WELCOME LETTER

LEVELING UP THE NEXT GENERATION OF IT

Greetings from Columbus Business First and welcome to CIO Tomorrow, our annual event dedicated to developing the next generation of Ohio’s digital leaders. In partnership with central Ohio’s impressive community of chief information officers, IT leaders and digital influencers, CIO Tomorrow is a signature event for our region that brings together the community’s current and next gen leaders to share their experiences, engage with one another, make new connections and walk away with actionable intelligence.

This is the 21st anniversary of CIO Tomorrow and Columbus Business First’s ninth year hosting the event. For those who have attended previous CIO Tomorrow events, you know this event spotslights thought-provoking and inspirational speakers, presentations and conversations. This year is no exception. CIO Tomorrow also provides the opportunity for you and your team to connect with a vibrant cross-section of senior executives, key decision makers and emerging IT talent who are ready to meet today’s challenges head-on.

This year’s theme thoughtfully addresses the challenges and opportunities today’s IT leaders face as they navigate a rapidly changing industry landscape. A key determinant of their success will be the ability to find, keep and grow skilled talent in an increasingly competitive labor market.

We’ll explore how CIOs are laying the foundation within their organizations to raise up the current and next generation of talent and seed their future leadership.

We’ll explore today’s work environment and how top leaders are navigating the intersection of rapidly changing technology with a more diverse pool of technology talent. With human capital at the core, this year’s CIO Tomorrow will illustrate how modern-day tech leaders are thinking about and addressing how to level up the next generation of IT.

As always, this year’s event continues to build on our mission to reach a broader segment of the technology and business communities. It also builds on a key call to action for CIO Tomorrow: to continue the conversation throughout the year.

Under the leadership of the CIO Tomorrow planning committee, this event is designed for the Ohio technology ecosystem that is shaping the next generation of digital innovation in our state and beyond. An ecosystem that continues to drive unprecedented growth, innovation, prosperity, investment, and innovation.

Many thanks this year’s CIO Tomorrow executive committee chair Ervan Rodgers, Senior Vice President and CIO of Designer Brands Inc., the CIO Tomorrow planning committee and the broader community of digital influencers who helped shape this year’s event, attendees, and content. This event is for you all.

Thanks also to our impressive lineup of speakers and Innovation Live participants. Your stories, experiences and work are what make this event a special one. Finally, thanks to our sponsors – we couldn’t do this without your support.

WELCOME LETTER

NEXTGEN: LEVELING UP THE NEXT GENERATION OF IT!

I have the privilege of being Senior Vice President, Chief Information Officer at Designer Brands Inc., which includes DSW, America’s favorite shoe company. Our strategy is centered around a frictionless experience for our customers. With the customer at the center, we have strategies focused in three primary areas which include Customer, Brand and Experience. In addition to our national brands, we set a goal to double our own existing brands. We are well on our way with the launch of several brands this year including Keds, Topo and Le Tigre.

I can’t think of an industry that technology doesn’t touch in some kind of meaningful way, which goes to show you the advancements made to support the needs of all consumers. The retail shoe industry is no different and the technology behind the scenes in the life of a shoe would likely surprise you on many levels. Over the past 2 years at Designer Brands, I have become quite a shoe lover with a collection of well over 150 pairs. I encourage everyone to lean in and self-express through the power of a new pair of shoes.

Senior IT professionals have always been forward-thinking in setting up their organizations for the present and future with innovative technology solutions. A winning recipe includes the ability to deliver business needs with efficiency and automation in ways that reshape the art of the possible. Through the lens of innovation and disruption, CIOs work to build, structure, and empower their organizations for the next generation of business technology enablers by anticipating, articulating, and developing the skills IT will need at all levels for generations to come.

It’s an honor to be the 21st year chair for CIO Tomorrow. I stand on the shoulders of many chairs that have come before me, who have built a world-class conference which challenges the norm and pushes the envelope of IT to the next level.

