

## The Connected Business

# Changing nature of IT job helps clear path to the top table

### Career structure

## Commercial acumen has taken the place of technical skills, writes *Majja Palmer*

Sarah Flannigan never pictured herself as a chief information officer. But the 38-year-old was attracted to the idea of working for the National Trust and saw in the IT department a business unit in need of a revamp that she could deliver.

One of the first things Simon Jenkins, chairman of the National Trust, said to her when she started was that he hated computers.

"That's fine," Ms Flannigan answered. "I'm not here to talk about computers. I am here to talk about delivering your business goals."

Ms Flannigan is one of the new, emerging breed of chief information officer who are more concerned with communication and business acumen than they are about bits and bytes.

She does not have a technical background despite being in charge of a team of 85 developers.

She says: "Perhaps five years ago a chief information officer would have started out as an IT developer, but I am not a techie."

"The leadership challenges are the same in any department. I have run teams of builders and I am not a builder," she adds.

A 2011 survey by Gartner, the

technology research group, found that around a quarter of chief information officers globally have non-technical backgrounds.

"We don't have the formal data yet but we think the trend is growing," says Dave Aron, analyst at Gartner. "The demands of IT are more complicated."

"It is no longer about running payroll and customer-relationship management systems, it is about how the business exists in a digital environment. Strategic, visionary and interpersonal skills are what is needed."

Tim Cook, who leads the IT officer's practice at Russell Reynolds, the London-based recruitment agency, agrees interpersonal skills trump technical knowledge. "The chief information officer search is the one search that chief executives often do not want to do. They are worried they will be faced with techies they will not connect with."

Hence, Mr Cook says, candidates who have come from management consultancies or more business-oriented roles tend to do better in interviews.

Part of the reason chief information officers no longer need to be as technical is that technology has become more standardised, and less specialist. Its functions can be outsourced.

Some companies also have a separate role for a chief technical officer, a technical specialist who reports to the chief information officer, says Mr Cook.

Ms Flannigan says: "I need to know enough to challenge my team and not be fobbed off. You have to

have a nose for bullshit . . . I respect their knowledge and consult with them but when necessary I take a leadership role.

"What they get from me is clear direction."

The trend is both good and bad news for IT professionals. It may help to make IT a more appealing role for a wider pool of people, especially women.

Ms Flannigan says the growing importance of communications skills may be one reason why more women are going into the job. It is making the chief information officer role a more desirable one, and one with a clearer path to the top management roles.

Mr Cook says: "People used to joke that chief information officer meant career is over. If you said to a group of up-and-coming general managers would you rather spend time in IT or sales, most would not go for IT." But now it could be a step on the career ladder to becoming chief executive.

Mr Aron says: "What we are seeing in the more advanced companies is that [the chief information officer role] is part of the chief executive fast track for senior executives."

"One of the common laments of chief information officers has been: 'Why am I not on the board?' But this new kind of executive often is on the board."

On the other hand, taking on a broader, more strategic role, can be a difficult adjustment for older chief information officers who have come from more traditional backgrounds.

**Tim Cook:**  
interpersonal  
skills trump  
technical  
knowledge



Mr Aron adds: "It is quite threatening for chief information officers towards the end of their careers."

"They need new relationships, they need to be working on influencing the organisation, a whole new set of skills."

The trick he says, will be to bring a much broader range of people into the IT profession at all levels.

Ms Flannigan says: "There is a dearth of good candidates out there."

"I recruit strategically at every level for strong communication as well as technical skills. I like to recruit style over substance."

She adds: "The technical skills have to be there, but the right can-do attitude will overcome any technical deficiencies."

She also pushes her often shy technicians out of their comfort zone, requiring them to spend at least five days each year at Trust properties, where they may find themselves washing up or polishing brass.

"I want my IT people to be completely blended into the organisation," she says.

However, Mr Cook says human resources departments can do more to make IT attractive. Policies of moving people in and out of the IT department would help. And chief information officers can be the best ambassadors.

Mr Cook says: "Chief information officers have to make it feel like more of a cool job."