

The CIO Gap Runbook

A 90-day playbook for holding technology steady through a CIO departure, transition or transformation — for CEOs, CFOs and boards.

Michael Kennedy · Former Group CIO, Robert Walters · Singapore / Global · July 2026

THE REAL RISK

A CIO gap rarely fails loudly. It decays quietly.

When a technology leader departs, the visible things — projects, budgets, steering committees — usually keep moving for a while. The damage happens underneath: decisions get deferred, vendors stop being managed, security discipline drifts, and your best technology people quietly start taking recruiter calls. By the time something breaks visibly, you have been unmanaged for months.

This runbook sets out what to do — in the first 72 hours, and then in three 30-day phases — whether the gap is covered by an internal deputy, an interim, or a fractional leader. It is written for the CEO, CFO or board member who now owns the problem.

One principle above all: a leadership gap is not a reason to pause technology decisions. Deferred decisions are decisions — usually expensive ones made by default. The purpose of the first 90 days is to keep decision-making running at executive quality, not to hold your breath until a permanent hire arrives.

BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE

The first 72 hours

Four things cannot wait for a plan. Do these before the leaving drinks.

1. Secure access and accounts

- Revoke or transfer the departing leader's privileged access — including cloud consoles, admin accounts, domain registrars and banking/payment approvals.
- Rotate any shared or "break-glass" credentials they held, and confirm at least two current people can access every critical system.
- Check for personal accounts holding corporate assets — domains, SSL certificates, app store accounts, social media. This is embarrassingly common.

2. Map the key people

- Identify who actually holds the knowledge — the three to five engineers or managers the departing CIO leaned on. They are now your biggest flight risk.
- Have retention conversations within the week. Not necessarily money — clarity, visibility and a named interim decision-maker matter more than most CFOs expect.

3. Put a temporary commitment gate in place

- Route major commitments — contracts over an agreed threshold, senior hires, architecture decisions — through a named executive until leadership cover is in place.
- Do **not** freeze all change. A blanket freeze signals panic and creates a backlog that lands on whoever arrives next.

4. Control the narrative

- Tell the technology team before the rumour mill does — same day if possible.
- Name the interim decision-making authority explicitly. Ambiguity at the top is what makes good people update their CVs.

Surface these in week one — they change the plan:

- No documented list of privileged accounts, or access held personally by the leaver.
- A major contract renewal or go-live inside the next 60 days.
- An unresolved security incident, audit finding or regulator interaction.
- A transformation programme whose business case only the departing CIO could explain.

PHASE ONE

Days 1–30: Stabilise

The objective is simple: nothing gets worse, and you know what you actually have.

Service continuity

- Confirm incident and escalation paths still work — on-call rotas, major incident roles, disaster recovery contacts. Test one, don't just read it.
- Review service performance for the last 90 days: tickets, outages, backlog trend. Drift here is the earliest signal of decay.

Vendor and contract calendar

- Build a single view of every renewal, expiry and auto-renewal in the next six months. Nothing auto-renews unexamined.
- Identify the three vendors who matter most, and meet them. Vendors smell a leadership gap and behave accordingly — at renewal time.

Security posture

- Check the three controls that decay fastest without an owner: patching cadence, MFA coverage, and joiner-leaver access reviews.
- List open audit actions and their owners. Orphaned actions are a regulatory finding waiting to be written.

Money and signatures

- Confirm who can approve what, and re-point the departing leader's approvals. Unowned approvals stall the team or leak money — usually both.
- Pull a one-page view of monthly technology spend. You need the shape, not the detail: run vs change, top ten vendors, headcount vs non-headcount.

The listening tour

- Ten conversations in the first two weeks: executive peers, technology team leads, the two or three key vendors, internal audit, and the departing CIO if available.
- Ask each one the same question: "What breaks first if nothing changes?" The overlap in answers is your real risk register.

PHASE TWO**Days 31–60: Grip**

Stability buys you the right to make judgements. Now form them.

Project triage

- RAG the portfolio honestly — including the programmes everyone has learned not to mention. A leadership gap is political cover to kill what should have died a year ago.
- For each red project: stop, restart with new scope, or hand back to the business. “Continue and hope” is not one of the options.

Cost baseline

- Produce the one-page cost baseline: run vs change, unit costs where they exist, and benchmark roughly against sector norms.
- Identify the two or three savings that can be banked without harming service — there nearly always are some, and they fund the credibility of everything else.

Organisation and capability

- Map single points of failure: any system, process or relationship that depends on one person.
- Assess the leadership bench honestly. Sometimes the gap reveals a deputy ready to step up; sometimes it reveals why there was no succession plan.

Quick wins, chosen deliberately

- Pick one or two visible improvements the business will actually feel — faster laptops, a fixed recurring outage, a simplified approval. Credibility compounds.

PHASE THREE

Days 61–90: Direction

The gap ends with a decision, not just a hire. Use what the 90 days taught you.

The board-ready view

- Three one-pagers: risk (what could hurt us and what we're doing), cost (where the money goes and the trajectory), roadmap (what changes in the next 12 months).
- Establish the reporting rhythm — a monthly executive view and a quarterly board view. The rhythm outlasts whoever fills the seat.

Decide the shape of the role

- Define the role from evidence, not the old job description. Ninety days of gap tells you what the role actually requires — often less empire and more governance.
- Choose deliberately between permanent hire, fractional leadership, or a restructured function. Each is right for a different business; the wrong default is “replace like-for-like without asking”.
- If recruiting: the stabilised, documented estate you now have is worth months of onboarding time to the incoming leader — and widens the field of candidates willing to take the job.

The 90-day test: if the business has stopped asking “when will we have a CIO?” — because decisions are being made, service is steady and the board has a clear view — the gap has been managed well. The hire can then be made calmly, and to a higher standard.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Kennedy is the founder of Kennedy Advisory and former Group CIO of Robert Walters, where he led a 150+ person technology organisation across 14 countries, delivered £3M+ in annualised savings, achieved ISO/IEC 27001 across all jurisdictions and took AI safely into production. He is CISSP certified and based in Singapore with a global remit.

Working through this for real?

Independent judgement on technology, cyber risk and AI — as an interim or fractional CIO, or at the board table. Engagements start with a conversation, not a proposal.

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