Technology is evolving faster than we can develop a skilled workforce. The IT needs are challenging, and we often find ourselves competing against one another in the same tight labor market. It’s time to re-think this limiting approach and proactively shore-up the perceived skill gaps. Today, I ask you as a leader in Technology to help pay it forward by reaching back to pull the next generation forward. To expand the pool of talent, it’s important that CIOs partner with Human Resources and start to tap into the “untapped”. In addition to the traditional four-year Universities, there is an entire pool of hungry and humble IT talent that have gone through the ranks of IT Bootcamps or technical programs focused on providing essential skills. I have personally found the drive of these graduates to be inspiring. I am asking everyone to work to expand their approach and embrace this vast and vibrant cross section of technology talent, which is a win/win on all levels.

The NextGEN is NOW!
CONFERENCE AGENDA

REGISTRATION + BREAKFAST + VENDOR EXPO .........................................................7:30 AM
WELCOME + OPENING REMARKS ...........................................................................8:30 AM
KEYNOTE ..................................................................................................................8:45 AM
+ MO WRIGHT, President & CEO, RAMA
  Executive Director, African American Leadership Academy
INNOVATION LIVE! ..................................................................................................9:30 AM
BREAK + VENDOR EXPO .......................................................................................10:15 AM
BREAKOUT SESSION ONE ......................................................................................10:35 AM
BREAK + VENDOR EXPO .......................................................................................11:20 AM
LUNCH + STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP PRESENTATION .........................................11:40 AM
BREAK + VENDOR EXPO .......................................................................................12:40 PM
BREAKOUT SESSION TWO ....................................................................................12:55 PM
BREAK + VENDOR EXPO .......................................................................................1:40 PM
KEYNOTE ................................................................................................................1:55 PM
+ PAULA O’REILLY, Senior Managing Director,
  US Midwest Technology Lead, Accenture
INNOVATION INTERVIEW SPOTLIGHT .................................................................2:40 PM
KEYNOTE ................................................................................................................3:10 PM
+ CHRISTINA JACKSON, Chief People Officer, Donates Pizza
CLOSING .................................................................................................................3:55 PM
NETWORKING RECEPTION ..................................................................................4:00 PM
CONFERENCE CONCLUDES ..............................................................................5:30 PM

TECHNOLOGY BREAKOUT
Delaware Room A/B

INDUSTRY BREAKOUT
Delaware Room C/D

PEOPLE BREAKOUT
Franklin Room C/D

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TO SECURE FUTURE TECH TALENT, LEADERS MUST CAST A WIDER NET

THIS YEAR MARKS
the 21st year of
the annual CIO
tomorrow event
presented by Columbus
Business First and
several sponsors,
including presenting
partner Accenture.
Angelo Mazocco, vice
president of advisory
services at Columbus
management and
technology consulting
firm Avaap, co-founded
the event and remains active in its
planning.

He and this year’s event chair, Ervan
Rodgers, senior vice president, CIO
at Designer Brands Inc., recently
talked with Business First about
this year’s theme: “NEXT/GEN:
Leveling up the next generation of
IT professionals. What do CIOs need
as they embrace the future of technology
and work to secure the
next generation of IT
professionals?”

As one of Central
Ohio’s top technology
executives, Mazocco
thinks the story of Bill
Nunn is a good one for
technology leaders to
know as they consider
this year’s theme.

Nunn began his career in the
newspaper business as a sports
writer, sports editor and then
managing editor of The Pittsburgh
Courier. Starting in 1950, he
selected the newspaper’s annual
“Black College All-America Team,”
which included many players from
Historically Black Colleges and
Universities (HBCUs) that weren’t
on the radar of most
National Football
League scouting
departments.

His work caught the
eye of Art Rooney,
the owner of the
Pittsburgh Steelers at
the time. After many
years publishing the
list, which was built on
making connections
inside HBCU programs,
Nunn landed a part-
time job in the Steelers’ scouting
department in 1967, which became
full-time in 1969.

