

The digital disruption of the CIO

It's time the government appointed a chief digital officer, says Marie Johnson

Marie Johnson (CIO)
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The Australian government's decision to abolish the CIO role indicates a profound misunderstanding of the impact that the public sector's use of technology has on the broader economy.

It also suggests a lack of appreciation that every policy setting has technology in its DNA. The CIO role stands at the inflection point in the digital disruption of enterprises, industries, public administration, and the economy.

Technology is no longer just an enabler. In fact, it never was just an enabler. It's one of the most powerful policy levers and catalysts of innovation in service delivery. It's also the most under-used policy lever in the government's toolkit. In many respects, very few see technology as a policy lever at all.

This nexus between policy lever and service delivery and administration is critical to understand – because it opens up a discussion about governance and accountabilities.

For decades, technology in government has primarily focused on automation, not transformation. However, there have been some standout examples of digital transformation such as the introduction of the Australian Business Number (ABN) in 2000.

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If technology is a pervasive lever across the spectrum of policy, administration and service delivery – changing the economics and design of business models – what does this say about governance and accountabilities? And in particular, the responsibilities of the CIO?

Is the CIO accountable for the client experience or actually harvesting and realising return on investment? Is the CIO accountable for system performance? The design of the operating model? The risks that could be attributed to technology? Is the CIO responsible for innovation?

These questions are important because governments and enterprises are largely ill-equipped to comprehend the impact of digital disruption. This is increasingly now a major focus of company boards.

The signs have been very clear but interpreted as 'technology' or 'IT project' issues in a great many audit reports, capability reviews, various inquiries and media reports over the past decade. So, why have structural and systemic issues persisted? And who is standing back and looking at governance and assurance issues from a system-wide, economic and risk perspective?

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Over the years, audits of inquiry dealing with governance and IT projects have pointed to complexity of systems, lack of architecture and business engagement, inadequate or scarce skills, and procurement methods as key reasons for project failures.

IT projects are identified as costing too much, delivering too little, or failing completely. It would seem that the various audits, reviews and reports individually are misreading or not identifying the systemic signs of disruption.

A very powerful commentary in the May 15 edition of *Harvard Business Review* titled, ['The IT project that brought a bank to its knees'](#) is a must read for all CXOs.

The article rightly says that it's the CEO who is accountable for the enterprise architecture. This is not a CIO's responsibility.

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This perspective on accountability raises the question as to who in government is responsible for creating an enterprise architecture that determines how the government should operate.

The Australian government's decision to eradicate the CIO role has profound implications for whole-of-government strategy, governance, and risk.

Having a clear and executable strategy, strong governance and unambiguous accountability will determine what the role is. This is not to say that because there has been an Australian Government CIO in one form or another for the past decade, that things should not change.

The rise of the chief digital officer

THE CHIEF DIGITAL OFFICER – THREAT OR BOON?

I have long advocated a new role – re-framed in the broader context of digital transformation – the role of the chief digital officer (CDO).

I am delighted that the National Commission of Audit has similarly identified the need for such a role – and positioned this as a whole-of-government transformation position.

The time has come for conversations to focus on how this new role could drive the transformation and re-imagining of public services over the decades ahead.

This is my vision. The CDO role will not be about business as usual or an agency-by-agency approach and for that reason, the digital transformation of government must be centrally driven – the person leading this must have passion and drive.

FEDS APPOINT NEW DATA CENTRE PANEL

A 'Commission of Transformation' group should be set up – similar to reconstruction commissions that are created after man-made or natural disasters.

This no longer assumes that public sector services will be delivered by the government: the digital delivery platform will be fluid and shaped by what the client wants.

The team must unapologetically be the world's best. Drawn from all sectors and disciplines, the best from the giants of the web, human factor specialists, designers, systems thinkers, modelers, architects, and innovators from developed and emerging markets.

The government will source talent not through a long drawn out procurement process but through an innovative method akin to mobilising reserves.

FEDS INCH CLOSER TO MORE WIDESPREAD CLOUD SERVICES

The effort to deliver this transformation needs to be imaginative, scientific, measured and agile and the timeframes need to be aggressive. Although driven centrally, this transformation will have a system-wide accountability framework.

We have well and truly moved from the industrial to the digital age with all the signs and symptoms of digital disruption. Government is not immune and strong and innovative leadership is required.

The Australian government spends more than \$5 billion annually on technology so there's a compelling urgency for it act on the recommendations of the National Commission of Audit and appoint a chief digital officer.

Marie Johnson is the managing director and chief digital officer at the Centre for Digital Business. She has extensive public and private sector experience in Australia and internally in technology and innovation, and has led the strategy and implementation of reform programs across government.

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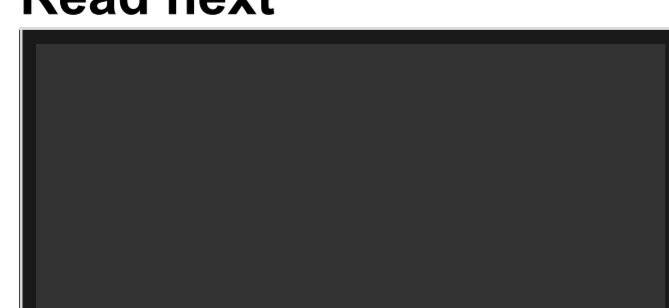
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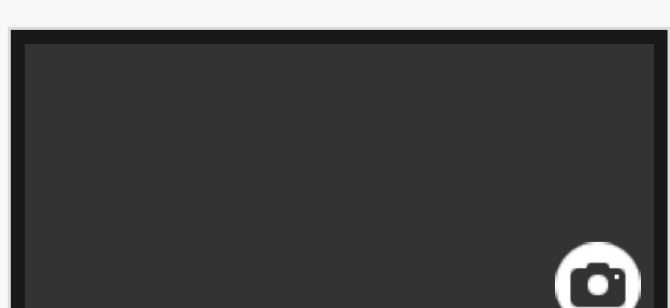
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