The State of CIO with Helena Nimmo

00:00:01
Speaker 1: Tech Reimagined. Redefining the relationship between people and technology. Brought to you by Endava. This is Tech Reimagined.

00:00:12
Bradley Howard: Hello and welcome back to Tech Reimagined. I'm Bradley Howard. I'm glad to welcome you to a new episode about shape. We're now full steam into season three in which we explore how technology is influencing the fabric of our society, how we live, the way we work, and how we do business. Almost every Thursday we try to speak to the leading minds in the tech world and how it impacts our day-to-day lives. And speaking of interesting personalities in the technology world, it's such a great opportunity to be able to introduce you today to Endava's CIO, Chief Information Officer, Helena Nimmo. Helena is our first guest to return to the podcast for a second time. So a big welcome back to Helena. How are you today?

00:00:52
Helena Nimmo: Thank you Bradley. I am very well today. It is Monday and the sun is shining. I couldn't ask for a better start to the week.

00:01:00
Bradley Howard: Oh, wonderful. And it's also warmed up recently which is fantastic as well.
So today we're going to be discussing the CIO profession and its impacts in the current IT landscape and what that means for both employees and clients.
So before we jump straight into it, do you mind introducing yourself and letting our audience know a bit about your background?

00:01:20
Helena Nimmo: Sure. So as Bradley said, I'm, I'm CIO for Endava. I guess you would now classify me as a seasoned CIO. This is my third role in being in charge of technology one way or another. What is interesting was I have experienced is I started in the technology sector but I've moved around across different sectors. So I've had an opportunity to see what it is like to be a senior technology leader in a number of different sectors. I've also managed to straddle a couple of different countries, starting my career in Finland, moving over into the UK. And most of my roles have been global international roles, which always brings that extra spice and dimension into technology and being a senior leader.

00:02:06
Bradley Howard: Excellent, and welcome to the show.
So the CIO role varies a lot from company to company. So what is your CIO role intel at Endava.

00:02:14
Helena Nimmo: Right, so Endava is obviously a professional services organization being an IT services company. So it's very different for example to be in a CIO in a manufacturing organization. But one of the big differences are that in professional IT services company or professional sector in general, you have many more users than you would say in manufacturing. In manufacturing, not everybody touches technology. Likewise, in the

professional services side of things, people roughly use the same systems regardless of who they are, they touch the same systems. Whereas again, if you're manufacturing, you have very role specific technology and you also have a lot of operational technology rather than technology as a sitting in front of a screen just staring at your systems and your numbers.

00:03:08
Bradley Howard: Oh, thank you for that. Obviously it sounds really obvious, but I hadn't quite thought of it in those ways before.
So how has your role as a CIO changed in the more recent years with hybrid working and fully remote workers?

00:03:22
Helena Nimmo: Hybrid working is quite interesting and it's quite a challenging premise, not just for IT leaders, but any leader in the business. First of all, you're going to have to reflect on what are your personal working methods and then to understand how you might be imposing your working methods onto others. And you have to step out of that because hybrid working and the way we're starting to consume technology is very individual. It is less about one size fits all. And I think that is a very significant change for technology leaders. We are having to break down our user group in a much smaller entities, not just based on the profession but also based on their age group, for example. So there's a very different approach that we need to take on what technology and how do we use technology for individuals in the company.

00:04:20
Bradley Howard: So it's kind of a further trend beyond consumerization, for example.

00:04:25
Helena Nimmo: Absolutely, it is literally... And I guess in marketing terms everybody talks about segmentation. That's something that we have to think about much more now as technology creators or technology providers. On how do we take that into account when we're putting solutions and options together.

00:04:42
Bradley Howard: And how's your role been influenced by cybersecurity? How do you sleep at night worrying about cyber threats? Do you sleep at night worried about the cyber threats?

00:04:50
Helena Nimmo: Well, I would be lying if I'd say that there isn't a single CIO on the planet who is not worried at some point about cybersecurity threats and for a very, very appropriate reason. And we're seeing this not just as consumers and individuals, but in companies. Crime has moved online and online crime for individuals often means you get those scam text messages, for example, where you pay a little bit of something to get your post delivered or your parcel delivered. For companies it's much more significant because of the data we hold or the IP that you might have, the intellectual property. So theft has moved online and, as such, a lot of organizations who hadn't thought about it in advance or didn't have advanced technology are now starting and having to put barriers up to protect themselves from this threat. So it is a really increasing area and it is not just about the company, it is also about the individual. We humans still happen to be the weakest link. We really are.

Bradley Howard: Yeah, definitely. It's always that social engineering, isn't it, that allows the criminals to get in.

00:06:08
Helena Nimmo: Yes.

00:06:09
Bradley Howard: I remember having a conversation with a CIO client and asking, were they worried about essential threat to their core cloud platform or about the edge threat through one of their users? And they said exactly that. That much more about the edge threat for someone impersonating, definitely.

