7 Traits of a Great CTO

Original post by **Roger Jin** on **July 31, 2017**

A great CTO can be a critical driver behind a technology company's success — whereas a bad CTO can lead to stalled projects, high turnover, and poor quality software.

But what traits actually make up a great CTO? Generic characteristics like a strong work ethic have their place of course, but the role of a CTO is intricate, encompassing far more than just technical skills and project management. What traits make a CTO great at their job.

1. Technological Insight

Ensuring quality across the entire organization is a critical responsibility of a CTO. For that to happen, a good CTO should be able to work alongside his or her team — because they know how to.

Beyond knowing the technicalities though, a CTO should also have enough insight to recognize when a new solution, coding language, tool, or hardware device is worth exploring — and when they are not.

2. Decision Making

Whether you're deciding to migrate a technical system, reorganize your team, or prepare a high-level presentation, as a CTO, you're going to be marking a lot of decisions, both on a long and short-term basis.

When it comes to technological and business decisions, a great CTO should make moves based on evidence and experience. As for decisions pertaining to in-house affairs and office politics — well, those usually prove to be the most technical of all.

3. Team Management & Deadlines

A CTO might make the big decisions, but they don't (usually) work alone. Instead, they'll have a passionate team behind them that cares just as much about the product as they do. That's the idea, anyway.

With that in mind, part of being a great CTO is excellent team management. A strong CTO isn't afraid to hire team members that bring new and sometimes unpopular ideas to the table.

Beyond being able to cultivate and manage high performers, a stellar CTO will consistently be able to lead a team towards new and innovative technologies, at a reasonable cost/under budget and on schedule too. This requires stellar team management and communication skills that few possess.

4. Eloquence

A CTO has the relatively unique job of keeping their finger on the pulse of technology — as well as keeping an eye on the reaction of the market to that technology.

To do that job efficiently, and to make their work useful for the dustruct, a CTO has to be eloquent enough to convey their findings to the rest of their team, their stakeholders and their peers — even the non-tech savvy ones.

A great CTO will be able to quickly understand and explain complex technical topics to that wider audience, and will also have the communication skills to inspire and educate their team and their company's clients or customers about the importance of the new technology in question.

This is helped along by both a wide breadth and depth understanding of the technologies available, as well as the right communication skills to get the right messages across.

5. An Eye for Design

Sorry to break it to you, but a CTO needs to see beyond anything technical.

It doesn't matter how agile your team gets or how well you're making use of the latest technologies — there is no substitute for awesome design.

The best CTOs understand that design of a computing infrastructure or of a product is a fundamental part of a brand's success. They also have to do their best to work with the design demands of their peers and superiors — because if they want something to look and work innovatively, it's the CTO's job to try and make it happen.

6. Knowing When to Get in the Details (And When Not To)

Although they should know how to, it's true that not all CTO's code or design networks.

But even if a CTO is a prolific technician within their own right, a good CTO knows when to get their hands dirty on a given project, and when to let their team members handle the nitty gritty stuff.

The CTO should have an eye on the bigger picture, ensuring quality and supporting his team from the sidelines.

7. Business Insight

Remember when we mentioned the importance of technological insight to a CTO? Well, that trait won't bear much fruit without business insight, too.

Not every new technology is going to be the best fit for the district, and indeed, many fads come and go within the digital realm. A great CTO will be able to discern between meaningful changes in the market, and momentary blips.

Once a good CTO can tell the difference, his/her business insight should come into play, helping him put together a plan of action that will not only impress stakeholders, but will also be ROI positive.

Sure, it's sometimes difficult to know when technologies are going to be a hit or a miss. But, the CTO needs to have a broad enough understanding to know what technologies are ready to help the company, and its customers. If there's a disconnect between the CTO's technological and business mind, problems will inevitably arise.

The Foundations of a Great CTO

A good Chief Technology Officer does need the above traits in order to shine a light on their district's technological future. They need to lead their team, know when to get their hands dirty, when to delegate, when to pivot into a new technological trend — and when not to.

No CTO is perfect of course, but if you're trying to be the best CTO you can be, the list of traits below are a solid foundation to build upon.