



Podcast Transcript

Technology from the Top: AI, Data and the Future of Business with Today's CIOs – Sharay Erskine

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Kattman: With a rapidly evolving technological landscape and an increase in data value, organizations, now more than ever, depend on their leaders to guide them through uncharted territory. Janine Anthony Bowen, co-leader of both the Privacy Governance and Technology Transactions team and the Digital Transformation and Data Economy team at BakerHostetler, gets an inside look at how chief information officers, or CIOs, across industries are tackling trends and planning for the future. Janine sits down one-on-one with current CIOs in the new series, Technology from the Top: AI, Data, and the Future of Business with Today's CIOs. I'm Amy Kattman, and you're listening to BakerHosts.

On today's episode, Janine speaks with Sharay Erskine. Sharay, CIO of the Atlanta Community Food Bank, is a visionary leader in information technology, driving innovation at the intersection of digital and business strategy. With the track record of leveraging cutting-edge technologies to shape the future of organizations, Sharay is passionate about exploring the transformative potential of AI and data analytics in driving sustainable growth and competitive advantage. Let's hear from her now.

Bowen: Sharay, you are at the helm of the Information and Technology Strategy as the Chief Information Officer at the Atlanta Community Food Bank, one of the top five largest hunger relief organizations in the country. In fact, very few hunger relief organizations even have a CIO, so you have an interesting and fairly unique perspective on some of these issues. Also, even though the Atlanta Community Food Bank is mission-focused at its core, from an operations and business perspective, it is essentially a logistics and supply chain enterprise. Sharay, you're also deeply engaged with Georgia CIO and Inspire CIO, so you have good

visibility to these issues in ways that your peers are thinking about as well. So, I'm excited to talk with you today. Ready to get started?

Erskine: Oh, yeah, this is exciting. I'm just, thank you for having me, Janine.

Bowen: Perfect. Alright, so my first question is multi-layered and so I'll click them off as we run through them. Is all the noise in the marketplace and pop culture around artificial intelligence, generative AI in particular, justified? What do you think?

Erskine: That is a good one. When I think back to my high school days and I was one of the few people in my senior class that had a cell phone, and you may remember it was like a cell phone that was literally the size of a brick.

Bowen: Oh, yeah.

Erskine: I thought I was super cool or super popular. I was on the cutting edge of technology and just really disrupting the classroom. Really it was a disruptor, right? You couldn't have it because it would make noise and then obviously if a call came in, it was going to be extremely expensive to even receive said call. So, I don't even know what the purpose of the cell phone was at the time for me as a teenager, but when I think about that, and I think about the comparison between the industrial revolution that's happened with technology and what is happening with AI, it truly is the next ebb and flow of what is to be expected. In our lifetime, we have seen rapid development in this space. And so, for me, yes, the hype is justified because the technological advancements that we're seeing are coming at such rapid pace at a rapid scale and in ways that we never dreamed that we would see.

Bowen: Okay, so that is a great analogy with respect to the cell phone because over time we've seen how that big block thing has now turned into something that has changed our lives and is fundamental to who we are as a culture.

Erskine: Absolutely.

Bowen: So, how do you think, taking that same train of thought, how do you think businesses will be affected in this new era of AI? Will it have that same cataclysmic impact on the culture as the cell phone has had?

Erskine: Absolutely. And that is the premises of the cell phone. So, if we remember back in a time where landlines were the big thing and hard phones on people's desks were the big thing and now as organizations are moving to soft phones, people are moving landlines out of their homes and they're using cell phones for the primary point of contact, it is exactly the same thing that we're going to see with AI. Most organizations today, they're using it. They're using a form of AI and they may not have an actual governance in AI policy, or an actual AI strategy, because it is coming in in different ways from the individual, from the user who is looking to do better or be better at the work that they're doing in the organization. We're going to see the same shift and lift in the AI space as it relates to what we saw in cell phones.

Bowen: Okay, so, I recall when they first put a camera on a cell phone, I thought that was the most ridiculous thing ever, and now an entire industry around social media and other things have launched because you can take pictures on cell phones. And so, I thought that was weird then. I wasn't afraid. There are folks that are afraid of what is happening with generative AI. Should we be afraid?

Erskine: Janine, I think fear is natural. It really is the next level of disruptive technologies that we're talking about. It is important for us as a society to look at this from a balanced perspective. That would be more productive for us. I'm glad that we've got a lot of energy and a lot of discussion, a lot of hype, if you will, around AI right now because it allows us to start to have the type of conversations that we need to have. Let's talk about the ethical issues that are going to come from this. Let's have a collaborative approach and how we're going to handle this from a government, from a business, from an individual perspective. How do we best use AI to complement our society? It all comes back to education and adaptation. But again, fear is natural, but the conversations do start now.

