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FROM IT GURU TO BUSINESS INFLUENCER

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From IT Guru to Business Influencer

One of the things that I love about the technology industry is that it is full of smart capable people. The IT professionals that I have the privilege to work with all have tremendous knowledge and expertise, which has been built over years and in some cases decades of study and practical application. As a result of this training and expertise, technology people can see opportunities and issues that few others can see. There are many examples of this. One that is burnt on my mind was an opportunity to allow the team at The Warehouse to effectively work anywhere, anytime, anyway they wanted. The opportunity was clear, the users from the pilot were enthusiastic and the business case made sense. The project however, was rejected.¹

Great ideas from a talented team of technology professionals rejected by the organisation. It happens again and again and at all levels within an IT team. And it's not just ideas for new and better ways of working. Maybe you work on the service desk and you have a user who has the same problem again and again. They are getting frustrated by it and so are you. If only you could convince them to make a couple of changes in the way they work the problem would go away. You try to tell them but you know they'll be back next week with the same issue and be as frustrated as ever.

Or maybe you are a Project Manager and you need your sponsor or business owner to make a critical design decision. You present the problem but the decision just doesn't seem to get made. You highlight it as a risk to the project but nothing seems to happen. The project slips, costs begin to escalate because you will need the vendor resources for longer. Oh and then there is the issue of project resources. The sponsor publicly declares the importance of the project but when you ask them to release some of their team members to work on the project you get half of what you ask for and they are people they can spare rather than the people you need. You raise it again and again but it makes little difference. You know that when all is said and done that it is likely that you will get "the blame" but no matter what you try you can't seem to get this decision, or any decision, to be made in a timely fashion.

¹I have written about this before. The full blog is [here](#)



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Or maybe you're an architect. You look at the organisation's ambitions for being digital. You look at your current systems and you know that these legacy systems will not meet the future needs of the organisation. There are only two feasible options to move forward, a complete replacement or, a major redesign / refactor of the existing systems. You present this to the executive but they are reluctant to endorse your recommendations. One of them comments that it's a lot of money and there doesn't seem to be any real benefit. Why would they invest without a return? You explain its about future proofing, building the foundations for the future and as you do you see their eyes glaze over. Then it happens. A member of the executive raises that large project which went badly, "do we really want to do that again?" they say. It's not fair, you weren't even here then but you now know where this conversation is going to end up!

It's a recurring theme and I could go on. Despite undoubted expertise many technology professionals struggle to get buy in to their ideas. Non technical professionals (and some IT management) just don't seem to "get it" in the same way that IT professionals do. It's frustrating and it limits our effectiveness. The reality is that for IT professionals to be successful and have the impact that they want to have requires more than great technical expertise, it also requires the ability to influence others.





From IT Guru to Business Influencer

Our primary role as IT professionals is to support and enable others outside of the IT team, whether they are our business colleagues or our businesses customers and stakeholders. Your day job might be supporting day to day operations, or delivering projects that improve efficiency, or developing programmes that fundamentally change the way our business operates, it doesn't matter. Everything we do is a collaboration between us and the people we are asked to support and enable. As a result, it is almost impossible to succeed as an IT Professional unless you have at least basic influencing skills and to be truly effective you need to be a master influencer.

Unfortunately, when you look at behaviour and results you might easily conclude that influencing skills do not come naturally to many IT professionals. Perhaps this shouldn't be a surprise, after all, IT has always attracted more introverts than extraverts and many gain satisfaction from the logical challenge of working out solutions to difficult technical problems. This problem solving skill, sometimes wrapped in superb creativity, is one of the superpowers that 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 IT business peers.

This is a problem as the ultimate measure of success for IT, and therefore IT professionals, is not our technical prowess, although that helps, or how good we are at technical problem solving, although we do need to solve technical problems. It is in our ability to add value to the organisation through the effective use of information and technology and we only get to add value through collaboration with non IT professionals. And when it comes to collaboration the ability to be influential is key.

Yes, you need to be influential but how influential do you need to be? This depends on your role and aspiration. To help answer this question let's look at three influence archetypes which cover the vast majority of technologists.



