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The Role of the CISO in Digital Transformation

Wednesday, 26th of May 2021

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Today Digital Transformation is less of a buzz word and becoming more of a cliché. The reality is that people have been desensitised around the topic, yet many still are not clear what it actually means and what the implications of it is. This reality is becoming more and more pronounced for CISOs who find themselves in a world where what was expected of them in the past is still relevant, but what is expected now in a digital world, is not quite defined. This article explores these realities and puts forward a framework to help the average CISO deal with some of the implications of digital transformation.

Digital transformation can be seen as organisations leveraging the ability of technologies to transform the organisations' abilities (1). Think of how artificial intelligence can automate decisions in real-time, carrying context and meaning. This was not previously possible, and so through these types of technologies, organisations can fundamentally change the way in which they fulfil certain activities and operate.
But you might be asking yourself what is driving this embrace of digital transformation for organisations? Well various aspects can be highlighted, but in essence it can be distilled to the following four:

- Changing of customer needs are fuelled through the increasing expectation of personalisation and meeting previously unmet needs;

- Changing economics where the cost to manufacture services in a digital space is on a decreasing trajectory, creating increased business competition;

- Changing business models, where platforms are starting to become more dominant in scale, and taking more market share; and

- Technologies' ability to solve problems is rapidly increasing, allowing organisations to solve previously unsolvable problems.

Stemming from these realities, one can expect the future to introduce more change, which leads to more complexity, all transpiring at an exponential rate, as technologies' ability increases.
This backdrop is the reality that the average CISO needs to contend with, coming from a world where their primary focus was on protecting the organisation and now moving to a space where the expectation is driving strategy and advising the organisation (2). These realities have been highlighted through various publications, emphasising that the CISO is expected to play out their role as a leader (3) in delivering the organisations digital transformation (4).

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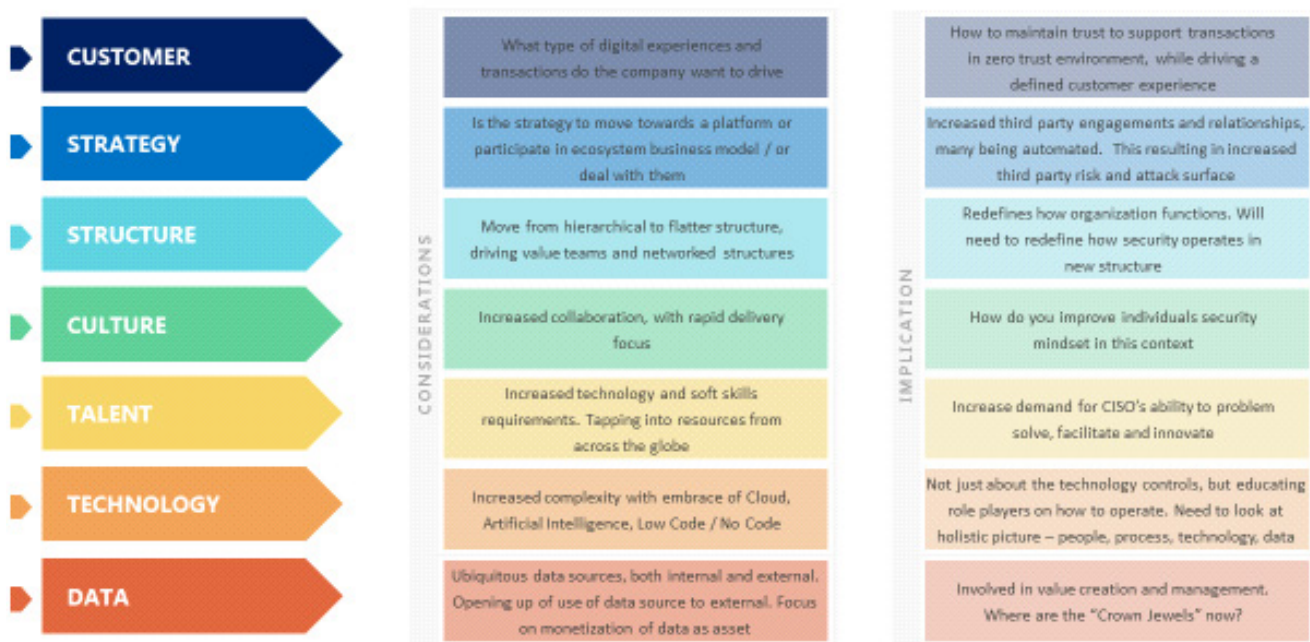## The Role of the CISO in Digital Transformation