Over the years, according to
Steelers.com, Nunn helped the team
find talent from HBCUs that other
teams largely ignored, including
several who would become Pro
Football Hall of Famers. The 1974
team that won Super
Bowl IX, in fact, included
11 players from HBCUs.
Nunn’s successful run
with the team lasted
until 2014 and he is
one of only four people
outside of the Rooney
family with six Super
Bowl rings.

His contributions earned
Nunn a spot in the Hall
of Fame himself as
“contributor” as part of
the class of 2021.

“Nunn convinced the owners of the
Steelers to take a chance on these
kids that weren’t being considered
by other teams around the league,”
Mazocco said. “He changed the
industry by broadening the pool of
talent and bringing more diversity
into the locker room. The results

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of the Steelers’ dynasty speak for themselves.

“As leaders looking for the next wave of talent, we need to start looking in directions we’ve never looked before,” Mazzocco continued. “Looking at more diverse, non-traditional talent pools will allow us, as IT leaders, to be more creative as we build our teams for the future.”

IMPORTANCE OF OPENNESS AND MENTORSHIP

CIO Tomorrow gives Central Ohio’s technology leaders a chance to connect with the industry’s top thought leaders, disruptors and motivated companies that are driving growth and innovation in the region and beyond.

This year’s theme was pitched to Mazzocco by Rodgers. It stems from the fact that sourcing the right talent for evolving IT needs is challenging, and leaders often find themselves competing against one another in the same tight labor market.

Rodgers said it’s time to re-think this limiting approach and proactively shore-up the perceived skills gap by tapping into untapped pools of labor through mentorship and lifting up non-traditional candidates to take the wheel of the future of IT.

“When I look back and consider some of the barriers I faced, I realize there were advocates in my corner who made time for me,” Rodgers said. “As we look forward to the next generation, it’s important for leaders now to do the same thing. There’s an untapped environment of talent out there – some who want to get into the industry but perhaps don’t have the resources or don’t know how to break in. Let’s find diverse sources of talent and provide mentorship to help them break through.”

Mazzocco was one of those mentors and advocates. After arriving in Columbus in 2006 to work as an IT vice president with Huntington National Bank, Rodgers reached out...
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

to Mazzocco. Both had previously worked at global consulting firm Accenture, so he felt there was enough of a connection to ask to meet over coffee. They did and their relationship blossomed from there.

“That openness Angelo fosters in the local tech community made an impression on me,” Rodgers said. “We want to carry that forward to help the next generation.”

FINDING FUTURE LEADERS

Rodgers would go on to become CIO for the State of Ohio where he tried to compete for talent with consulting firms and private industry – often a fruitless endeavor.

“The job requirements for a government position were – you had to have a degree, it must be from a top university and you must have five years of experience,” he said. “Who has five years of experience coming out of college? Part of solving for the talent gap is bringing human resources along for the ride and easing some of those requirements to broaden the scope of who you can bring in.”

That included tapping into HBCUs like Central State University – just like Nunn did – and hiring “some hungry folks who outperformed folks from the more traditional schools.”

Other places that are cultivating future tech talent include the Tech Elevator coding bootcamp that is geared to help people from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences gain skills and confidence; Per Scholas, which offers tuition-free tech training and certifications, professional development and employer connections; and Color Coded Labs, which empowers people of color with in-demand tech skills.

“We need to ask ourselves how we can pull people into the industry who are talented and want a tech career and perhaps do it in a way that’s more creative than what we have done in the past,” Mazzocco said. “That’s why CIO Tomorrow needs to be about more than just those of us who are leading right now – it needs to be about finding and helping the folks who will lead for the future.”
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Mo Wright is a highly sought-after community strategist, planner and serial entrepreneur. As president of the RAMA Companies, he is responsible for providing executive leadership to each of the RAMA brands, including RAMA Consulting Group, a planning and engagement consulting firm specializing in stakeholder communications and outreach, organizational development and planning and diversity and inclusion; Milan Development, a real estate holding company and business incubator; and 617 Enterprises Hospitality.

