If avoiding them means going outside of normal process and protocol then you will do it, even if it seems to cost you more time and money in the short term, to get what you need. Shadow IT anyone? If you have Irrelevant Geeks in your team, or if you are worried that you might be one, then your priority is to begin to deliver the core of your job consistently.   From an organisational perspective this means ensuring that the systems you support are reliable and available when the users expect them to be and that you consistently deliver your initiatives on time, on budget and to specification. From a personal perspective you need to focus on keeping your commitments. That is, fulfil the core responsibilities of your role. When you say you will do something do it and be polite.

I understand that the description of an Irrelevant Geek is pretty harsh and as a result we are prone to dismiss it as not me. Before you do I would ask you to pause and consider our industry statistics. Most users experience some system fault / interruption to their work every month (often more than that) and almost every commentator believes that half of all IT projects fail. Hardly a picture of competence.

The Technical Contributor

A Technical Contributor is a person or group whose views are actively sort out because people know that you will likely have a positive contribution to make.

At this level, while you continue to do your core job well, you are increasingly consulted on how technology can help the business to solve a problem or grasp an opportunity.   Your technical skills are being used in a way that begins to add value across the organisation. People are no longer going around you. Instead you find yourself being invited to sessions with would be IT vendors because people trust your technical judgement and value your opinion.

Becoming a Technical Contributor is a watershed moment for most.

When you reach this level, working across the business as one team looks real for the first time. Synergy begins to happen as conversations between IT "leaders" and non IT "leaders" build on each other in a way that creates a better outcome than was possible when working alone.

The Technical Contributor

This is a great place to be and if you are there, congratulations, relatively few IT guru's make it to this level.

However there is more that can be achieved if you wish to continue your journey. If you do, then your focus needs to be on continuing to build your relevance by investing in building your understanding of all aspects of the business.

Ultimately your goal is to understand the business as well, if not better than anyone else. You need to be able to deeply understand and articulate in normal everyday non geek language issues like:

- Why your organisation exists.
- How you help customers.
- What your competitive strategy is.
- How your organisation adds value through the products and services you sell.
- How technology and information can support the organisation to do these things even better than they do them today and
- How this translates into value for your customers and your business.

When you can do these things then you will be a trusted adviser across the organisation and around the executive table.

The Business Partner

A Business Partner is a person who is actively sought out by others to provide support, guidance and advice. Their opinions are highly valued because past interactions have taught those around the Business Partner that this person has valuable, often unique, insights that will help them with their current dilemma. If you are a senior technology leader and have achieved this status it is probably because you have been able to consistently solve important business problems through the smart use of technology or information. Typically the Business Partner can:

- Clearly articulate a business problem or opportunity in business terms.
- Successfully position a technology enabled solution that will solve the problem or deliver the opportunity.
- Clearly articulate the business benefits that will be realised as a result.
- Successfully deliver the agreed solution and support the business to realise the benefits.

When it comes to the world of organisational IT there is also often a fifth step. Congratulate your colleagues for a job well done. On the surface this appears quite cynical, however as an enabler of the business I believe we need to be secure enough to allow the business to be in the limelight and happily know we helped make that happen. They'll appreciate it, they'll know what we did for them and they'll ask for our support again. Not only that, when we need something they will likely support us. Do these things well and you will not be just another adviser. You will become a preferred adviser - a true partner in change with your business.

When an IT team is seen as a true Business Partner interesting things begin to happen. To start with it is highly likely that the CIO, or whoever the most senior IT professional is, will have a seat at the executive table and it won't just be any old seat. They will be part of the CEO's inner circle. A person who is looked at to formulate strategy and lead widespread organisational change.

The Digital Futurist

Many believe that the Business Partner is the peak of influence, however there is another level for the most influential and it is the role of the Digital Futurist. The Digital Futurist is not only a partner in change but is seen as the architect and designer of tomorrow's organisation, defining and shaping the very future of the organisation. This is a natural role for an IT Leader for a number of reasons. Firstly, in today's world the vast majority of the catalysts of change that we use to improve and transform our organisations are technology tools. The Digital Futurist can position transformative technology and will be listened to, not as a geek, but as an accomplished business person. They can show how the technology will bring the strategy to life, enable the changes the organisation is seeking and position the benefits and outcomes in a way that is understood and accepted by their peers.

