

CIO Panel

Danny Attias, Chief Information Officer, Anthony Nolan

Claire Priestley, Director of IT, City University of London

Jason Oliver, Director of Information Technology, University of Sussex

Stuart McSkimming, Chief Information Officer, Royal British Legion

Chair: Laura Dawson, Director of Data and Technology Services at the London School Economics and Political Science (LSE)

When Jason Oliver first became IT director at Sussex University, he inherited a team of about 140 people who didn't see themselves as part of a profession. There were several married couples, parents and offspring, and three team members were preparing to collect their 40-year service awards. No one had undertaken any professional development for at least three years.

So Oliver spent the entire first month of his tenure inviting each employee into his office and asking them three questions: who they were, what they would do if they had his job, and where did they want to be in two years' time. This involved seeing seven people each day for about 20 days.

"It gave me a huge amount of insight into how I needed to change the team," he said. "One of the bits of feedback was that many people had never even been in the director's office. And many had things they wanted to contribute but had never had an outlet to do so."

As a result of this insight, Oliver set aside £100,000 for training and development, brought in an apprenticeship scheme and introduced two-weekly whole-team meetings. "Everybody comes, we open up the whole floor, and I stand up and I'm completely transparent with them. I don't play games, I tell them everything that's going on, even the fairly sensitive stuff.

"It's engendered trust because there is transparency, and it's been transformational. People who were telling me a year ago that they hated the place and were just there to pick up a pay-cheque, are now really engaged and driving some of the biggest transformation pieces we are doing."

This impressive story was just one of many golden nuggets that emerged from the conversation among a panel of CIOs at the two-day Charity IT Leaders conference at Whittlebury Park in the Buckinghamshire countryside in October. The wide-ranging discussion got off to an entertaining start when chair Laura Dawson asked the panelists to reveal something about themselves that most people in the room would not know.

It turns that Danny Attias is trained not only in three different styles of massage, but also spent most of the last ten years learning acrobatics. Claire Priestley owns a boxing gym and is an accomplished synchronised swimmer. Jason Oliver winds down at weekends by driving his tractor, and in 2001 Stuart McSkimming installed the first ever internet connection into Papua New Guinea. Who knew??

The next two questions were rather more work-focused: what are the panelists working on outside of their day-to-day remit, and what keeps them awake at night?

McSkimming said he is wrestling with the Royal British Legion's huge volumes of data, and how the charity can make best use of it. "Quite often data gets put within the IT department because people don't know where it should go, and that's one of the questions we have: how exactly are we going to handle our data? Not on a department by department basis, but as an organisation, taking that organisational view. How can we get maximum benefit from the information we collect, whether it be around what we get when we give out poppies, or information on our beneficiaries. So although it's kind of outside of my day job, I'm making it my day job because it's really fascinating."

Jason Oliver is presently immersed in what the university calls the "pedagogical revolution", which basically means, "how are we going to transform education, the way that students learn, and how technology can support them?"

He's also been charged with writing the university's sustainability strategy, which is examining options such as taking beef off menus and greening the gases that are used to heat the buildings.

Danny Attias is working with Anthony Nolan's learning and people division to help devise a new learning development strategy that permeates the whole organisation, not just the technology team. This is likely to include digital literacy and apprenticeships, and greater emphasis on diversity and inclusion at both trustee level and across the workforce.

Claire Priestley is trying to navigate a path between academic freedom, in terms of information, and security, and so the risk of a cyber attack or data breach is always high on her agenda. This was echoed by Oliver, who said he'd been told recently by an influential sector CIO with a military background that "the research our institutions are doing is likely to be accessible by three nation states before our researchers can even unpick the data that they're gathering. That's hugely scary, not just for the sector but for our entire country. That keeps me awake at night because it's my job to address it."

The panel was also asked what advice they would give to their 27-year-old selves about their careers and becoming a CIO. Claire Priestley immediately quipped: "Synchronised swimming is a solid career choice," before going on to add: "In all seriousness, the one thing I've learned in all sorts of different roles, is that it's all about the people. We're here to create the right environment in which extraordinary talent can flourish, and to remove the barriers." Attias agreed: "It's 10 per cent technology, 90 per cent people. The technology is not the challenge."

Jason Oliver's advice was to: "Recognise that you are a business director. The IT portfolio happens to be your area of responsibility, but you have as much influence as any other director on that executive. And it's crucial that you use that to your advantage. Are you challenging the director of finance or HR about what they are doing, just as they are happy to have a view on what you're doing? You should be, because technology underpins

everything you do as an organisation and you are in a unique position to influence how you move forward.”

Laura Dawson chimed in: “I recall a piece of advice I was given when I was 26: ‘deliver a good service and keep your head down’. That was the worst bit of advice I ever got. You need to get out there. You need to not keep your head down.”

Stuart McSkimming concluded the conversation on a lighter note: “I’d tell my 27-year-old self that if you’re going to Guinea, take anti-malarial tablets.”

Offered the chance to tell the conference what they were most proud of in their careers, most panel members spoke about the part they have played in developing others. Priestley said she was particularly proud of the CIO +1 programme of events that she has launched to provide opportunities for a more diverse range of people to break into IT.

“One of the reasons I set it up was because I kept walking into rooms that were really not diverse; networking events that were just a sea of white, middle-aged, middle-class men,” she explained. “That’s not an insult to anyone who happens to fall within that demographic, but I wanted to walk into rooms that were representative of the streets I’d just walked in from. So I thought I’d set up my own event to that effect and create some sort of pathway to help develop that diverse pipeline of talent, and it’s really gone swimmingly, so I’m very proud of that.”

Attias was proud of developing successors for each of his last two major roles. “I had a successor that I brought in, grew up and was able to just hand the baton over seamlessly. I always try and do that, I try to make myself redundant in my role so I can do something else in the organisation or elsewhere. I encourage everyone in my team to constantly do that, so that when there’s a new opportunity they can jump on it.”

One of Laura’s most challenging questions posed a scenario where each panelist stepped into a lift on the 10th floor with their CEO who, as the doors closed, said to them: “Go on, what’s all this about digital transformation, then?” They had 10 seconds to answer before the lift hit the ground, the doors opened, and the opportunity was lost.

Stuart McSkimming’s response was simple: “Forget the word ‘digital’ because that will just confuse you. It’s all about what we are trying to do as an organisation.”

Priestley’s comeback was similar: “It’s a misnomer. There’s no such thing. Forget both ‘digital’ and ‘transformation’. Digital is about culture, about behaviour change. And forget ‘transformation’, it’s evolution.”

Danny Attias said his reply would be: “Judge us by what we deliver every three months, and tell us whether you think it’s the right thing.”

Perhaps the sharpest response came from someone who wasn’t even on the panel – though he had a little longer to think about it. Martin Cambell, CIO at World Vision UK, concluded his own presentation later in the day by quipping: “If I’d been in that lift, I’d have told that CEO: ‘If we get it right, you’ll still have a job in five years as a successful CEO; if we get it wrong, the organisation will go bankrupt’.”