Wright is also deeply involved in the community and has served on several boards and committees. He also serves as co-executive director of the African American Leadership Academy designed to increase the skills and efficacy of fellows selected each year.

Highlights from his keynote address, “Solving for ‘Y’: A Next Gen Leadership Toolkit”

You’re a leader ... Or so you’ve been told by others around you. But are you ready and equipped to fully harness your teams and your influence to create lasting organizational impact and value? Many leaders today are unsure.

In fact, the playbook for leading in organizations today continues to evolve right before our eyes. The keynote presented insights and perspectives from the field on the contemporary work environment and the nuances of navigating the intersection of technology, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging; multi-generational teams; and leadership roles.

O’Reilly is a senior managing director at Accenture responsible for leading the technology business in the Midwest. She also is office managing director for the Columbus office. Most recently, O’Reilly was responsible for leading strategic and transformational initiatives at one of Accenture’s principal and global financial services clients.

In the course of her career, O’Reilly has consulted with many of Accenture’s insurance, banking and capital clients. These initiatives included strategy development, large-scale system implementation, acquisition and merger integration, front office and omni-channel experience and overall account management.

In addition to client work, O’Reilly is passionate about giving back to the community and is a frequent industry speaker, author and board member.

Highlights from her keynote address “The future of technology for business: When atoms meet bits”

The next wave of business transformation will create the foundations of a new reality – a shared reality that seamlessly converges the physical lives we’ve been leading with the digital lives we’ve been rapidly expanding.

This is an important time in the decades-long technology revolution that has been shaping business, society and our lives. Businesses have leveraged cloud and data, dramatically speeding up change and bending the innovation curve. New forces of change bring hope that solutions to problems once deemed unsolvable might soon be within our grasp.

And to continue forward momentum, we need innovative Next Gen leaders to successfully manage this massive business transformation. The next wave of transformation will combine our physical lives of atoms and our digital ones of bits. The goal is not incremental improvement, but a step change. The true value of convergence is in creating something fundamentally new.

In her role, Jackson is a strategic business advisor to the CEO and president and key members of the executive leadership team. She also oversees the People Services Team, which includes recruiting, total rewards, training and operational excellence, safety and compliance, associate relations, organizational development, culture and experience and diversity, equity and inclusion.

Jackson is responsible for creating innovative strategies and developing inclusive people plans that build sales, improve profit and protect the brand while enhancing a culture that lives and breathes Donatos’ core values.

Jackson has held various leadership roles as a member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority since 1995, served as vice-chair on the Columbus Harmony Project board from 2013 to 2017 and is now a member of the Girls on the Run of Central Ohio Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility Committee.

Highlights from his keynote address, “A.I. vs EQ: The missing piece”

According to the Harvard Business Review, “There are just a lot of things that machines can do better than human beings...” While this may be true – empathy, compassion for others and authentic leadership cannot be easily replicated.

Digital intelligence will no doubt become an integrated part of our daily lives, assisting us as we grow as individuals and as communities. But it is the “human factor” and the values we hold, share and teach that will ultimately shape and define who we are as a society and where we choose to take our digitally partnered paths.

So, as we re-imagine life in our post-pandemic world and seek new ways to leverage these unique technologies for faster, cheaper and better results, it is imperative that the new foundation we create be one of respect, inclusion and support, both for ourselves and for the Next Gen leaders who will build on that legacy as they dream and realize for the future.
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WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO LEAD TALENT, TEAMS AND CLIENTS?

What do CIOs need as they embrace the future of technology and work to secure the next generation of IT professionals? We asked a group of local executives to share their thoughts on what it takes to lead tech talent, teams and clients in today’s environment and into the future. Their answers are edited for clarity and conciseness.

WHAT MAKES THE COLUMBUS REGION ATTRACTIVE TO TECHNOLOGY TALENT?