Bowen: Okay, so I like that, and you've triggered an entire separate discussion about how we should be thinking about it societally and ethically in other ways. So, we might have a part two to this conversation later to dig into some of those issues, but let's turn the corner a little bit because for sure, artificial intelligence engines don't exist without data, okay, and data has become increasingly more valuable over the last, I've said three to five years, but really probably it's continued to grow in value in the enterprise over the last 10 years or so. So, how has your role as a technology leader in business, how have your goals as a technology leader, and how have your responsibilities evolved, given the increasing value associated with data in the enterprise?

Erskine: I think there was a time when most business users would think of the IT team as simply the helpdesk. You went to them when you had a problem with your PC or you couldn't get your application to work, but it really wasn't that strategic thought partner, that data steward, who is helping make better decisions with how we control or govern the quality, the security of our actual data so that it is accurate and consistent and secure as our top priority. And even we were not necessarily seen as innovation drivers, innovation enablers, but not necessarily the drivers of said innovation. And then, obviously, the change-agent side is the part that was maybe lacking from before. Again, it was a business problem that needed to be solved and then a solution was coming, or being birthed, solely from the business and technology was expected to just implement without any consideration to before-mentioned issues that we had before. So, I think the evolution that that role has really become, especially for me in the food bank, is being seen as that dynamic and integral part of the core strategy of the business. In some organizations, the pillars of growth for that business, the underlying component, the foundation of it all is information and technology.

From a goals perspective, obviously, maximizing our data value is always key. We always want to think with our customer experience at the forefront. And then there is the operational play. What efficiencies are we going to be able to drive and how we're going to measure that? All while we're wrapping all of that in a

nice little bow around compliance and security. Some of the responsibilities also include that technology integration and for, first and foremost, talent development. We're using application services, hardwares, conversations, if you will, that we've never been asked to have before. So, continuing to invest in our team, continuing to invest in ourselves are also part of those responsibilities that we have, all while we're keeping an ethical mindset, how do we handle this in a safe way that drives the goals, the direction of the businesses that we're all supporting?

Bowen: Okay. So, let me take that a little bit further and see if you agree with this statement. As you described the legacy view of the IT organization, I think you described it correctly. When the computer broke, we called you, somebody came and did something, right. Okay. And so that was really an internal-facing role. It seems to me as you talk about strategy, that the role of the CIO is becoming increasingly more external-facing and customer-driven and customer-touching. Would you agree with that or not?

Erskine: Oh, absolutely. So, a company that I worked at before, we were building out a new e-commerce platform and this was in a B2B environment. So, we really wanted our business partners or in our ecosystem to use the e-com platform that we had. We trained our sales teams. We changed our customer service reps, and the stickiness of the website just was not catching on. So, what we did from an INT perspective, is that we created our target list, which customers do we want to talk to first, and partnered that salesperson with an IT professional that can go and speak to, almost become an IT salesperson on the technology to get that customer comfortable with the utilization of said tool. I believe that that is the future of what some of our IT roles will start to look like. More outbound-facing interaction with the customers. It brings it back to the customer experience. Sometimes, and depending on the organization that you're in, when people hear the technology piece of the INT, they get a little uncomfortable and so they're not able to speak to it as passionately or with the conviction that a technologist can. So, I do see that growth trend happening.

Bowen: Okay, love it. Alright. So, next question for you. Back in the dawn of cloud computing, 2008, 2009, 2010, companies were going through a lot of go/no-go analysis with respect to moving data to the cloud and actually making decisions whether or not they were going to undertake that action. What are the analyses and decision rubrics that are being used now around maximizing the value of data in the enterprise?

Erskine: Yeah. So, that is another good one. When I think back over the tenure of my career, I remember speaking to my former CIO and we were talking about cloud computing and what some of the other, or our competitors seem to be doing. And tell me, Sharay, we're already doing cloud computing. We're doing it. We're moving some of our servers from on-prem to off-prem. We're hosting some of our e-commerce platforms in the cloud. These technologies were being utilized and it was one of those, okay, but how did we come to those decisions? Obviously, it starts with, depending on the organization, is there a misunderstanding or lack of talent within? Is there a business problem that we're trying to solve? What is our

market, and we talked about that competitive review look, what are our competitors doing and how are they winning at making those changes? What is the data quality that we have and the governance that we're trying to orchestrate around there? Is there things that we want to do with our data that we just cannot do on-prem that we need to move, say cloud based, as well as our infrastructure and architecture so that we've got some scalability and flexibility around what we're looking to achieve.