Secondly, the IT team is one of the few teams whose job it is to view the organisation end it end. Most other executive roles are buried deep in the operations of their particular area. This wide view provides a holistic perspective that can add tremendous value and allow the Digital Futurist to highlight constraints within the "corporate system", constraints in how teams and departments work together and how work flows across the organisation. The Digital Futurist can then position potential solutions that will resolve these dilemmas, improve the lives of the team and customers and improve organisational outcomes.

And finally, technology enabled change has the ability to bridge the gap between strategy and effective execution. In today's modern corporation it is technology that provides the foundation of work that defines and changes what activities get done and increasingly provides the platform that we use to interact with our customers. As Michael Porter says: [3]"Competitive strategy is about being different. It means deliberately choosing a different set of activities to deliver a unique mix of value." It is great technology that enables those choices and brings them to life.

[3]Michael E Porter HBR Nov 1996.

The Digital Futurist

When these three things happen technology enabled transformation becomes possible and because of these advantages a Digital Futurist is the ideal candidate to not only lead transformational change but to architect it. We simply need to claim the role.

So how do you get from where you are today to becoming a Digital Futurist. It's an iterative process of building trust, demonstrating competence and becoming increasingly relevant to your peers and the organisation. Let's investigate that now!

Being influential requires a combination of acknowledged competence, demonstrated relevance and trust. If any one of these is missing influence will be difficult, if not impossible.

You are influential when ....
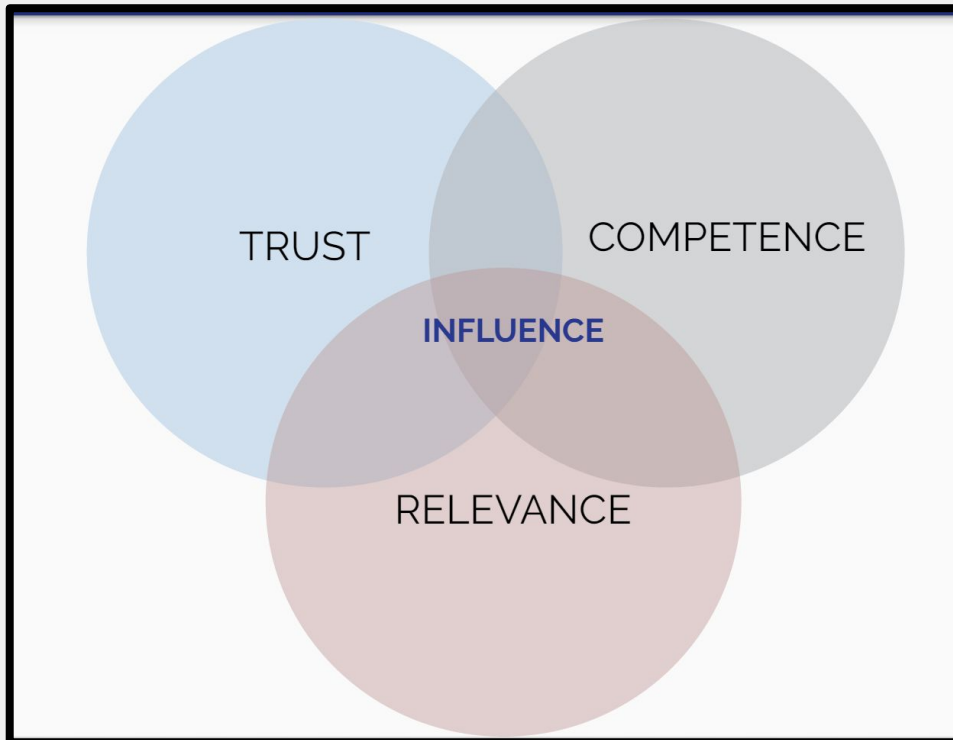
Even two of the three don't work. Imagine that your are relevant and competent but people do not trust you. How do people describe you? I'm picking it is as being untrustworthy. "Sure he seems to have great skills and when he talks he talks in our language but, you know, I just don't trust him!" We all have this feeling from time to time. Sometimes you can't even explain it but it's there and everything that is said is interpreted through that filter.