00:06:27
Helena Nimmo: Yes. And people do get tired and people do get distracted. So it is the education of the individual. But it's also the making sure that we are not turning it into something that everybody's afraid of. It's just understanding the user, understanding the patterns and spotting when things are starting to go wrong with individuals, especially if they're getting tired in their work.

00:06:52
Bradley Howard: So when you see a major cybersecurity incident with any other company, do you have a bit of pit in your stomach and just feel a bit sorry for that organization. Because I sometimes see on Twitter that people say, " Oh, they left this particular port open or this particular thing open." I think that's not quite on, is it? They weren't exactly asking for it. Just because you might leave your window open at home doesn't mean burglars are allowed to come into your house.

00:07:20
Helena Nimmo: Yeah. And yes, and I think there's something there. So I would encourage anybody in IT to actually talk to somebody who has been through one of these cyber attacks. It is an absolutely horrific event to go through, not just for the individual who's happened to make the mistake. It might cost the organization millions and you feel responsibility for it. But also the recovery operation. So everybody always talks about, " Oh, the cyber incident happened and it was caused by X." However, what we don't talk about enough is the recovery operations that take place. When you go into the cyber threat recovery, this is not anymore the cybersecurity team's domain. This is the IT folk, every single one of them, pulling 20- hour shifts for a number of weeks to try and get everybody back up and running again.

00:08:23
Bradley Howard: So moving on when you, or moving backwards actually. So when you first joined Endava, what are the main things that you did in the first six months?

00:08:27
Helena Nimmo: First six months are always tricky. There's a couple of things I've learned to look at. And one is to understand the business. And I don't mean about understand what the business is manufacturing or creating or selling. Understanding the culture of the business. And the reason why I say that is most IT leaders, senior leaders, when we come in, we usually come in because something needs to be changed. There's a change that needs to be affected or there's a change that needs to be continued or started. And any change you start, culture is critical because culture eats strategy for breakfast. So

you have to match your strategy to the culture of the organization and the first six months are really key in that piece.

00:09:18
Bradley Howard: Oh, and that's good advice for anyone starting a new CIO role as well. What else do you think are the important things to do in the first few months?

00:09:27
Helena Nimmo: Understanding the culture, listening and also understanding the key revenue generating processes. So less about... Obviously you need to understand what the business creates and the products that is being served and offered, but also understand on the big picture level, the end- to- end process. What is the value add to the business, how the revenue is generated. And to be honest, there is pretty much a single process that every organization operates by which is a lead and you move that lead through into being a paying customer and the money comes at the end of it. But there's different nuances to it. And understanding those helps you guide how you put your technology solutions together to make the processes more efficient and make the users do less manual pieces of work. So I think that is a really, really key piece.
 And the final bit, I also look at always, and I don't think this is just to IT leaders, I think this is every leader going in. Who are the competitors? What is your ecosystem that you are moving into? A lot of organizations have got their own select competitors that they keep on benchmarking themselves against. However, whenever a new leader comes in, it's always good to maybe bring a little bit of new thinking in, which is have you thought about that potential disruptor being a competitor for the future? And as technologists we can often see that and bring that to the table.

00:11:04
Bradley Howard: So do you sometimes like to question what would Google do, what would Amazon do, even if it's in an adjacent industry? I can't imagine either of those companies necessarily coming into the IT services space, never say never, but do you sometimes think how would they approach it to be different?

00:11:21
Helena Nimmo: Well if you look at Amazon, Amazon is actually a really good example because Amazon is an IT services company in the way that it provides cloud platform. But when it started, did anybody ever think that what was built as a book store move into something like offering cloud platforms and some really key creative technology solutions and offerings? So absolutely. I think that is a really good example, as in what could somebody else move into? What is the technology that they currently use and how could they create a secondary market for that technology? And I think those are some of the questions that we should maybe be asking and answering more than we do.

00:12:06
Bradley Howard: Do you sometimes think the other way around as well. What could we do to compete with adjacent industries?

00:12:12
Helena Nimmo: Absolutely. So why would you not? If you look at anybody who has got specifically a platform product or a platform that is a unique selling point to the business, something that makes the company special, how can you commoditize that? How could you lift and shift that and actually white label it and create a secondary market for yourself?

00:12:37
Bradley Howard: That's so true. And in fact some of my favorite projects that I've worked on over the years at Endava have been turning cost centers into profit centers where we've helped large companies who've developed an in- house products then go out to market and sell that. That is really interesting because it encompasses everything you've said so far, from cultural changes to what does the sales process look like. Never thought about it in this way before but that's so interesting.
 So can you share with us what your main focus is going to be like for the rest of this year? And we're in 2023 at the moment, the very beginning of the year.