The Needed Geek²

The needed geek is the entry level of influence for a technologist. The name itself is somewhat disparaging. At one level technologists should embrace their geekiness, it's what makes you different and special. However, you also need to recognise that others can find your geekiness hard to deal with.

The needed geek is a technologist who is good at their core job. You love technology and know how to make technology work. If a person has an issue they know that they can go to you and you will most likely be able to help them to put it right. When things do go wrong (which isn't that often) the very best technologists will obsess about why and do whatever they can to ensure it doesn't happen again.

As good as you are at your core job people from across the business find the geek difficult to work with. You speak a different language, one that they consider to be indecipherable "techno babble". As a result, while people don't purposefully avoid you, they do tend to leave the interaction for as long as they can because they anticipate a strange and difficult conversation.

Getting a lot of last minute urgent requests is a typical sign that you are viewed at this entry level of influence. Depending on your role these requests maybe a simple "This isn't working, can you please fix it" or they may be more complex requests like "We are implementing system X with vendor Y and we need data from this other system that we don't have access to. Can you get it for us? Oh, we need it in two weeks."

The requests are last minute as people will often try and work it out themselves and only engage you when they are stuck. They are engaging you because they need your particular technical expertise. The reality however is that they have probably already defined the solution they want and are working towards it. What they want from you is for you to work your technical wizardry to help them get it. In this scenario there is often little room to add real value and if you try you are likely to be perceived as making it hard to progress as they already know their preferred solution.

²There is a level below the needed geek. It is an archetype I call the incompetent geek. As the name suggests this archetype is not all that good at their core job and often struggles to resolve their customers problems and issues. I have not included here because this archetype has no or very little influence at all.



The Technical Adviser

A technical advisor 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 of influence you are increasingly consulted on how technology can help the business to solve a problem or grasp an opportunity. You are being engaged in a way that allows your technical skills to begin to add value across the organisation. People are no longer simply bringing you technical problems and solutions that they need you to implement. Rather, they start bringing you their issues and opportunities and are engaging with you around what the potential solutions could be.

A good indication that you have become a technical advisor is that instead of being engaged at the last minute you find yourself being invited to planning and evaluation sessions because people trust your technical judgement and value your opinion.

As an advisor you are getting the opportunity to make a difference, but on a "transactional" basis only. That is, you get to make a difference when you are invited in by your business peer to work on an issue or opportunity that they have identified. Even though you work for the same company this looks a lot like a preferred supplier relationship. You are working on their issues, on their time frame and at their request.





Partner

A 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 others that you have valuable, often unique insights that will help them with their current dilemma. If you are a senior technology leader and have achieved partner 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 partner can:

If you wish to improve your level of influence a good starting point is to identify which archetype you mainly are and also the archetype you wish to grow to. In making this assessment be realistic and brave. Realistic as it doesn't pay to believe you are at a higher level than is real and brave to get input from those you work with as they often see you very differently than you see yourself and in the end your ability to be influential is all about their perception rather than yours.

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

As a partner not only will you be engaged on specific issues that your colleagues want your support on, but you will play a full role in strategy formulation and planning for the organisation. You will lead discussions with your fellow executives about emerging technology and how it will impact your business model and your industry's competitiveness.



The Conditions For Influence

Great, so we now have an understanding of our current level of influence and where we want to get to, so how do you build your level of influence and just as importantly, how do you become influential in a way that works for a technology expert?

For many people (me included) when they hear the word influence there is an immediate association with sales and even manipulation. Reinforcing this link a lot of the influence literature is focused on the art of sales and while there is an undeniable link between influence and sales, for most IT professionals the thought that we are in sales is a little repulsive. If we wanted to be in sales we probably would be as there are plenty of well paid technology sales roles out there. While we don't want to be in sales we do want to be heard, understood, respected and have the opportunity to make a difference for our clients or for the organisation we work in and this does require influence. The challenge for many IT professionals then is to improve their level of influence without having to be, or act like, a salesman.