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This expectation gap requires that the average CISO invests in adding some additional skills and understanding to its armour:

- Ability to effectively solve problems across diverse environments;

- Know how technologies enable strategies;

- Measure value in a digital context, across customer, operations and the business ecosystem

- Know how digital transformation plays out and how to navigate the common pitfall.

Drawing on the common aspects to consider in any digital transformation, and examining the primary outcomes that organisations will be driving across its transformation, the framework below helps convey (as cheat sheet) what the CISO should understand and appreciate as impact to their world.

CISO DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FRAMEWORK

	CONSIDERATIONS	IMPLICATION
CUSTOMER	What type of digital experiences and transactions do the company want to drive	How to maintain trust to support transactions in zero trust environment, while driving a defined customer experience
STRATEGY	Is the strategy to move towards a platform or participate in ecosystem business model / or deal with them	Increased third party engagements and relationships, many being automated. This resulting in increased third party risk and attack surface
STRUCTURE	Move from hierarchical to flatter structure, driving value teams and networked structures	Redefines how organization functions. Will need to redefine how security operates in new structure
CULTURE	Increased collaboration, with rapid delivery focus	How do you improve individuals security mindset in this context
TALENT	Increased technology and soft skills requirements. Tapping into resources from across the globe	Increase demand for CISO's ability to problem solve, facilitate and innovate
TECHNOLOGY	Increased complexity with embrace of Cloud, Artificial Intelligence, Low Code / No Code	Not just about the technology controls, but educating role players on how to operate. Need to look at holistic picture – people, process, technology, data
DATA	Ubiquitous data sources, both internal and external. Opening up of use of data source to external. Focus on monetization of data as asset	Involved in value creation and management. Where are the "Crown Jewels" now?

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The relevance of the framework was tested through the CISO Alliance, which comprised of a community of seasoned security professionals. Drawing on the expertise of the community, there was a resounding agreement that digital transformation carries high prevalence in their respective companies, where some strategies aim to drive future relevance of their business model, and for others the focus was on increasing the engagement with customers. It was highlighted that the past period under COVID, served as an accelerator as organisations mobilised their efforts to manage their relationships as trusted providers to their respective customers.

Strong emphasis was placed on the importance of how the organisation approaches and engages with digital transformation, ensuring that all functional areas across the organisation appreciate their required change impact as the business lead transformation is played out. Emphasis on skills and collaboration seem to be common areas of concern as organisations drive their strategies, placing a high focus on customer centricity.

Common recognition was carried by all that technology served as an enabler, and as such managing the associated complexity of it, is on the one hand a function of knowledge, but more importantly rests in the nature of trust that people place in the role of the CISO. This trust vesting not only in how protected the organisation is, but also how value is created through its digital assets. Stemming from the review, one can conclude that the framework does provide good use.

Central to digital transformation, information security experts agree that the role of the CISO is being asked to operate in areas that extended beyond the traditional realm of information security. This signalling an opportunity for the CISO to redefine themselves as they move to help drive the creation of value for the business, as a leader.

1 https://savethedate-digitalnow.com/s/Jeanne-Ross-DN-Presentation.pptx
2 https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/in/Documents/risk/in-ra-CISO-as-a-service-noexp.pdf
3 https://www.isflive.org/s/article/Becoming-a-next-generation-CISO
4 https://www.cyberark.com/resources/white-papers/3-ciso-strategies-for-digital-transformation-success
5 https://cisr.mit.edu/publication/2021_0301_ValueinDigitalBusiness_SebastianWeillWoerner

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