00:13:13
Helena Nimmo: I think 2023 is going to be a really interesting year. Again, I think we've had a couple of rollercoaster years. My expectation is that we are going to continue having a rollercoaster year. And I don't just mean Endava, I mean the industry as a whole and the world as a whole. So I think there's going to be a lot of opportunities that are going to come out of this.
 I also think there is a little bit of a fatigue building at the moment. We've talked a lot about technology and a lot about digitization and a lot about digital transformation and acceleration. I think we are going to start seeing a little bit of a, hang on, what about the people? Hybrid working, what about the people? So I feel there's going to be definitely a bit of a reset and bringing that balance back into it is about people, not just about technology. Technology is the servants, people are there and they're their key focus. So I think that's going to be part of 2023.
 Saying all of that. I've got a lot of innovation coming in 23, this year. I'm really excited. We have seen some absolutely incredible ideas coming from the teams via our innovation days and innovation labs. So I'm really looking forward to accelerating some of the things that they are talking about using some of the new technologies in search and findability in particular in the next few months.

00:14:47
Bradley Howard: Agreed. So I should probably explain to all of our listeners that Helena and I and some other people, other guests that we've had on the show actually, run an internal hackathon every year where we ask the whole of Endava to submit their ideas and build prototypes and then as I said, we're the judges on that panel. And it's really interesting, isn't it? It shows trends of what problems are out there that people want to try and solve that they're not happy with some of the internal tools today. So it's good to see that you have put that on the roadmap for the year.
 So taking a step back and looking at the industry, what do you think are the top skills that are required to become a CIO today? Let's start off with the hard or technical skills, then move on to the softer skills. What are the top ones?

00:15:35
Helena Nimmo: Hard technical skills. So I would say that the CIO's role is quite unique in the business because we have to understand everything. So we need to understand how the business operates. So going back to my comment about the business process before, you have to understand that revenue generating end- to- end process. That is key and that is at top level. I don't mean about going into every detail. That's where you've got the specialist individuals who are much smarter than we are in that space. So that's one bit.
 The second bit is also architecture. Again, a big picture view. So it's understanding and mapping the process architecture at a high level to the technology architecture, your

system estate. Because that's how you generate opportunities. You might find a opportunity saying, well tell you what, why are we not using that functionality of this system over here to support this process over there? And that's just because it hasn't been thought about before so the crossover just hasn't happened. So I think those are some of the key bits.

Now the final bit, which I actually think is really critical for CIOs nowadays, is data. You have to understand the data because following the data effectively means following the money. And to be able to map that and to understand that at the higher level, but also to understand and challenge how the data is being used across the business. Management reporting has been around for a very long time and our management reporting across decades has been the same, which is we report after the effect and sometimes you might report four or six weeks later. Now the data piece, especially in the world that we're currently living in, being that higher level of uncertainty, the sooner you understand and can interpret that data, the quicker you can make decisions. So I think that is going to be one of the key hard skills for CIOs to have. Understand the data and understand how you can contribute to the decision making process sooner.

00:17:50
Bradley Howard: Little to argue with there. And what about the soft skills?

00:17:51
Helena Nimmo: Soft skills, same as any senior leader. Well any leader, any human being. Especially now that we're in the more hybrid working model, we do have to listen and we do have to pick up cues better than we would otherwise. It's easy when you've got people in the room, it's easy to pick up the body language. Doing that on screen is much harder. But I think that's something that we're all going to have to hone our skills on a little bit more. So the listening, the empathy, picking up the cues, definitely. I think those are going to be the key skills going forward.

00:18:31
Bradley Howard: My last question for you is at Endava, so we're an IT services company with 12, 500 people or so. I would imagine every one of us probably thinks we are the CIO. So what's it handling that kind of pressure all the time?

00:18:46
Helena Nimmo: It's like herding cats. It really is. No, I'm kidding. Actually, it has got some very significant benefits which means that I have this ready pool of brilliant minds who are brilliant consultants. It is directing the thoughts and ideas. And my job in that scheme is to articulate the problem or the challenge in a way that the consultancy can add value to it, the opinions can add value to it. Literally it is working with 12, 000 IT consultants and everybody thinks their ideas are the best. However, what I do like about the Endava is that we are very collaborative. So ideas come to the table and we share the ideas and people debate them and we always end up with a better solution at the end of it. And that is definitely something I'm seeing with the innovation piece at the moment.

00:19:40
Bradley Howard: Oh, it's a lovely way to wrap up today's episode.
Thank you so much Helena for those insights into the CIO profession. If anyone would like to get in contact with you, what's the best way?

00:19:50
Helena Nimmo: You can find me on LinkedIn.

00:19:52
Bradley Howard: Great. That's Helena Nimmo. Double M there. So I'm Bradley, Howard. And until next week, please don't forget to share and subscribe to this podcast.