McColough: A lot of things make our region attractive - amenities, social life, and access to career options come to mind. We are not a “one tech shop” town. Tech workers can expect some career growth and mobility. Of course, our housing, night life, and opportunities to start your own company compare well to many other regions around the country. But I urge us all to consider that our diversity and focus on building community is a big part of our attractiveness. While we have a long way to go on our diversity efforts, it is becoming less rare to see tech teams with women, LGBTQ+, New Americans, Justice Involved, and People of Color working together. This is a more important value to outsiders than we might realize, and we should keep our foot on the gas in promoting our diverse community.

Hrusovsky: It is a combination of things. One, there are several top-notch universities in the region that attract talent. Two, the standard of living and the living environment is strong. Three, there is a tight IT community that shares and helps each other. Four, Columbus has a vibrant community that includes the arts and sports. Five, several key technology firms have seen this and have made investments in the community and that attracts technology talent to the region.

IT Leaders: Columbus is home to various technology companies, from startups to established enterprises, across various sectors such as healthcare, finance, logistics and retail, among others. The region offers a robust job market with a high demand for technology talent. This abundance of job opportunities attracts tech professionals seeking career growth and advancement. Compared to other major tech hubs, the cost of living in Columbus is relatively affordable. Columbus offers a high quality of life and boasts a vibrant arts and culture scene, diverse culinary options and a wide range of recreational activities. Columbus fosters a collaborative and supportive culture. The tech community in the region actively engages in networking events, meetups, and conferences, creating opportunities for professionals to connect, share knowledge, and collaborate on projects. Columbus is home to several renowned educational institutions that provide a strong foundation for research and development and contribute to the development of a skilled talent pool. The region offers a broad range of certifications such as the IT Leaders program which is co-sponsored by Franklin University. Many local universities host non-degree certifications programs.

HOW DO YOU RETAIN EMPLOYEES?

Bare: Stay close to them. Talk to them regularly. Even in a virtual world, this can be done! Understand their hopes, dreams and objectives. If you support giving them what they need and understanding their aspirations, they will give back to you in their delivery. Care about them. Stretch them. Believe in them. Support them. Let them know you are there to catch them when they fall. Know when to lead and when to follow. Be humble enough to learn from them too.

IT Leaders: Leaders must adapt to a rapidly changing world, embracing agility, resilience, and innovation. The rise of remote work and virtual collaboration requires leaders to foster strong communication skills and effectively manage diverse and distributed teams. Ethical and inclusive leadership continues to gain prominence, emphasizing empathy, diversity, and sustainability. Additionally, leaders need to navigate the increasing influence of artificial intelligence and automation. Continuous learning, unlearning, and adaptability is crucial for leaders to thrive in this dynamic landscape.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12
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HOW DO YOU SUPPORT COLLABORATION?

Bare: I start with understanding the problem I am solving for and who needs to be around the table to help solve it and/or who will be impacted by the solution. That will inform my thoughts about who needs to be a part of the solutioning process to be inclusive and collaborative. I will require stakeholder engagements and regular meetings inclusive of the key people. I support design thinking and ideation sessions with stakeholders to ensure voices are heard and perspectives are gained.

IT Leaders: The IT Leaders program supports collaboration with several Central Ohio IT community organizations. All annual profits are donated to the Central Ohio CIO Forum scholarship fund to help support Ohio students thriving in technology roles. We work with the TechStrategy program to engage our IT Leaders cohorts with the best network of local CIOs and tech leaders twice a year. Our program enables each cohort to work with IT professionals from past cohorts through our private LinkedIn group.

Most importantly, the structure of the IT Leaders program creates networking groups in each cohort, with like-minded professionals who develop relationships in groups and classes throughout the year. Many of our graduates say that this is the best part of the program.

WHAT ENERGIZES YOU?

Hrusovsky: As I am in the later stages of my career, what energizes me is helping the next generation of technology leaders. We grow as a community with strong technology leaders who can work in mid- and senior-level roles to help companies thrive. We are growing as a region by building both our local talent base and attracting top external talent.