This is possible and to make it happen IT professionals need to understand the **conditions** required to be build and maintain influence and based on this understanding take new **actions** that bring your influencing skills and perspectives to life for the benefit of yourself, your customers and your organisation.

For an IT professional to be influential requires the following conditions to be met:

1. You need to be trusted. If the people you are working with don't trust you to deliver what you say you will then you have little or no chance of being influential. In many cases, if you are not trusted people will try and go around you rather than take the risk of working with you.

You build trust over time by keeping your promises and doing what you say you will. Stephen Covey likens building trust to a bank account. You build trust by making consistent trust deposits over time and if you do that well you can build a significant balance, a balance that can sustain the occasional withdrawal.



The Conditions For Influence

So how can an IT professional build trust? By keeping your promises. For example if you or your team say you will resolve an issue in three days then you need to keep your word and resolve it in three days. Similarly, if you say you can deliver a project in four months for \$100,000, then you need to do that. Do this consistently and a withdrawal can be sustained on the occasional time that things go wrong.

2. You need to demonstrate competence. I have written a lot about the need for IT professionals to demonstrate their professional competence. Whether you are engaging a mechanic for your car, a surgeon for an operation, a pilot to fly a plane or an IT professional to manage your technology, the first thing that people look for is professional competence. Most people do not keep going back to a person, or a group, that do not demonstrate that they are competent at the skills required.

For IT professionals to demonstrate competence they need to:

- Ensure that the systems they support are stable and operate when expected. Trust is built by being responsive and fixing issues as they arise. Competence however is about stopping the issues from occurring at all. If the same issue occurs again and again people will begin to question your competence - "why can't you fix it properly?"
- Deliver projects and changes on time, on budget as requested. The competence dynamic around projects is the same as systems stability. If you say you can make it happen then please make it happen!!
- You need to be seen as a good steward of money and other resources. People need to know that you understand the basic organisational dynamic and you need to be fiscally responsible.

These three form the core of your professional IT competence, but there is also a fourth factor to consider and that is that you need to be easy to deal with. For most people if you are hard to engage or hard to work with then no matter how competent you are they are likely to look elsewhere because, frankly, who can be bothered!



The Conditions For Influence



3. You need to build relevance. No matter how competent or how trustworthy you are if you are not relevant to my needs then I am not going to engage with you. Why would I? Never have I heard myself saying something like "I don't need a car but you're a great car dealer and I trust you so what the heck, I'll buy that car from you!" Yet we often try this approach in IT. I have this great technology. It has some really great features and we should buy it! Well, maybe! The real question here is why? What problem does it solve? Or what opportunity does it create? Technology adds the most value when it is deployed to enable an organisation's strategy and supports the organisation to develop and deploy unique and valuable offerings to the marketplace. For IT professionals to be effective in shaping this conversation requires that we understand the issues and opportunities of the organisation as well as, if not better than, our peers. When we understand the business as well as our peers we can position technology as a solution to known business problems and opportunities and this makes us highly relevant.

These are the three fundamental conditions for influence. You build influence by cultivating these conditions over time. Please note, you need all three. When it comes to influence two out of three is next to useless (to misquote the great Meatloaf). You may be relevant and you may have demonstrated competence but if you haven't built trust you risk being seen as untrustworthy - "yes I reckon he can help us but you know, I just don't trust him." Similarly with the other dimensions. They may trust you personally and you may be relevant and understand them but if you haven't demonstrated competence people will wonder.



Actions To Build Influence

So we have identified our current level of influence, we now understand the underlying conditions required for influence so what can we do to grow our level of influence?

The actions you need to take to build influence is different for each of the archetypes.

Three Actions for the Needed Geek

If you believe you are broadly consistent with the Needed Geek archetype situation do the following three things to begin to change the conversation.

