APC Forum: 
Insights From The Top - Interviews With Two Prominent CIOs

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Simon Gauthier, General Manager and CIO at the Inter-American Bank, has had CIO roles in public service organizations both in Canada and the U.S. Steve Pickett, Senior Vice President and CIO at Penske Corporation, has served in corporate-sector CIO roles both in the U.S. and Germany. I asked them to share some of their insights culled from their careers as successful IT executives.

Let's start our questions with challenges. What is the biggest one you face as an IT executive?

Gauthier: Many challenges face IT executives, so I am not sure if one is necessarily the “biggest.” But definitely one of the biggest challenges today relates to the ability to communicate clearly and effectively, be it with IT professionals, with senior management in one’s organization or with one’s clients. We have come a long way as IT executives in developing the ability to communicate effectively the value of our work. As a result, I believe that our clients have become more technology-savvy and better understand the impact technology can and will have on their environment. In many ways, our challenge is now to find ways to listen better and, in doing so, clearly understand not only the needs of our business users but also the continual pressures to change that they face in order to be competitive and remain relevant.

One additional challenge is to either contain or cut costs, especially as the number of services and solutions being offered rises and budgets are either static or being reduced. Thus the CIO faces the challenge of having to generate savings that can be used to finance the growth that is being experienced in other unfunded (or underfunded) areas.

Finally, the CIO must manage expectations around the adoption of consumer technologies for enterprise grade work. For example, the use of Dropbox, uShare, and similar services poses both a risk from a security point of view, but also a challenge in managing expectations around time-to-solution for IT services and solutions delivered by the IT department.

Pickett: My biggest challenge is not exclusive to IT executives. All executives face the challenge of time. There’s never enough time to do everything as thoroughly as I would like. And this problem continues to get worse. The result is that I have to make decisions without sufficient data or time to delve into all the issues. I have learned to create deadlines for myself for just about everything. As the deadline approaches, I make decisions with the best information I have. There’s no perfect decision, but I’ve learned how to ensure that I have the key facts. It works quite well for me. And I’ve been able to instill the same discipline in those who work for me. I encourage them to set their own deadlines, but then I expect them to deliver - and they
do. We continue to hone this skill by examining results. Successful outcomes result from good decision making in the time we have. We also learn from failures.

As stewards of your organizations’ information and technology, what trend do you think will have the largest impact on your organization in 2013?

Gauthier: Currently, I see two issues: one is that employees want to use their personal computers for and at work. In particular, there are growing numbers of individuals using Mac (vs. Microsoft) hardware who prefer that environment over that provided by the bank. This trend is already driving application and desktop virtualization to levels we never anticipated.

The other is the application and effective use of mobile devices within the organization. The Bank has a geographically decentralized, relatively young and technically-savvy workforce who expects to be able to conduct business from anywhere and at any time via a wide range of portable devices. However, this aspect of “mobility” not only poses new support challenges but also introduces the enterprise to IT security risks that must be mitigated.

The availability of numerous consumer products that employees wish to incorporate into their daily work requires managing a balance between convenience, efficient management and security of access. In an environment of complex cyber threats; this becomes both a pressing and difficult challenge.

Pickett: Without a doubt, wireless technology will have a large impact on Penske Corporation. Managing this technology requires us to think differently about the complex issues related to employees bringing their own devices to work. If everyone brings at least one personal hand-held device, we have to grapple with balancing flexibility with such issues as licensing, protection of company proprietary data, and providing adequate wi-fi capacity. If an employee leaves the company or loses a device with company proprietary data, for some technology we may have to do a complete wipeout—including the employee’s personal data. And how do we address employees accessing sites such as sports channels at work?

Clearly, we will continue to develop policies and procedures to find the right balance.

How do you stay get ahead of the curve on what’s ahead in the use of technology to enable your organization’s continuing success?

Gauthier: My membership in the Advanced Practices Council provides me the opportunity to network with peers and other professionals. I use my APC colleagues as a sounding board for new ideas and seek opinions and suggestions from other professionals and colleagues, all coming from different business and technology sectors and who look at similar problems and challenges from different perspectives. Exchanges are always frank and create an environment of trust where sensitive information can be discussed with assurance of total confidentiality.

In addition, I find the research and research agenda lead by Rick Watson and his team to be highly innovative and often helps or forces me to “think out of the box.” The technology reports are also very well done, informative and, first and foremost, save me my most precious commodity these days—namely, time. The APC helps me maximize it! It is indeed a very effective forum to share and look at new ideas and concepts.

Pickett: The APC saves me time by encapsulating issues. APC researchers bring us facts and insights acquired through rigorous research. They not only provide leading practices, but also frameworks for exploring issues with my non-IT executive peers. These frameworks save us time and help us arrive at much better decisions. For example, Professor Michael Wade at IMD Business School in Switzerland presented two frameworks for finding the appropriate balance within our corporation for gaining global efficiencies while honoring local flexibility.

Finally, you have mentored many emerging CIOs over the years. What advice do you have for newly-appointed CIOs?

Gauthier: There are three issues which keep recurring almost on a daily basis. These could form some “advice” to newly appointed CIOs. First, we should all be aware of the “generation
gap.” The needs and expectations of a younger workforce (particularly in terms of access, portability of solutions, etc.) can be drastically different from those of an older workforce. Five years ago, the average age of staff members at the IDB was 45. It is now in the mid-thirties. This is affecting how solutions are implemented as well as how quickly they are being adopted.

Second, try to be a coach and mentor for your staff. A career in IT has changed drastically in the past five years. A “career” within a single organization is no longer as clearly defined as it once was, and often no longer even possible. So expectations of employees at all levels are changing and it is our responsibility as CIOs to establish the necessary initiatives to meet our employees’ coaching and mentoring needs. The time available to recognize our employees and teams and celebrate their accomplishments is also a diminishing commodity. It is therefore very important to have in place the mechanisms to ensure effective communications within an organization.

Third, a new CIO must accept the fact that his or her role is one of “compromise.” It does not matter how hard one tries; the CIO will never be able to satisfy all users’ needs or meet all expectations. The CIO must quickly develop expertise at balancing the needs of the corporation and the needs of the users at a reasonable cost.

Pickett: My advice is gained from personal experiences when I was a newly-appointed CIO many years ago. Don’t personalize decisions. New CIOs often arrive at the job with pet projects, which they are convinced will lead to significant transformations. When their proposals are not funded, they feel rejected and emotionally devastated. But it’s not personal. If you gave it your best shot, move on; get right back on the horse. It will take time to build the trust of senior management so that they will take greater risks with you. They will get used to your style. And if you consistently present solutions rather than problems, the time to build trust will be shortened.