McCollough: I am fortunate to work on something that adds value to all sides. We help adults gain the skills and relationships needed to enter into career pathways in the technology industry - often transforming their income opportunities and leading to the possibility of building generational wealth. Helping people join in on the tech boom our region has been experiencing also helps their communities. At the same time, we help tech companies get access to new sources of tech talent, enabling them to meet critical business needs. This machinery is part of making our region better, as there is an economic impact to the inclusion of every new tech worker. Playing a small part in this ecosystem energizes me.

Bare: I love that I get to use so many of my skills from the past and continue learning new ones! I stay hungry with a growth mindset. The role I have, the company I work for, well, it feeds my soul. My strategic thinking has developed and helps me establish frameworks and ecosystems that enable government leaders to transform how they think about mobility and making transportation more equitable, sustainable, safer and efficient. I am able to have an impact on the future of a space that everyone can relate to, that matters in our generation and more importantly, in future generations. My work is disruptive, it is hard, it is transformative and it requires extensive collaboration with really smart people.

THROUGH THE LENS OF TECHNOLOGY, WHAT CHALLENGES ARE MOST APPARENT WITHIN YOUR INDUSTRY?

Hrusovsky: I think the key challenge in the IT industry is that many IT professionals don’t understand the business side of the organizations they serve and there are limited opportunities for them to learn it. This has to be addressed in a meaningful way as business is increasingly dependent on the IT function to be strategic. We need to help our IT leaders move from tactical to strategic effectiveness.
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Bare: Data, data, data. Everything we do today is centered around data. The challenge is getting government to understand that just because you have the data doesn’t mean you need it. Moreover, data siloes need to come down and departments should collaborate under one data governance. It becomes overwhelming for organizations to identify with their data, and how to manage it and make it accessible. They become blocked by the enormity of the data and then just do nothing. We need to encourage better thinking about data and technology from a use case perspective. What is the problem you are looking to solve? Then solve for it with the data needed and build from there. Bit by bit. One layer at a time.

IT Leaders: Our talent demand still outstrips the supply. If you look at the IT talent laid off this year, you will not see many of these IT professionals without a job as other local employers absorbed these jobs. This will only accelerate with the talent demands of Intel and other tech-heavy organizations moving to the region. So, programs like TechElevator, Color Coded Labs, IT Leaders and our local higher educational institutions need to produce more tech talent.

WHAT INNOVATIONS EXCITE YOU WITHIN YOUR INDUSTRY?

McCollough: While Artificial Intelligence is also the scariest thing happening in the industry, it is also the most exciting to me. Not because of what it appears to be capable of, but for the opportunities, use cases, and new business models it is likely to bring forward. AI appears to me to be a massive disruption to the status quo. And while that may mean the destruction of some things we have assumed would be around forever, it also means the creation of the “new.” The ability to augment human capacity – especially in some of the industries that are big in the Columbus Region – represents an awesome opportunity for some of us to create new systems, new businesses, new services, and new social and economic structures.

HOW HAVE YOU HELPED MOVE THE BUSINESS FORWARD?

IT Leaders: We started IT Leaders in 2017. To date, the program has had three hundred participants in six cohorts, representing 127 Ohio organizations. 162 of the first 250 participants have received a certification of completion and we have raised $78,000 for the Central Ohio CIO Forum Scholarship Fund. Over seventy of the first 150 participants have earned a promotion since participating in the program. Franklin University co-certifies the IT Leaders program and offers graduates accepted into their MBA program a 10% tuition discount.

Bare: My experience with Smart Cities and working in government to advance mobility using innovation & technology has contributed to a broader way of thinking about the work we do in Intelligent Transportation Systems (one part of our business.) My experience leading software development teams for autonomous vehicles and data platforms for AI/ML combined with community outreach, stakeholder engagement and global customer support experience positions me as an influencer to scale our company for the future. We are transforming our business to provide more holistic solutions in the defense, intelligence and critical infrastructure markets.
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WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF DIGITAL LEADERS?