- 1. Be easy to engage.** You are much more likely to be sought out early if you make it easy for people to engage you. Consider going to their workplace, sit with their team and be available to support them when they want and need it. They are much more likely to ask for support if you are right there than if they need to go to the other end of the building or spend 5 minutes using the hated online portal.
- 2. Ask how you can help.** As well as being available offer to help. Proactively asking gets you ahead of the game and provides an early warning that something is going to come your way. This in turn makes it easier for you to plan to meet their deadlines and perhaps even to have some input on how best to achieve their goal. Depending on your specific role and mandate consider asking the following questions:
 - Do you have any technical issues that I can help you with?
 - What projects are you doing (or considering) that we may be able to support you on?
- 3. Deliver your expertise.** Whenever you are asked to do something make sure you do it well. They have come to you seeking your specific expertise so make sure you deliver on that. Consistently delivering to them what they request sets up an expectation that you are in fact very good at what you do and this perception of competence means that they will be more likely to be engaged again in the future.



Actions To Build Influence

Three Actions for the Technical Advisor

Becoming an advisor is a watershed moment for most. As an advisor, working collaboratively across the business as one team looks real for the first time. To make it real and to become a genuine partner do the following three things:

- 1. Be relevant.** You have made it this far by being a great technologist and by being able to work out how to apply technology to the issues that you have been presented with. To go to the next level you need to also show the ability to be a good "business person." You do this by demonstrating an understanding of the business issues and opportunities that your users / customers are facing. You need to be able to think and talk about business problems from their perspective as well as provide a technical solution.
- 2. Suggest alternatives.** Having gained an understanding of the issues and opportunities begin to suggest potential solutions. In some cases this will be as simple as developing a business focused options analysis. In others it may be a more proactive. "If we could solve this issue then we would achieve the following benefits. Here are some ways we could make that happen."³
- 3. Deliver outcomes.** Up until this stage your focus has been on delivering the technical solution that you and your customers / users have agreed to. To move into the partnering space you not only need to deliver the technical solution but you need to demonstrate that you are as invested in delivering the business outcome as your partners are. Partners don't simply deliver what is asked for they are fully invested in creating the desired outcome.





Actions To Build Influence

Three Actions for a Partner

Often partnering, as I have described earlier in this paper, is seen as the pinnacle that we should aim for and it is certainly a great place to be and one that few ever truly achieve. There is however an opportunity to progress past "partner" and for you to become not simply a member of the team, but a member of the inner circle. In this role you are not only a member of the team that develops strategy, rather you are looked at to formulate strategy and lead widespread organisational change. If you are interested in progressing to this role then focus on the following:

- 1. Be visionary.** Demonstrate how technology can and will shape and create various possible future(s) in your industry and lead discussions on how and where your organisation should be positioned to take advantage of these futures in an increasingly digital world.
- 2. Architect the future.** Begin to create the future organisation by thinking architecturally, designing the organisation of the future and bringing the design to life progressively as capabilities are built and technologies mature, create value, commoditise and are replaced.
- 3. Fulfil purpose.** Focus your vision on understanding how you and your organisation can fulfil the organisation's purpose and reason for being and on what role technology plays in enabling you to make that happen. Always ensure you remain true to your reason for being while deploying and replacing whatever technology and capabilities are required to bring that purpose to life.

“This is true influence. Not only are you influential within your own organisations, but across industries and maybe even changing the lives of your customers for the better.”



About The Author

OWEN MCCALL



It seems that everyone these days believes in the power of technology to transform. Believing in the power of IT to transform is one thing, actually making it happen however, is an entirely different matter. The road to fulfilling IT's potential to transform our organisations is more often a road to failure than it is a road to success. Just look at the statistics. Most pundits agree that 70+% of IT enabled change programmes fail.

As a lover of technology and a believer in technology's potential to transform, Owen finds statistics like this very frustrating. As a result he now dedicates his time to supporting organisations to implement better ways to deliver change and to fulfill on technology's transformative power.

Owen is a qualified accountant and was previously a partner in Deloitte Consulting where for several years he led Deloitte's Australasian outsourcing business before returning to New Zealand to take up the position of CIO of The Warehouse Group. In addition to running his practice Owen is a regular blogger and contributor to CIO and iStart publications and is sought after as both an event speaker and judge of industry awards including CIO 100 and the NZ Hi Tech Awards.

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