Microsoft CIO Talks Innovation, Career Growth, and Dogfooding

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Jim DuBois’ CIO role at Microsoft is unique in ways many tech professionals don’t think about. Sure, he’s responsible for applications, infrastructure, and solutions. Yes, he leads the company’s information risk management and manages processes that keep the lights on for more than 127,000 employees in more than 110 countries. And of course he manages an IT organization with several thousand people and rather complex relationships with suppliers that are often key Microsoft customers and partners. All of this is important stuff.

Yet what makes his role extremely interesting is that his team deploys the pre-release versions of Microsoft’s products directly into the company’s production environment. His team and Microsoft’s 100,000 employees provide the proving ground for products like Microsoft Office and Azure before they are released, which means the company is running on software that sometimes isn’t quite ready for prime time. Nevertheless, DuBois’ team makes it work while providing direct feedback to the Microsoft product groups so they can improve and enhance the products before their commercial release.

A 20-year Microsoft veteran, DuBois became CIO on 1 Jan. 2014, after serving as the interim CIO for seven months. A graduate in computer science from the University of Washington, DuBois spent seven years at Accenture before following his mentor to Microsoft. Although he relished the consultant’s life, after the birth of his second daughter, DuBois was looking for a more stable work life, and Microsoft offered some interesting challenges. Although Microsoft moved DuBois around with tours in Tokyo and London, he was able to take his family with him. He wasn’t intentional about getting international experience so he could become a CIO, but in retrospect, it provided him with great perspective about local and regional organizations that have helped inform his views on IT management.

What was it like for you, personally, when you were first promoted to CIO?

It’s been a sea change, not only on the personal side but also at the company and industry level. I’ve never learned so much in my career—first and foremost, learning to be uncomfortable.

The biggest impact was when I was asked to be interim CIO. Kevin Turner, our chief operating officer and who I report to now, was clear that it was an interim role while they looked for a permanent candidate. During this time we had major changes at the company: a new strategy, a major acquisition, and a new employee performance review program, not to mention the announcement of a retiring CEO. All these changes were exhilarating to me in the role of CIO, because IT was the key enabler to the first three: the devices and service strategy, the Nokia acquisition, and the new employee review model. So change was all around me.

I asked the CIO leadership team to allow me to play the role of CIO, as we could not afford to lose momentum, and we couldn’t wait until a new leader was appointed. I really dug into the role while I prepared myself for bringing a new leader (continued on p. 61)
up to speed. The interim CIO role meant I had to partially transition away from day-to-day operational management and project execution oversight to a role focused more on strategic planning, partnerships with a broader set of executives, and IT staff management.

At home, the interim CIO role meant my wife and I had to adjust to new time demands while supporting priorities at home. My wife is in the midst of getting her doctorate in psychology, so our personal life was already busy.

After seven months, Kevin told me that I’d changed his view of what I could do and he’d not found anyone else who could do the job better. I accepted the permanent CIO role in January. The interim role really helped me appreciate the honor of being asked to take the role and to lead the people within Microsoft IT.

What is the biggest personal challenge of your job as CIO? It’s true that the IT team has big challenges and opportunities ahead with the Nokia integration into Microsoft, and many other strategic projects. But as I grow into the role of CIO, I know leadership of people and staff management are priorities that can’t be minimized or put on the back burner. In my brief time as CIO, the number of IT employees has grown by 30 percent. So, the biggest challenge for me is to develop an IT culture that enables the Microsoft transformation in a mobile-first, cloud-first world, and one that reflects the cultural attributes of a One Microsoft approach.

What is it like being the CIO for a company full of brilliant technologists, many of whom could be or have been CIOs in their own right? It’s a challenge and an opportunity—my peers in the high-tech industry can empathize.

What mobile phone do you carry? Nokia Lumia 1020. I like the personalization, the great camera, and Cortana.

What other personal technology do you use? Xbox One—my favorite game is Titanfall.

I expect Microsoft employees to work with pre-release versions of Microsoft products and services.

I love being surrounded by smart, diverse, and motivated people. They’re more technical than the general population and expect that we provide IT services accordingly. It allows me to play a bigger role than I might in a typical company, because some of our IT services are run by product engineering groups, and there are many employees who self-manage their devices. It means that Microsoft IT needs to trust employees to do the right thing, and tolerate more risk than IT staffs in most other industries. It also means that I have higher expectations of Microsoft employees to educate themselves on how to use devices wisely and how to treat different types of data. And that means that I expect Microsoft employees to work with pre-release versions of the Microsoft products and services so they can help us provide feedback on their experiences. The IT staff manages this process, which is called “dogfooding” internally, because we eat our own dog food before it’s available to customers.

Where does “innovation” play in your role? Are you a catalyst? Microsoft IT innovates on devices and services. It’s one of the three core IT strategies. This strategy appears in several ways. First, we continuously improve the service and support experience for all Microsoft external customer segments.