It's true for the other positions as well. Irrelevant and incompetent, let's be honest it doesn't matter which is missing, little influence is going to happen. So how do you build these 3 key attributes and become influential? It's an iterative process but let's start by looking at each in turn.

Trust

There has been a lot written about trust but the bottom line is that trust is something that is given from one person to another. As such, trust is not something you can directly "work on" as we do not "control" other people's view of us. That person needs to choose to trust us. What we can "work on" however is our integrity and if we act with integrity in all our interactions with people then we will build trust over time.

In my view, Stephen Covey has as good a model for thinking about trust and integrity as any I have seen. In the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People[4] Covey summarises the private victory (the first 3 habits) as the process of "making and keeping promises." It is in constantly living a life of making and keeping promises to ourselves and others that we begin to build integrity. Off the back of this integrity, trust is built over time and is a direct result of your behaviour.

A common metaphor, which is used to describe how trust operates, is that of a bank account. Every action you take impacts the balance of the trust bank account. If you keep a promise, or do other positive things, then you will build trust, it will be a deposit on the trust bank account. Every time you fail to keep your word, or otherwise do something negative, you create a withdrawal from the trust bank account.

As with a bank account, when you have made a lot of deposits then the bank account can take a few withdrawals without too much damage being caused. This may be a one off failure or perhaps asking for a favour. If you have a big balance then no problem, but beware withdrawals are almost always larger than you think they will be and often deposits are smaller than you would think.

[4] I love the work of Stephen Covey and I reckon his 7 Habits provides an exceptional framework for CIOs who seek to become influential. I have written about how this may work in a pair of blogs that can be found here.

Trust

Ok, I get all that but what does this mean day to day when you work in IT. Well here are some practical examples of actions that will build trust:

When someone asks for help, give it to them. If you can't help them in the moment then commit to when you can and make sure you do it.

Deliver your projects on time.

Don't leave your customers guessing. Communicate, communicate, communicate. If someone knows what is happening they are much more forgiving than if they have to guess because you haven't talked to them. If something happens and you can't help or deliver as you committed, communicate immediately and recommit.

If you are wondering whether your actions are adding to your trust bank account, or subtracting from it, then consider asking yourself these questions:

- Am I doing what I said I would when I said I would do?
- Am I doing what I know I should do?
- Am I doing what others expect me to do even if I didn't say I would?
- Am I doing complete work, the best that I am capable of?

If you can consistently answer yes to these questions, then you are likely to be making consistent deposits into your trust bank account with others. If however, some of your answers are no, then there is a risk that you are unwittingly making withdrawals.

Competence

To be influential in your organisation in the medium to long term you need to be able to demonstrate that you are competent at the core of your job. It is virtually impossible to be influential if others do not perceive you to be competent at what you do.

The IT Hierarchy of Needs[5] sets out what it means for an IT professional to be competent in the eyes of our customers. The more needs you are perceived to have filled the more influential you will become. If you want to be truly influential your goal is to have your customers and the organisation's leaders to not only be satisfied with your performance but to be advocates for you. Why? Because a happy customer will continue to use your services, at least until someone better or cheaper comes along, whereas an advocate will be loyal to you and will tell others about how good you are. Advocates will give you opportunities to act outside of what you currently do for them, which provides you with opportunities to add more value and assuming you do these things well, to grow your influence further.

The bottom line is that before you can be influential you need to demonstrate that you are competent. It makes sense that if people look into your world and what they see is a big mess, they are not very likely to listen to your advice about how to be effective. Why would they? From their perspective you can't even do your own job properly so why would they think that you would be able to help them do theirs? You can overcome this by cleaning up your own operations and processes and demonstrating that you are competent and worth listening to. When you have demonstrated your competence at your core job people will start to open up to being influenced by you and your thoughts.

[5]Exploring the IT Hierarchy of Needs in depth is outside the scope of this white paper, however understanding the hierarchy and how to climb the IT Hierarchy of Needs is critical to your ability to become relevant. So if you are serious about undertaking this journey I recommend you read my white paper on Delivering Value From IT and my Creating IT Value eBook.

Competence

The IT Hierarchy of Needs is mainly drawn from an organisational perspective, however if you change perspectives and look at the hierarchy from the point of view of an IT professional, it becomes a hierarchy of influence. Simply, you cannot be more influential than your demonstrated competence, or perhaps more precisely, you cannot be influential beyond the level immediately above your demonstrated level of competence.

