Hands-On CIO Tackles Healthcare IT

Joseph Williams, Seattle Pacific University

Jason Wood’s always dicey world combines IT complexity with the monumental challenges now facing healthcare providers. He’s the IT Director at Proliance Surgeons, one of the largest surgical practices in the US, with 195 physicians and roughly 1,500 staff running 67 clinical site surgery practices. Wood gave up his CIO title to move forward in his career, which is part of what makes his story about life in the C-suite so interesting.

Back in 2009, Wood was the Director of Departmental Computing at the University of Washington’s Department of Medicine. This was the largest department of medicine in the country, comprising 14 divisions and more than 2,500 faculty and staff.

Then, in 2010, a job opened up at the Benaroya Research Institute at Virginia Mason, an international leader in research on immune system and autoimmune diseases. Benaroya has more than 150 scientific staff, conducting at least 450 active studies, and another 125 administrative staff members are helping manage operation of the Institute. The job at Benaroya offered a lot of the strategic opportunities on the executive team, which appealed to Wood, but it only had the title of IT Director. In fact, the medical field has very much been a latecomer to the CIO role. Regardless, Wood negotiated for an eventual path to CIO and took the job.

During his three years at Benaroya, Wood managed 18 full-time employees, four contractors, and a number of indirect reports spread across four states. He also ran the technology for the Immune Tolerance Network, an international clinical research consortium sponsored by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Last year, the hands-on CIO was attracted by a leadership opportunity that arose at Proliance, which needed someone to oversee a major turnaround. Yet again, the position only had the IT Director title.

Why take what looks like a demotion from CIO to IT Director?

The Proliance role is a much bigger job, so it really was a promotion. I weighed the title change a lot and only made the move because I believe I will earn back the CIO title before too long. In the IT world, titles matter, but responsibility and scope matter even more in the long run, particularly in the medical industry.

(continued on p. 61)
What is the biggest challenge of your job?
There are several. When I took the job, I understood this to be a turnaround situation, but I expected it would take 90 days to get things in order. In fact, it will likely be closer to 18 months. So I need to be patient and methodical with the pace of change.

On my third day on the job—in April 2013—I was informed that we had a major security incident that had to be fixed and documented within 17 days (due to regulatory compliance rules). That was not a great way to start.

In general, healthcare is under enormous pressure to reduce per-procedure revenues and that will also put new pressure on reducing costs. The search to find and implement efficiencies is relentless and, although it’s a shared concern across all departments, everyone is looking to IT for leadership.

Can you talk about innovation?
There’s a lot of pressure on cost reduction, so we’re doing things that might not seem innovative but to Proliance they are. We’ve completed a datacenter consolidation that’s already driving down costs. We’ve started a virtualization initiative that has reduced the number of physical servers by 75 percent. We’ve migrated our core messaging platform off-campus to Microsoft’s Office365 cloud, while adding encryption services that reduced costs while achieving an important functionality that a federal agency was demanding for secure delivery of records to patients. We’ve had to accept that the situation isn’t ideal and come together as a team to remedy it by bringing the infrastructure to a stable and manageable environment—of course, documenting as we go so as not to repeat mistakes of the past.

Jerry Seinfeld had Newman. Sherlock Holmes had Professor Moriarity. Who is your nemesis?
Finance. Great people over there, but they have different priorities from IT.

Apart from reducing the cost of operations, what major challenges have you faced?
We’ve gone through tremendous turnover, with many involuntary and voluntary departures. With an undocumented and antiquated infrastructure, it has been especially challenging for the 17 staff members who weren’t at Proliance just one year ago. We’re building out the documentation now, but it’s a daily occurrence to receive an email blast from someone asking if anyone knows the background on a certain application or system. The applications list has swelled to over 180 as we’ve populated it. We’ve had to accept that the situation isn’t ideal and come together as a team to remedy it by bringing the infrastructure to a stable and manageable environment—of course, documenting as we go so as not to repeat mistakes of the past.

One of biggest challenges facing the team is the organization’s unwillingness to establish IT governance that champions unpopular decisions. For example, we have eight unsustainable electronic medical record (EMR) systems. While it might be unpopular to push clinics who maintain separate P&Ls to get rid of their existing EMR and move toward the corporate solution, it’s imperative that we do so.

Healthcare is going through a transformation much like banking did post-deregulation, and the survivors are those who will have very efficient operations. I’m reminded of Bank of America in the book Breaking the Bank by Gary Hector [Little Brown & Co, 1988] when I think of our current situation. The book chronicles the pushback within Bank of America to any change, because no one felt the need. We’re heading into the same headwinds in healthcare but have yet to really feel the pain that primary care practices have felt.

