


[Home](#)
[Current Issue](#)
[Archives](#)
[Buy](#)
[Contact](#)

April 2013 | Volume **70** | Number **7**

The Principalsip Pages 84-85

Power Up! / The Changing Role of the Technology Director

Doug Johnson

Like many educators in my current position—school technology directors, chief technology officers, or others who have responsibility for all things that plug in, use batteries, beep, or depend on a digital network—I never imagined this as a job when I was growing up. My high school guidance counselor in 1970 did not suggest this as a career choice because such a job did not exist then. Even when I was hired by my current school district in 1991, my title was "audiovisual director," and I replaced a fellow whose primary tasks were silk-screening school logos on record players, developing black-and-white film, stocking overhead projector lamps, and supervising the guy who fixed 16mm film projectors.

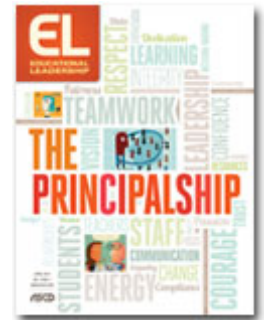
Although my previous experience in education was as an English teacher and librarian, my same-age peers have come to technology leadership positions through a number of pathways, with math and science teaching being the most common. As networks and large data systems became mission-critical in the late 1990s, schools began to hire technology directors with computer degrees, often with business rather than education experience.

The entire leadership team needs to thoughtfully consider the selection, placement in the organizational structure, job description, and performance expectations of this relatively new job in education. The efficacy of the technology department and its head affects every student, staff member, and parent in the district.

Evolving Challenges

The job description of the chief technology officer is certainly a moving target. In the last 20 years, technology leaders have never really had the same set of challenges, frustrations, and successes two years in a row. And these shifts will continue, according to Robert Moore of the Consortium for School Networking. His advice to K-12 information technology (IT) leaders:

- Forget about IT as you know it today.
- Get ready to outsource IT.
- Let go of the desire to control.
- Embrace diversity in the IT environment.
- Blow the lid off storage limits.



BUY THIS ISSUE



Quit saying things like, "A wired network infrastructure will always be necessary because wireless will never be fast enough for everything."¹

Outsourcing, loss of control, diversity? Anathema to many formally trained IT folks. But as school leaders who are facing budget crunches come to realize that real cost savings can be had by moving to the cloud and contracting for maintenance, these uncomfortable realities will be the new normal in schools.

Core Competencies

As a result of these changes, the core competencies required of school and school district chief technology officers are rapidly evolving. Tech leadership skills are moving

From configuring networks and local servers to mediating contracts for cloud-based and contracted services.

From supervising technicians to evaluating outsourced work and setting up effective help-desk processes.

From writing technology plans to working interdepartmentally with curriculum, staff-development, public relations, assessment, and strategic-planning leaders.

From providing technology devices to staff and students to providing access to school network resources accessible with personal devices.

From writing policies that dictate behaviors and ban activities to writing guidelines and curriculums that encourage safe and responsible use.

From knowing about the *how* to understanding the *why* of a new technology in education.

From preserving the status quo to implementing new technology applications and best practices.

I regularly get questions about large data systems; classroom voice amplification systems; interactive whiteboards; every type of computing hardware and operating system; social networking uses and abuses; acceptable-use policies; technology ethics and digital citizenship; applications of hardware and software in every curricular area and grade level; collaborative purchasing programs; state and federal laws surrounding technology data privacy; E-rate eligibility; e-books and digital textbooks; content management programs; security systems; VoIP phone systems; and ... well, you get the drift. It would be impossible for any single individual to master all the areas of hands-on expertise needed to deal with all school technologies and their applications.

Even though I couldn't install a router if my life depended on it, I *can* describe in plain English things like routers, packet shapers, firewalls, deployment servers, thin clients, Active Directory, DaaS, WAPs, and a whole host of TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms)—what they are, what they do, why they are important, and what specs to think about when considering them. I read continually and broadly in many areas of technology. But I depend on my IT staff, especially my patient network manager, to teach me and help me make good collaborative decisions.

I feel the same way about the technology integration specialists in my department—they are my teaching and learning, staff-development, and application-software gurus. It's as crucial for the technology director to understand education concepts like differentiation, Response to Intervention, Common Core standards, value-added measurement, and Understanding by Design as it is to understand the technology itself.

Perspective and empathy are as essential to being an effective technology director as hard technology skills or knowledge. The new role of the technology director is to ensure a realistic balance between the concerns of the technology department and the goals of the instructional program. I am proud that everyone in my department of technologists, teachers, librarians, and clerical staff works together as a real team of what Pashuk calls "professional magic makers."²

In planning, supervising, project management, communicating to staff and administration, policymaking, and budgeting, it's vital that I make *informed* decisions. Admitting my ignorance about both technology and

education—and then figuring out how to alleviate that condition—has proven to be the most successful strategy I have found in my 20 years of doing this work. That's why, most of all, you need an educator in charge of the technology department who is willing to learn continually.

FIGURE 1. Differences Between Debate and Dialogue

Characteristics of Debate	Characteristics of Dialogue
Assuming there is one right answer (and you have it)	Assuming that others have pieces of the answer
Combative: attempting to prove the other side wrong	Collaborative: attempting to find common understanding
Trying to win	Trying to find common ground
Listening to find flaws and make counterarguments	Listening to understand
Defending your assumptions	Bringing up your assumptions for inspection and discussion
Searching for weaknesses and flaws in the other position	Searching for strength and values in the other position
Seeking an outcome that agrees with your position	Discovering new possibilities and opportunities
<p><i>Source:</i> From "Moving Beyond Polls and Focus Groups" (p. 112), by S. A. Rosell and H. Gantwerk, 2010. In <i>Toward Wiser Public Judgment</i>, D. Yakelovich and W. Friedman (Eds.). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press. Copyright © 2010 by Public Agenda. Reprinted with permission.</p>	

Making it Happen: What School and District Leaders Can Do

To enable your chief technology officer to make the best contribution to education quality:

Look for education experience and leadership experience as well as technology skill when hiring a chief technology officer.

Use the standards developed by the [Consortium for School Networking](#) and the [International Society of](#)

Technology in Education to help develop job descriptions, performance assessment criteria, and expectations of professional growth targets of the chief technology officer.

Make the chief technology officer a member of the district leadership team.

Find ways to ensure that major technology decisions are made collaboratively by technology and education experts and that a wide range of stakeholders, including parents and students, have a voice in setting technology goals and policy.

Endnotes

1 Moore, R. J. (2012). *The future of information technology: How the next ten years will fundamentally change the role of the K-12 CTO: Executive summary*. Washington, DC: Consortium for School Networking. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/28hzqcc>

2 Pashuk, K. (2012, November 28). The top 5 challenges CIOs will face in 2013 [blog post]. Retrieved from *Turning Technology Invisible*.

Doug Johnson is director of media and technology at Mankato Area Public Schools, Mankato, Minnesota. He is the author of *The Classroom Teacher's Technology Survival Guide* (Jossey-Bass, 2012). He blogs at the *Blue Skunk Blog*.

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:

[technology](#), [technology planning](#)

Copyright © 2013 by ASCD

Requesting Permission

- For **photocopy, electronic and online access**, and **republishing requests**, go to the [Copyright Clearance Center](#). Enter the periodical title within the "**Get Permission**" search field.
- To **translate** this article, contact permissions@ascd.org