In this sense competence must proceed influence. In fact, you can't really become influential in   an organisation until you demonstrate you are a competent technology professional. You demonstrate that you are a competent technology professional by fulfilling the first two levels of the IT Hierarchy of Needs, which are the equivalent of the first two levels of influence shown in the model on page 7. That is, to begin to be truly influential you must demonstrate to others that you are at a minimum very good at your core job, you are a Competent Geek. Once people see you are a Competent Geek they see you understanding their world more and they will begin to invite you into their world, ask for and value your opinion / guidance. This is the beginning of building relevance.

Relevance

The third element required for influence is relevance. If what you are proposing is not relevant to who you are talking to then it is unlikely that you will be influential with them. Why would they bother? To be relevant you need to understand two things. Firstly, how the person you are trying to influence thinks and then you need to understand the specific issues that they are facing right now. The concept of a hierarchy of needs is a useful concept here as well, except this time you need to think in terms of the hierarchy of needs for your customer rather than for IT. The basic structure is the same, however starting with the most basic needs at the base of the hierarchy and working up to the higher order needs. The following organisational hierarchy of needs explains what issues executives worry about, and why:

- Have we **established value** - that is, do we have a service or product that people want to buy?
- Can we **reliably deliver** our product or service - it's great that we have a service that people want but are we delivering it reliably to our customers?
- Are we **efficient and effective** - are we executing our business model efficiently and effectively, which means are we providing value to our customers and making some money so we can stay in business and grow?
- Is the business model **optimised** - is our current business optimised end to end and is it possible for us to extend our current business model into related areas (e.g. different customers, markets or additional products and services)?

You get the picture. The structure is very similar to the IT Hierarchy of Needs and once you have identified where on the hierarchy your business is, you can begin to understand the issues that the business is facing and you can begin to position potential solutions to these issues.

So how do you build this understanding?

Relevance

Be curious about what is going on in the business and about why people do what they do. A truly curious person asks questions and focuses deeply on understanding the answers rather than on judging the answers. These questions (worded tactfully) can help:

- What are you doing?
- Why are you doing this? What's the purpose of it?
- How do you know you have succeeded?
- Are there specific measures you are trying to achieve?
- What makes this hard to do and can stop you from completing the task or achieving the desired outcome?
- What would make this easier?

There are of course many other questions you can ask, but you get the idea. Your focus in on understanding the other person's world. Once you have really and deeply understood their world then you are in a much better position to be able to use your expertise to offer constructive suggestions and they are much more likely to listen, if they believe you understand their world. This is the beginning of influence.

Without understanding the other person's world you are left with little choice but to guess what the critical issues are within a business. This guessing can take many forms. A suggestion from your experience or your perspective. A guess based upon research that you haven't validated. These may look like good ideas from your perspective, but if you haven't bothered to validate this from their perspective you really have no clue if the idea solves an important issue for the executive. You might get lucky but probability isn't on your side. The more likely outcome when you guess is that you end up looking like an Irrelevant Geek.

Ok, so you have understood their world and validated the problems and issues that you may be able to help with, then you can begin to package a response to their issues in a way that makes it easy for them to understand. A simple way to do this is to capture the proposal in a value proposition.