Most of these cloud-computing services now require different integration interfaces. So, when we're looking at that, we're making those particular decisions on how does that all structure, how are we bringing that alignment together? What is the problem we're trying to solve? What talent do we have inside? All while, we got to put a TCO around it. Are we going to get the total cost out of what we're investing in? What is our ROI going to look like and what risks are we exposing by doing that? The rubrics on that side, and again, every organization is different, so I can only speak to what we're doing right now at the Atlanta Community Food Bank. It really does come back to where is our priority? What is the impact versus the effort? Is it really going to make a difference with our mission? And how is our stakeholders going to adapt to the change? And those stakeholders do come in the forms of information and technologies that sit within the IT team and technologies that sit outside of the IT team, all while we've got to have that rubric that defines what we're, what are we measuring. How are we measuring the success of doing that? All of these things really come together to make sure that we're technologically sound, operationally efficient and are effectively monitoring any improvements we're expecting to make.

Bowen: Okay. So, that was a lot, and because I want to get sucked into it, I'm not. I'm going to transition to this next question because I'm sensitive to time. So, AI has sucked the oxygen out of the room conversationally. Okay. But other things are going on. Okay. And you've talked a little bit about this already, but what else are you thinking about technologically in order to generate revenue or otherwise move the business forward?

Erskine: First and foremost in, okay, so let me just step back and say I think that AI is coming in so many different shapes, forms, and sizes, if you will, that even in your technology road maps, there are some things that you're doing that may not have the AI classification on the front, that AI label on the front of it. Behind the scenes, it is still being supported by a version of AI. So, when we think from a food-banking perspective about developing mobile and web applications so that we've got better donor and volunteer engagement, better partner agency engagement, that still is being served up by real time interaction with our data that is still on the backbone of AI. In automation, oh, we would love to be able to do more predictive analytics around demand forecasting, some supply chain optimization so that we can reduce our food waste and, obviously, get more food out to the neighbors that we serve, as well as some logistics automation. I remember AI being the buzzword of the day, probably not even two years ago, blockchain was the buzzword, right. It was the train that everybody was on, but we're still trying to investigate how we play in that space and actually seek some benefit from using some of the blockchain technologies. All of those things are

obviously components of AI, but for the most part, our technology road maps are specifically focused in those areas.

Bowen: Okay. So, that is good. It is also interesting and I'm glad you mentioned that. Part of my work as a technology transactions lawyer is I'm always asking my clients, in this AI conversation in particular, as this vendor is marketing this service to you, we need to ask certain questions to understand what their AI play is. And we can't assume that it is not a play there. There probably is and we need to dig under it more deeply. So, I appreciate you pointing that out.

Alright, so let's close with this. And I think this is a, well, I'll hear what your answer is to this question. So, my son is a computer science major, and I can't help but ask, given where you are in your career, what words of wisdom do you have for those next generation of technology leaders in particular, and also, with respect to non-technical disciplines.

Erskine: Yeah. So, it is really funny. I have three kids, two are in college, and my two eldest are boys and my daughter, who is 17, is getting, she is a rising senior and I really thought, Janine, that I had lost all three to the medical field because they all said they wanted to be psychologists or neurosurgeons or, I don't know, but it was all medical. And I'm like, between their, me and their father, who are both technologists, what did we do? Where did we go wrong? Nobody wants to play in this space, which is just crazy to me. So, two weeks ago, my daughter told me that she had a change of heart and that she actually wants to explore more of the technology space. So, the same things that I would tell your son are same things that I told my daughter. One, I'm super excited. We need more people that look like me and my daughter, you and your son, in this place. So, I always suggest, and this is for everyone or anyone that I mentor or just help in their career trajectory, sharpens your whole self, ask a lot of questions. Don't be afraid to truly understand the areas of the business, understand the problems that they're trying to solve, understand the challenges, and how technology can help enable or increase productivity or create a better customer experience. Volunteer for projects even when you feel like it is not in your lane, volunteer and show up. Be that superhero at work, because we are short on those type of utility players. I know that was a lot. But, again, I would give the same information that I gave my daughter to your son.

Bowen: Perfect. Well, we are out of time and, Sharay, this has been a fascinating discussion and conversation. And so, I thank you for taking time to come and talk with us, and I'll look forward to talking with you soon in the future.

Erskine: Awesome. Thanks, Janine, for having me. This was a joy.

Kattman: If you have any questions for Janine Anthony Bowen, her contact information is in the show notes. As always, thanks for listening to BakerHosts.

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