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Middle East CIO interview: Rajiv Prasad, Xpandretail

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IT head at customer analytics provider Xpandretail says the CIO role is increasingly important as businesses digitise, but warns that CIOs must be given the human resources they need

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The company, which has a Middle East and South East Asia focus, provides customer analytics in retail, including people counting, in-store analytics footfall counting systems and business intelligence (BI) software.

Its IT division is headed by Rajiv Prasad, who was made CIO in 2010. Prasad has helped Xpandretail to deliver products and services to clients, helping them meet the changing demands of the digital environment by building up a sophisticated hybrid cloud infrastructure. He now plans to use this infrastucture to power the company's big data and analytics projects.

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"At Xpandretail, we are not only providing products based on current market technology trends, but also educating retailers and other customers on the benefits they can reap through adoption of big data and analytic capabilities," he said.

"Big data and advanced analytics systems are providing retailers better visibility into individual customer purchase patterns with relevant contextual background information," he added.

Prasad said since his joining in 2010, the role as the CIO at Xpandretail has become more prominent. He believes having a background in advanced training in video analytics, satellite and wireless communications, along with a bachelor's degree in electronics and telecommunications, has helped him pilot Xpandretail and the IT team.

When it comes to guiding the IT team, Prasad has found that it's best to learn to accept that people are going to do things differently than he would and to focus instead on the end result.

"I approach my team with a task of what to do and do not enforce any methods on how it should be done. This leaves room for them to feel comfortable with the task to be completed and to be accountable for it," he said.

"Communication is king and keeping the lines of communication open and involving employees in the change process has made it easy for the team to get on board."

The role of the modern CIO in business

As retailers increase their efforts to get closer to customers through analytics, Xpandretail's focus in 2017 has been directed towards developing and implementing a platform which seeks to reduce complexity and is adaptable to clients' needs.

Prasad said Middle East countries are pursuing digitisation and the mass adoption of connected digital technologies and applications at a rapid pace. "As a result, there's a growing awareness of the risks, but there's still inertia and a lack of understanding of the specific factors involved in protecting IT infrastructure and systems," he said.

According to Prasad, today's CIO role is as much about the business strategy and leadership as it is about technology, which means the modern role of a CIO goes far beyond technical expertise.

He said nowadays CIOs feel that they have an increased influence in their organisations, and have developed more of a partner-relationship with their CEO and other C-level executives.

"As the CIO, the role allows me to forge alliances and ensure alignment with the departmental heads, both in and outside the corporate boundary. I am not only viewed as a mentor, but also as the gatekeeper of the company's intellectual assets and operational resources, allowing me to move from traditional technical roles to more strategic business strategy roles when required," he said.

He added that this sense of elevation and C-level equality means CIOs are being entrusted with greater power to implement digital strategies and have a greater impact on the business as a whole.

Barriers to success

However, Prasad said that as the role of CIO evolves, so must the IT organisation that surrounds that it. The biggest barrier to success for today's men and women entrusted with heading IT in their organisations in the Middle East is a shortage of resources and skills.

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"Many are finding that their teams do not have the right skills to implement the more complex technologies required to move the business forward," he said.

An answer to this problem could be extending the search for fresh talent to beyond the realms of IT, or carried out via crowd sourcing, according to Prasad.

He added that CIOs could nurture skills by also developing internships with colleges and universities. Existing relationships with partners, suppliers and customers could also be lucrative sources of much-needed talent.

"People development and leadership, recruitment and foreseeing future skills requirements are key to the future of the CIOs role," he said.

This is a challenge for the Middle East. According to Computer Weekly's survey of 650 IT professionals in the region, a lack of employer-provided training is a problem for staff. More than 63% of respondents said they did not receive enough training from their employers, and almost three-quarters (73%) said a lack of training was hindering their career progression.

IT training is not the only employment shortfall in the region, according to the survey, as organisations are missing out on the potential to recruit more women. Computer Weekly found low levels of women working in IT in the region.

Just under 30% of respondents said there were no women in their IT department, and 29% said less than 10% of their IT staff were women. Only 9% said more than 40% of their organisation's IT staff were women.

Prasad said that in the future, CIOs will be key change agents, mentors, leaders, protectors of business assets, and technologists, among their many other roles.

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