

Driving innovation and anticipating the needs of the business



*Jeremy Vincent, Chief Information Officer,
Jaguar Land Rover*

Overview

Jeremy Vincent is Chief Information Officer for Jaguar Land Rover (JLR), an automotive company built around two British car brands: Jaguar premium sports saloons and sports cars, and Land Rover premium all-terrain vehicles. Jaguar Land Rover vehicles are designed, engineered and manufactured in the UK, and the company is part of Tata Motors, India's largest automotive corporation.

Q. What are some of the key challenges that you face as CIO?

A. The biggest challenge I face is establishing myself as a credible business leader, rather than solely as an IT director. There are still a few business stakeholders who are sceptical of an IT chief moving into what they see as a more traditional business leadership role. It's important for me to challenge this perception by showing them that I have the necessary business acumen, and that I can understand and respond effectively to the hurdles faced by the business.

To do this, it's vital for me to get involved in high-level conversations about the business, the implications of new developments and ways to overcome difficulties. I can't sit back and tell myself that it's not IT-related, so I don't need to get involved. If you want to play at the senior level of an organisation, you must have a view on every aspect of the business and communicate your opinion intelligently and effectively.

Another key challenge is establishing influential relationships. It takes a lot of effort to gain influence and access that inner sanctum of corporate decision-makers, and to maintain that position. However, once you succeed in building trust with the right people in the business, it is much easier to drive through the changes you want without getting slowed down by lengthy bureaucratic processes. It's like having an amplifier for promoting your ideas and moving initiatives forward.

Q. What personal skills do you think are needed to succeed in this role?

A. A modern CIO needs to be a big-picture thinker. When you are managing complex investment projects, you need to commit to long-term, strategic plans, so you can guarantee that projects deliver the value expected by the business. At the same time, it's important to be able to come down to a more detailed level and get your hands dirty at times. For me, the key is finding a balance between managing the long-term, strategic picture and getting hands-on with project details.



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Another important skill is being able to effectively translate complexity. Today, IT has grown to such a level of complexity that it can often seem overwhelming. I need to hide the bigness of IT – so to speak – and make difficult concepts easy for people to understand.

As CIO, it’s also important for me to be able to empathise with others and put myself in the shoes of a stakeholder or decision-maker. I constantly ask myself, what would I do, how would I react if I were in my stakeholder’s position?

Q. In what ways has the CIO role changed in recent years?

A. In the past, a CIO was seen as more of a technical specialist, and needed to come from a very technically-oriented background. Today, this has changed and it is now much more of a business-leadership role. You still need to understand how IT functions on a broader level, but very technically detailed, specialist knowledge will only get you so far. What really matters is how good you are at bolting together the right enterprise solutions that will best meet the needs of the business.

I believe this shift reflects a broader change in the importance of IT to the business as a whole. Whereas in the past IT was considered purely a secondary support function, many parts of IT have now become a primary focus for the business and not just the responsibility of the IT manager. You would be hard-pressed to find a business that does not depend on some form of IT. Technology has become critically important to the majority of business models and, as a result, the CIO role has become a much more influential and proactive part of company strategy.

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Q. What new capabilities have you helped your organisation to develop?

A. In partnership with IBM we have been developing a prototype for a virtual dealer showroom, which has been demonstrated to resounding praise from our business stakeholders. The tool allows you to virtually configure a vehicle from any of our product lines, personalising it to suit your tastes and then renders the vehicle which can be interacted with by the consumer. We plan to have the technology available at our dealers and non-dealer locations, such as industry trade shows or shopping centres worldwide, for example. In this way, if we can't have a physical model of every vehicle at all of our dealerships, we can use the virtual dealer showroom to provide a virtual example of every possible vehicle configuration.

We have also worked with IBM to create a first-of-a-kind “Global War Room”, which provides senior-level executives with intuitive reports and dashboards based on both traditional business data and real-time external media content, from news reports, social networking sites and industry forums. It helps us to drive faster decision-making, and successfully respond to new opportunities as they arise.

Q. What is the importance for Jaguar Land Rover of being seen as an innovator by customers and prospects? What innovations are in the pipeline in terms of building the brand and driving sales?