I haven’t made much headroom in this area. So far, I’ve tried to point out where the inefficiencies are, going so far as to create a time-tracking system, where we account for IT effort on nonstandardized systems. If you don’t have
different use. These kinds of settings are great for thought stimulation.

What part of your job gives you the most satisfaction?
Moving mountains. I can’t be at a place where my team works for three to six months, and we barely move the needle. The excitement of transforming a department and ideally an organization is what gives me satisfaction. When I look back at projects that altered the way the company did business, I get a tremendous sense of satisfaction.

What are the most valuable lessons you’ve learned in your career?
You won’t get anywhere without great people. The recipe to success is to hire and retain the best people you can get. In the world of IT, where one minor detail can have very large consequences, it’s important to staff your team with professionals who understand the repercussions of the changes being made and can get to the bottom of problems when they arise.

I’ve had to do the opposite of what I started doing when I got into technology. My passion for technology led me to reject liberal arts academics and “waste of time” skills like reading, writing, and verbal communication. I skipped those classes and instead worked two jobs in technology while taking a full load during my undergrad. I’d often fall asleep in the computer lab face-down in a Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert book.

I started out managing a small team right out of college and soon began to run up against my non-technical limits. As my team and scope of responsibility grew, I realized that it didn’t matter what I knew if I couldn’t communicate it in a credible manner. I’ve been catching up ever since. Grad school did wonders, but I had to study twice as hard to make up for what most learned in undergrad.

What is your advice to aspiring IT professionals who wish to move up the ladder to the C-suite?
If you are truly passionate about getting to the C-suite, be relentless. Look at job postings for CIO jobs for which you’re nowhere near qualified, and then become that candidate. If you want to be CIO of a large bank, look at what the postings for those positions require, and then go out and get that experience and those credentials. If you’re a single contributor now, seek management/leadership responsibilities. Go to graduate school and learn business or operations for your particular industry. It took me eight years out of college to make CIO by following this path—but I had several lucky breaks.

Tell me about a day in the life.
I typically wake up at 5:45am, triage email while I make coffee, then eat breakfast in front of the computer as I try to get a handle on any overnight surprises or early morning priorities. I leave the house around 6:30am, and I’m at my desk before 7am.

Is there a lot of structure to your day?
Every day is different, but the days fall into a general pattern of sorts. From 7am until 9am, I’m continuing to triage email while I check project updates on SharePoint. Any kind of adjustments to the day’s calendar for me or my staff are usually addressed before 9am.

At 9am, meetings start and run throughout the day until 5:30pm. I try to keep meetings to 30-minute blocks. I regularly meet with the COO, risk management team, and heads of the clinics. There are a lot of budget and project
meetings, and, because it matters in our industry, there is a lot of focus on compliance and reporting. I spend about half my day in meetings and the other half plowing through budgets and reports. I try to meet with my extended staff on a regular basis and occasionally with vendors. Throughout the day, I’m constantly triaging new email.

We’ve been talking about 90 minutes. How many new emails have you received?
I had about 60 emails in my inbox, and now it looks like I have 230. I’ve implemented a fairly sophisticated inbox filtering system for sorting through and prioritizing my email. I defer looking at lower priority emails until the evenings or weekend.

What is lunch like and do you take breaks?
My senior program manager and I order lunch online every day, and we do a 30 minute working lunch together. I don’t really take breaks.

What is your evening like?
Typically, I leave at 5:30pm, so I can be home for dinner. I ride a motorcycle to and from work, so that’s a nice break. I know a lot of executives who take calls during their commute (or text!), but you can’t really do that on a motorcycle.

I check email again before joining my wife and four-year-old son for dinner from 6–7pm. Dinner time is a “technology-free” zone, so I try to work out once a weekend. The job has been so consuming that I lost 12 pounds in the first three months.

Do you take vacations?
We go to Hawaii for nine days each year. I typically bring the phone, a laptop, and a tablet so I can stay in touch. Emails pile up and I can’t relax on vacation if I’m not at least on top of what’s happening at work. But I don’t work more than an hour a day while on vacation.

How long do you think you can keep up this pace?
I’m at 16 hours minus a quick dinner and counting today. I think I can keep this up for several more years if the work stays interesting and I continue to find meaning in what I do. The worst part of the job is the sacrifice of personal time. I bet you’re going to hear that a lot from CIOs.

What’s the best part of your job?
Helping change the corporate culture to be more customer-focused, getting rid of the adversarial culture that existed before me, and watching how this team is really turning things around.

Joseph Williams is the Dean of the School of Business and Economics at Seattle Pacific University. Contact him at josephwi@spu.edu.

Selected CS articles and columns are available for free at http://ComputingNow.computer.org.