Value propositions

If we .....
address this business
issue / opportunity

By .....
implementing this
proposed solution

Then we will.....
achieve the following
benefits / value
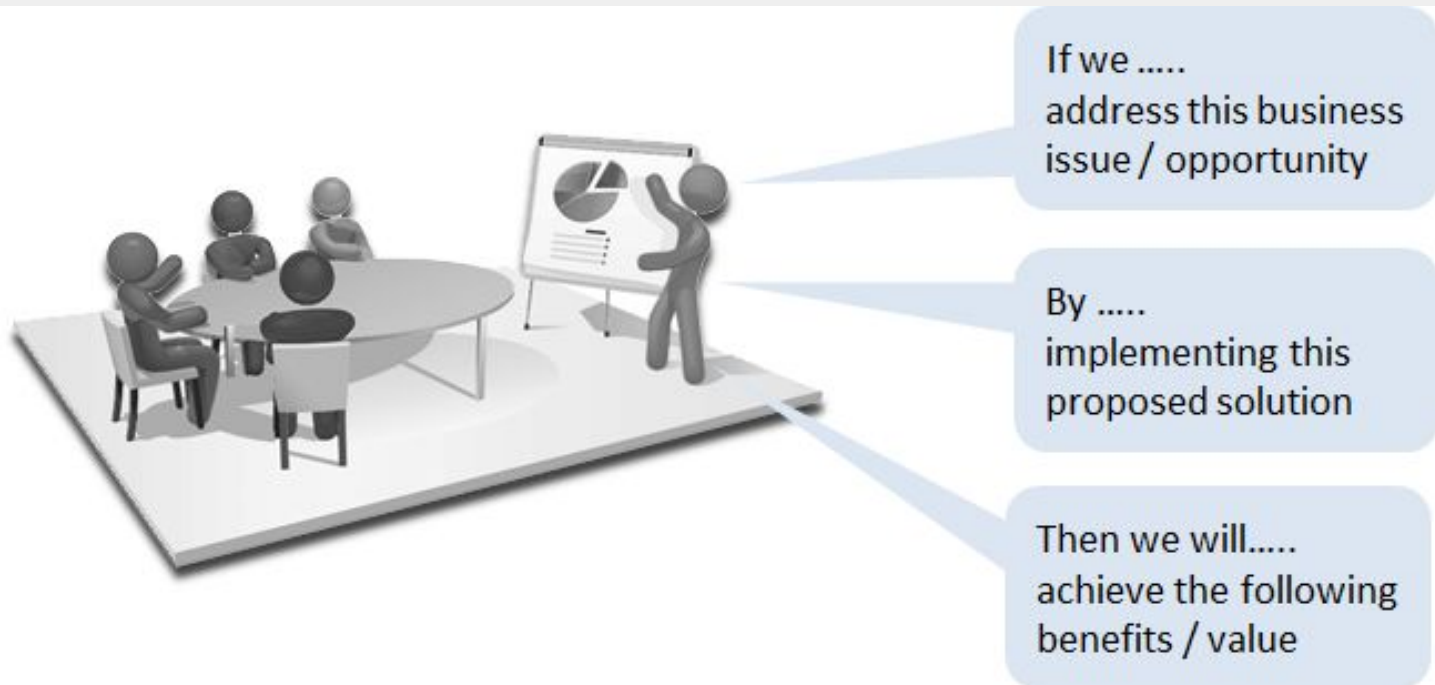
A value proposition comes in three simple parts:

- A definition of the business issue or opportunity that we wish to address.
- An outline of the proposed solution that will address the issue or opportunity (including options if appropriate).
- A definition of the benefits (and costs) that will flow from addressing the issue with the preferred solution.

Value propositions

You may recognise this as the basis of traditional business cases and it is. The key is to keep the focus on the understanding of the business problem / opportunity and the benefits that will accrue, rather than being predominantly a detailed technical explanation of the solution. Too many business cases today provide detailed explanations of the technical solution and as little business context as possible. Being business relevant demands that this balance needs to change. The focus is on identification of the business issues and benefits.

In the end, if we become influential we deliver substantial value to our organisations. Recent research shows that digital leaders generate 30% more profitability than their industry peers. This is not possible without having a high performing IT team that is led by highly influential IT Gurus. But better yet is the personal gain for highly influential IT Guru's. They build better relationships with their business peers, are consistently recognised for their expertise and contributions and they get to do cooler projects and play with great technology that delivers value. A win for everyone.

About the author

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Owen is an experienced management consultant and CIO who is passionate about harnessing the power of technology to create value for businesses, communities, families and individuals.

Previously Owen spent 18 years with Deloitte where he worked with clients from around the world to implement technologies that supported their business strategy. He also led Deloitte's outsourcing practice for Australia and New Zealand.

Owen then became the CIO of The Warehouse, where he was responsible for actually delivering value from IT.

These roles have given Owen a broad perspective of IT, its power and its challenges. He now operates as an independent consultant and advisor, guiding CIOs and senior executives on how to use technology in a way that adds real value to their organisation. He is a regular blogger and contributor to CIO and iStart publications and a sort after speaker across the technology industry.

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