Second, we want to inspire customers with our innovations...
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Jerry Seinfeld had Newman. Sherlock Holmes had Professor Moriarity. Who is your nemesis? Without naming names, I’d say time. Now that I’m CIO, it’s a challenge to find the time for all the priorities in life. In my old role, I could prioritize meetings with all the product engineering and R&D teams to see what’s coming and how these products could be used to run the business. I get to attend fewer of those meetings now and have delegated attendance to others.

I also say time because one of the roles of IT is to make the company faster. From getting products to market faster to helping customers find the answer to their support issue faster, to getting prospective employees into the interview loop faster and helping sales teams qualify leads faster. Speed is an imperative for IT employees.

What is the one thing you need to delegate that you haven’t yet? Technical support for my friends and family. Just the other day I was helping my dad with his online access and authentication into MSN. I suspect everyone in IT can relate.

But seriously, shedding my favorite and comfortable responsibilities from my old role has been a challenge with the transition to CIO. My assistant, business manager, and HR partner remind me of this regularly.

How do you personally keep up with technology in general? Keen interest and osmosis. I have a keen interest in the ability of technology to augment life by making it better, simpler, and more enjoyable. I’m lucky to be surrounded by some of the smartest technology people in the world, which makes it fun to come to work every day. A recent example is from Juha Turkki, the former CIO of Nokia and who’s now on my staff. He’s teaching me about Nokia devices, services, and apps and how he uses them.

How do you personally keep up with the technical details of Microsoft’s vast product line? The real answer is that I don’t keep up with everything, but I’m inquisitive and love to learn and truly want to know the impact and outcomes of IT engagements with the business. One of these engagements is how we “dogfood” products inside the company to drive business initiatives forward.

A few months ago, we put into production a feature of Microsoft Azure called ExpressRoute. This feature is going to allow IT to securely move hundreds of applications to the cloud per month, giving us more flexibility. As I think about retiring thousands of end-of-life servers over the next few years, the move to the cloud reduces costs and increases business agility. That’s a technical feature any CIO would want to know about.

What part of your job as CIO gives you the most satisfaction? I love being in the middle of everything we are trying to do as a company. The role of technology is more important than ever in any company’s success. I love playing the role of customer with our product teams, and exchanging ideas and best practices with industry CIOs.

What are the most valuable lessons you’ve learned in your career? Helping people understand they are part of something big and impactful is rewarding. Making really big impacts requires change. A lot of people don’t like to change. Explaining change is hard, because everyone hears the message through their own filters, based on their own life experiences. I’m still learning how to do this better, but I know it takes leadership, role modeling, persistence, and finding the right, influential people open to change early.

What is your advice to aspiring IT professionals who wish to move up to the ladder to the C-Suite? There are many paths up the ladder. But as I reflect on my journey from IT pro to CIO, some items come to mind. First, I’ve always had a plan for what I want to do next, but it has almost never turned out the way I planned because opportunities surfaced that didn’t.
Tell me about a typical day in your life.
I’m not a morning person and, if possible, I try to take my son to school. So if I can help it, my workday doesn’t start before 9:00 a.m. I try to spend at least 10 percent of my time with customers, then divide up the rest between running IT and working with our product teams. I try to set aside an hour a day for thinking and strategy, but right now I don’t stick to that rule most days. I’ll answer emails in between meetings or lulls in meetings, and post to Yammer (internal enterprise social site) a couple times during the week. Sometimes I have lunch, although usually lunch is with a meeting. I tend to work later at night after my family goes to bed. I like this time to read, catch up on some of my mail, post to Yammer, and prepare for the next day. I’ve always done some work at night. It’s the balance I chose as I’m up late anyway. As for the weekends, I try to limit that as best as possible, especially if it’s a sunny Seattle day.

How often do you see the CEO/COO/CFO?
I’m fortunate that I used to work with Satya Nadella in my old role and when he ran Microsoft’s enterprise and cloud business. As a new CIO with a new CEO, every week Satya expects me to let him know what I have learned as a customer of our devices and services. I have a good connection with our CFO, Amy Hood, so we can accomplish most of what we need to via email as she helps me with corporate governance. I report to our COO, Kevin Turner, and interact with him regularly as well.

What is the best part of your day?
It’s different every day. There are times where I know we are getting stuff done that is needed. There are better times when I get to make a decision, influence a direction for the company, help someone else be successful or teach them something new so they can make a bigger impact—where I really feel like I earned my keep. Those are the times I value most.

Do you take vacations and, if you do, are you plugged in?
My family loves to travel. We try to get away somewhere new every year. I do like to stick around in the Seattle area in the summer and take three-day weekends rather than long vacations. On the family adventures, I completely unplug from work. Other than that, I do stay connected. Technology is part of my life and helps me make the most of life experiences.

How long do you think you can keep up this pace?
I love it, and I’m all in. It’s been a little over a year now as CIO, including the interim role. I can’t think of anything I’d rather be doing.

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