

Building future-proof CIO capacity crucial for SA progress

The role of the CIO is evolving fast, and CIO upskilling and new ICT skills pipelines must be a focus if SA is to stay abreast of global development, say leading SA CIOs.

Speaking ahead of the annual Institute of Information Technology Professionals SA (IITPSA) President's Awards, which recognise the achievements of South Africa's top CIOs, previous winners and members of the judging panel note that the role of the CIO has changed dramatically in recent years, and will continue to do so.

"The annual IITPSA President's Awards clearly illustrate the changing roles and responsibilities of South African CIOs," says Ulandi Exner, President of the IITPSA. "Ten years ago, the CIO had a highly technical focus, and it was fairly unusual to see CIOs who innovated to drive business. Now, we see a broad field of nominations for our Visionary CIO award, and all of the nominees have a highly strategic approach to the technology they deploy, and how it is used to drive business growth. Another change taking place in the South African landscape is the increasing levels of trust being placed in CIOs – it appears they have become well entrenched in the C-suite."

Today's CIO must not only keep the lights on, but must also play a direct role in driving new products, services and business.

Previous IT Personality award winner and CEO of Entelect Shashi Hansjee says the modern CIO has been shaped by the era of digital disruption. "CIOs used to be purely focused on assets, infrastructure and systems. Nowadays, they have a far broader focus. They are more strategic, more connected with the business and reputation. They are no longer just driving transformation through technology alone, but collaborating with other areas of the business – including marketing, finance and sales – to support technology investments and push internal innovation and disruption before it comes from the outside and disrupts the business. Many of the CIOs we deal with are also performing part of the role of the CDO, and we are seeing more CIOs moving into the role from business backgrounds rather than technology backgrounds."

"The future-proof CIO needs a deeper understanding of all the facets of the business they work in, as well as leadership skills to get buy in and the best out of talent on their teams in such a skills-short environment," says Hansjee.

Facing up to skills challenges

Barloworld Logistics CIO Tshifhiwa Ramuthaga, a past winner and a member of the judging panel, says CIOs today must develop the capacity to learn, unlearn and relearn if they are to remain 'future proof'.

"CIOs must also learn to incorporate the principle of failing fast into the organisational culture and they need the ability to lead and function in uncertainty," she says. "While CIOs working in some sectors – including financial services, telecoms and mining – seem to be on par with the rest of the world in terms of their skills, more work is required on professionalism in IT across the world."

With CIOs under pressure to do more and become more versatile and enterprises increasingly dependent on strategic innovation, the right skills have become a greater concern than ever before.

Hansjee has noted an increase in the number of top CIOs, developers, analysts and engineers leaving the country for jobs abroad.

"This trend started around three years ago – from young people wanting to travel the world to older professionals being offered jobs abroad – skilled South African IT professionals are leaving the country. At a fundamental level, our universities produce world class skills in the technology disciplines, and our professionals are native English speakers with a good work ethic, they are cost-effective to relocate and easy to entice. So global companies facing the same high-level skills

shortages are head-hunting them. But this exacerbates the skills shortage, and because we have a fairly young workforce as a country, if you lose the senior staff there is no-one left to mentor them,” he says.

Ramuthaga believes South African industry needs to invest in developing new skills in emerging areas such as artificial intelligence, robotics, augmented reality and design thinking. She says this skills development should start early and have broad reach, to effectively strengthen the skills pipeline: “Winning the award allowed me to reach out to future IT specialists and leaders in high schools and universities across South Africa, emphasizing the message that the IT profession is open for all genders and races,” she says.

Ahmed ‘Smiley’ Ismael, former award winner, member of the judging panel and founder of Siyafunda, firmly believes that South Africa needs to take a long-term view of ICT skills development: “If we don’t build ICT skills and future CIOs from an early age, we risk increasing the country’s digital skills gap and falling further and further behind the rest of the world,” he says. To do so, the country needs to make connectivity and digital devices readily accessible and affordable, and introduce ICT literacy and even coding training to children in the early learning stage at school. It is also important to raise awareness among young South Africans of the broad range of career options available to those who study maths, science and ICT-related fields.

“The introduction of a social component in the IITPSA President’s Awards this year is a phenomenal development in this regard, because it starts showcasing social ICT role models, and these great ICT personalities will motivate more youths to enter the field and explore what ICTs can do for society,” Ismael says.

The prestigious IITPSA President’s Awards recognise South Africa’s IT Personality and Visionary CIO of the Year annually. The 2018 awards also include two new categories – a Technology Excellence Award and a Social Responsibility/Community Award. The 2018 winners will be named at the ICT industry’s premier year-end gala dinner and networking celebration, themed, the sky is the limit, in Johannesburg later this month. For more information about the gala dinner and to reserve seats, go to www.iitpsa.org.za