A. I believe that the virtual dealer showroom will be a leading and very public example of innovation. We have been coming up with a lot of exciting ways to leverage this particular piece of technology. One thought, for example, is to leverage Microsoft Kinect technology and to allow consumers to use body movement to interact with the rendered vehicle.

The virtual dealer showroom is just a small piece of technology, but I believe it could be instrumental in building Jaguar's reputation as automotive innovators. We can't have a physical model of each of our vehicle configurations at every one of our dealer locations, but we can potentially leverage technology to create a virtual example of every possible configuration of every vehicle line at all of our locations worldwide.

People are always attracted to bells and whistles. If we can attract customers with these and use them to grab their attention, then we have a chance to really sell them on the quality and value of our cars.

“My strategy is to always be ready for anything the business throws at you by anticipating its needs. You cannot wait until you are asked or ask what the business wants, because that implies reactive thinking. The CIO’s role is to anticipate and be ready to deliver with proactive developments.”

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Q. How do you help ensure that your organisation continues to grow efficiently and effectively? What role does outsourcing play?

A. Outsourcing plays a big role in our operations, and I have always been a supporter of outsourcing as a part of an IT strategy. It allows our organisation’s IT function to focus on what is important: making cars, simplifying operations, and innovating around the vehicle life cycle for example by pushing the commoditised parts of IT technology and service delivery outside of the organisation.

For Jaguar Land Rover, the primary driver for outsourcing is modernisation of the IT function and reaching enterprise scalability – it helps us to maintain standards that we have built up, so that subsidiaries don’t just go off and start running their operations in a completely different way. Of course, it also helps us to trim our operational expenses, which is always an important benefit, but cost savings were not our primary motivation. Outsourcing lets us minimise complexity, and helps to easily and cost-effectively integrate an ever more global business. We can only achieve this if the whole business is working from the same set of processes and leveraging the same technologies. Global reach is achieved with a global IT services partner.

If you want to compete effectively and innovate in ways that your competitors cannot, then you need to get rid of commoditised functions, such as management of capacity, networks and user support, and give them to a third party to manage. In that way, an organisation can truly focus on its core competences, business capability and value and maximise efficiencies.

Q. What is your role in developing Jaguar Land Rover’s presence in India, and how important is this for the company as a whole?

A. All the signs indicate that India is right on the cusp of massive volume growth, and we aim to be there at the forefront in the next few years when there will be a large, sustainable premium vehicle segment in the market. Given our relationship with Tata, I am sure Jaguar Land Rover will be one of the top players in the Indian premium automotive market in a few years’ time. We need to be ready to ride that growth curve when it comes.

If we are going to successfully drive the strategy for India then we certainly are not going to do it from the UK alone. It is vital for JLR to build a solid presence there and establish tight relationships with our Indian colleagues. We need to create strong bonds between Tata Motors and Jaguar Land Rover in the UK, so that we can better co-ordinate and govern our manufacturing and sales activities.

My role is to create a small team that will work to establish and strengthen these ties. A key part of our plan is fostering collaboration, which will allow us to deliver a coherent strategy and really cement ourselves as a leading player in the Indian market.

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Q. How do you stay abreast of what the business wants and needs from information technology?

A. I don't believe that a CIO should simply stay abreast of what the business wants, because that means that you aren't in front of the game and that you aren't driving the innovation that the business truly requires.

The CIO's task is not simply to give the stakeholders what they want, but to anticipate their business requirements, find out what they are trying to achieve and then proactively build systems and architectures that enable them to achieve their goals. In order to do this you need to be acutely informed of where the business is going by making yourself part of business decisions. That involvement allows you to find innovative techniques and be ready with prototypes when the demand actually comes, especially when you have helped to shape this demand.

To give a recent example, our PR team approached us with a challenge: they were constantly being approached at tradeshows and events by journalists who often knew more about what customers and the media were saying about our products than they did. They asked me if there was any way for IT to develop a piece of technology that could let our PR team do what the press does. They were stunned to learn that we already had a working prototype of exactly what they had described, which was our Global War Room platform. We were there, completely ready, and we didn't even need to make any customisations to the tool.

I was able to give them what they wanted precisely because we had anticipated that sooner or later, with the rise of corporate encroachment into social media, we would want to know what was going on in that landscape and what was being said about our company, products and people. So we created the Global War Room, which allows us to interrogate general press, automotive press and social media.

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