IT Leaders: Our advice is to embrace curiosity and continuous learning. Technology is ever evolving, so stay updated with the latest trends and innovations. Develop strong communication and collaboration skills to lead diverse teams effectively. Foster a culture of innovation, encouraging experimentation and risk-taking. Prioritize ethical considerations and emphasize the importance of diversity and inclusion. Cultivate emotional intelligence to understand and support your team members. Be adaptable and resilient in the face of challenges.

Finally, lead with integrity, balancing technical expertise with a solid understanding of business principles. Remember, as leaders, you are responsible to your stakeholders to deliver your best effort and results, so never stop learning and evolving.

McCollough: Success in whatever any of us are trying to do comes from our relationships. No amount of transformative technology, top skills from top programs, or venture capital funding can outperform your personal capacity based on your reputation and relationships. The lines between digital and traditional will continue to blur over time so there are not digital leaders and non-digital leaders. Everyone will be digital. Every enterprise will be digital. We will all rise or fall based on how we treat people, how we are regarded, and our ability to engage and interact with diverse, distributed groups of people.

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CIO TOMORROW PANEL DISCUSSION

FROM TECHNOLOGIST TO IT BUSINESS STRATEGIST

To be successful in today’s highly competitive corporate landscape, technologists must broaden their skills and become more strategic. Skills such as leadership, finance and accounting, analytics, critical thinking, marketing, strategy, and operations are necessary for the next gen technologists to take the next step in their career.

RENEE CACCHILLO
PRESIDENT AND CEO
AT SAFELITE

This topic was the focus of a panel discussion at this year’s CIO Tomorrow event. Panelists Renee Cacchillo, President and CEO at Safelite, and Sophia Mohr, chief innovation and technology officer at the Central Ohio Transit Authority, talked with Columbus Business First about why transitioning from technologist to IT business strategist is paramount in today’s world.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF EMBRACING A CULTURE OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP?

Cacchillo: Strategic leadership is key to the success of your business. It requires a growth mindset – and that means you can never sit still. Even if you are in a competitive market position, you must continue to identify how to innovate given the rapid pace of technology and an ever-evolving landscape.

That’s why it’s important to also teach your leaders to come along with you – to look ahead, anticipate and never rest on your laurels. By keeping one eye on today, one eye on tomorrow and two eyes on the future, you will be best prepared for building a successful future.

Mohr: Most new initiatives that are happening in today’s workforce involve strategies that use some technology. Public transportation is no different. It is crucial to moving forward the organization’s objectives. So, it is important that organizations embrace technology and technological leadership. In the past the CIO was more of a “back office” role. But now they are often out front and in active leadership roles.

For example, if you want to learn about your customers, then technology is crucial. If you want to make the customer experience more seamless, you need the technology to make that happen. The execution of organizational objectives often falls into the innovation and technology departments. Technology used to just be the “how” of a project. Now technology drives organizational objectives.

Another example: COTA is helping to lead a mobility initiative called LinkUS, which will expand transit in the Columbus region and will a build high-capacity rapid transit system for our growing population. But technology will be essential to make sure the system works seamlessly with our existing fixed-route service and connects other customers to micro-transit service.

A transit shelter design is no longer just about structural needs, so how do we create a customer experience that makes it accessible for all? Wi-Fi must be available at all station stops so mobile ticketing can happen for everyone. How do you control crowd flow? Cameras will help us understand crowd demand and improve safety. Digital screens are needed to share information on ticketing and when the next transit vehicle will arrive. Technology will be key to ensuring a positive experience.

WHAT ARE THE TOP TRAITS OF A TRANSFORMATIVE TECHNOLOGY LEADER?

Cacchillo: Keep in mind that growth mindset. Leaders must understand

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the business you are in and then build plans that include iterative optimization (to drive innovation) and Blue Sky opportunities – the things that can stretch you to achieve results when you may not feel they are attainable. Enhance existing processes along the way to drive engagement and efficiency.

You can’t be afraid to try new ideas and some of them may come from your people. Never underestimate how the talent on your team can provide some great ideas that may drive revenue.

