

When will the public service appoint CDOs?

Agencies need chief digital and chief data officers, argues Marie Johnson

 **Marie Johnson (CIO)**
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Much is being written about the rapidly evolving role of the chief digital officer (CDO). Forums and groups on LinkedIn provide phenomenal insight into the role and the digital disruption across industries and economies.

The 'CDO Club' on LinkedIn has forecast that the number of chief digital officers will double again this year, [growing to 1000 worldwide by the end of 2014](#). It anticipates that there will be more than 200 chief data officers by year's end.

So how will public sector organisations benefit from having CDOs?

I have been leading significant digital transformation programs for many years, and although the CDO role may be new, the defining questions are enduring – because these go to governance, the heart of the operating model and the capability architecture that enables it.

In 2012, while at the then Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), I led a team with diverse public and private sector experience to examine the appointment of a CDO. This person would work on digital and transformation initiatives as part of the Visa Pricing Transformation program.

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As with many organisations, the digital rhythm of 30, 60 and 90 day cycles (or far more frequent fast runs), did not align with the traditional two-plus year release schedule and capital plan involving legacy systems and environments.

We created the concept of 'two-speed IT' that could accommodate the different roles, responsibilities, relationships and rhythms across the digital and industrial environments.

The business and policy drivers were for unprecedented agility, enhanced data to support analytics, data driven understanding of the client experience, operational efficiency, and cost reduction.

Key relationships would be in the areas of risk and analytics, policy, service delivery, finance, and workforce planning – indeed right across the enterprise, across government and beyond to strategic and international partners.

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The defining governance questions went to the heart of the drivers for change.

Who is responsible for policy outcomes and adjudicating policy inconsistencies in the digital environment? Who is responsible for data, data quality and data analytics? Client experience? Driving costs out of operations?

Who leads a team that transforms the operating model and changes delivery arrangements? Who manages the deep changes to the workforce that result from these changes? Who is responsible for identifying and incubating creative and innovative concepts?

And most importantly, what is the changing risk profile, and who is responsible for the capability architecture – the blueprint for the digital operating model?


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We reached out to advisory firms, banks, telcos, logistics, and aviation organisations for insights and innovation approaches to transforming from traditional legacy models to digital enterprises.

The result was a map of a potential organisational structure, and scenarios of a digital future with a radically transformed operating model.

And the operating model was defined in terms of two pillars – 'digital' and 'data'.

It is therefore interesting to reflect on the CDO Club forecast of the emerging role of the chief data officer, given that countless audits and reviews of Australian public service agencies over the past decade or more have pointed to systemic problems in relation to data quality and standards.

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The chief digital officer role clearly would not be an IT role, but a role to drive the transformation of the operating model. This was the first investigation of the CDO role and related governance issues in the Australian public service.

The big missing piece 18 months ago and still today is the whole-of-government story: a coherent strategy driving the digital transformation of government and the digital transformation of government agencies.

Although the lack of a coherent whole-of-government digital strategy has not stopped agencies from implementing and working together on some phenomenal digital initiatives, it has impeded the system-wide transformation of the machinery of government beyond the agency-by-agency perspective.

This is not e-government re-badged; it's not about 'putting transactions online' and automating bad and complex processes – it's about fundamental reform.

And the same defining governance questions posed from the single agency perspective of DIAC (now the Department of Immigration and Border Protection), have far more profound implications from a whole-of-government perspective and the transformation of public administration in Australia.

The emergence of both CDO roles are not passing fads – but an escalating strategic governance posture by public and private sector industries globally to transform and remain relevant through the unprecedented impact of digital disruption.

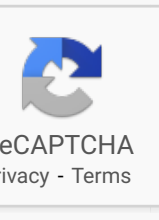
There is now an increasing urgency for action on the National Commission of Audit recommendation for the appointment of an Australian Government chief digital officer (and accompanying CDO roles in key agencies) – a pivotal role to drive the strategy for deep and systemic transformation.

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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