Then look to scale for the future that you want to be. In today’s economy, what got you here won’t get you there. It’s important to adopt a transformational approach to take you to next.

Finally, spend time on what you can control and influence. And then get better. Remember that the journey continues to evolve and you must too.

Mohr: As technology leaders, we must step out of that “back office” and be good at asking the right questions to understand the objectives.

First you need to understand the needs of not only your customers, but also your employees to create systems that best serve them. I cannot come up with great technology solutions if I don’t understand your objectives. What is it that you want to accomplish?

What is our strategy and goal for our customer experience? Is the objective to make people safe? Then we need to consider what camera and security equipment will be needed to boost safety.

Is it to make the onboarding process quicker? Then we need to determine mobility ticketing systems and Wi-Fi capabilities for each station so customers can purchase fare before boarding. This is where our upgrades to 5G will be helpful in ensuring fare purchases are fast and boarding is even faster.

As COTA builds a rapid transit system, we want it to run as regularly and as seamlessly as light rail. So that means we need a sophisticated traffic signal prioritization system so COTA bus rapid transit can run with minimal traffic interruption so customers get there faster than their cars can get them there.

Another valuable trait is curiosity to examine every process and try to determine how to make it better. You must also have a love for exploration and transformation.

And finally, we must look at data as more than numbers. In the past, technology leaders were expected to just provide numbers, but we are now out front and that means we need to recognize there are customers and employees behind those numbers and we have to be compassionate about that.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST BENEFITS OF HAVING TECHNOLOGY LEADERS BROADEN THEIR SKILLSETS BEYOND JUST THE IT DEPARTMENT?

Cacchillo: Always do your best to step back and understand the big picture of what you’re trying to achieve – what the company needs are to lead technology both short- and long-term. Technology is interconnected, especially with any type of growth and transformation.
A broad view of the strategy and journey is required to deliver more than the technology solution. Remain focused on the strategy behind the overall experience – otherwise you’re talking to yourselves.

Mohr: In the past the front office determined the objectives, and IT would be brought in later to “make it happen.” But technology leaders with broadened skillsets can now sit at the table from the very beginning and even lead the discussion and drive the objectives. Technology professionals who understand their customers – internal and external – will be able to utilize the best technology that consumers will actually use. They can also be essential in helping customers learn how to use that technology.

WHAT ROLE CAN COMPANIES PLAY IN HELPING TECHNOLOGISTS BROADEN THEIR SKILLS?

Cacchillo: Invest in the tools, training and talent that you need to make the best of your current strategies while planning for what’s down the road. Stay focused on the broader strategic journey.

Include technology leaders in business, talent and financial meetings. Ensure they understand and align with business initiatives, so they can be a stronger support.

Remember: When you include your people and bring them along on the journey with you, they can remain focused on the right things, communicate effectively, repeat key messaging and keep your broader team members feeling confident in your strategies and overall vision.

Mohr: Companies must be bold and embrace a culture of technology, even if not everyone understands it. An organization cannot be afraid of technology. Also, it is inefficient to create new processes and systems in a silo. In the past, leaders would ask for something and then IT would have to figure it out. Technology should be part of the strategy from the very beginning.

Also, companies need to embrace continued education and upskilling of technology professionals. In the past we hired “doers” in IT with just a couple of experienced leaders. We were not elevating the skills of IT members. What happens is that we don’t increase our number of employees with advanced IT skills, and they ultimately look for that advancement elsewhere. We must foster a culture of continuing education and collaboration – because they might have the idea that helps advance our goals.

Among my goals as I grow our technology division is to empower and upskill our team and move toward a more business-centric view. I want to help our team strengthen our foundations for growth, but watch for and be ready for future opportunities to build on our successes. I also want to improve and mature IT execution and operations as well as help our entire organization to better understand cybersecurity.

Once we encourage our tech professionals to learn more about COTA, its goals and mission and our customers, we can truly develop systems that will be equitable, accessible, safe and efficient for all.
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