

N BROWN

N Brown's chief information officer Andy Haywood is upgrading the former catalogue retailer. **Matthew Chapman** asks how he is doing it

Andy Haywood, chief information officer of N Brown, is issuing a rallying cry to his peers because he argues that for too long they have been taking a back seat.

Haywood is fresh back from his daughter's wedding in Italy and evidently still has nuptials on his mind.

"Quite often the chief information officer is the bridesmaid," says Haywood. "I think they need to do more to prove their credentials."

Haywood is speaking from a position of authority because he has been entrusted with N Brown's transformation programme by chief executive Angela Spindler.

The Jacamo and Simply Be parent is in the process of transforming from a catalogue business to a 'digital-first' retailer, and is investing heavily in the plan.

Haywood describes it as "the biggest investment in change that this organisation has ever seen".

Under-promise, over-deliver

N Brown has issued two profit warnings since October and Spindler has said that while the group is disappointed by the "slower-than-anticipated progress from a profit perspective" she attributes that to "taking the right decisions now".

Haywood arrived at N Brown last August and has wasted no time shaking things up.

Initially the retailer had set aside four years to carry out the transformation, but Haywood halved its target to two years.

Halfway through the transformation plan, Haywood says it is on track and on budget. So what is his secret?

"It is under-promise and over-deliver," he says. "A lot of big technology-enhanced transformation programmes are either late, or over budget, or late and over budget, or never deliver what they set out to do in the first place."

Haywood says that in his career he has had his fair share of disappointments, one of which came at Asda after the grocer's acquisition by Walmart.

"When we did the Walmart integration we underestimated the time and complexity of such a huge programme so we ended up running 18 months late by the time we finished," says Haywood. "It was a classic case of underestimating the complexity of today's businesses."

Haywood explains he has seen a number of programmes disappoint because "the focus

The man who is putting digital first at N Brown



and energy was front-loaded onto the business end rather than back-loaded into delivery and risk mitigation".

At N Brown Haywood is focusing on breaking down the dauntingly large transformation into smaller, more manageable tasks.

The first such task was the overhaul of

back-office systems, which was delivered to schedule and within budget earlier this month.

Transforming businesses

Next on the agenda is the ecommerce sites' front ends and a transformation of the company's credit business.

Haywood aims to complete these two customer-facing projects over the next 12 months.

"I've tried to chunk this programme into fewer bigger releases," says Haywood. "So you get the benefit of an industrial-scale change capability but there are always regular frequent changes along the way."

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Andy Haywood, N Brown

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"I think this is a seminal moment for CIOs. We have been a little bit late to the party and not prepared for this digital wave," says Haywood. "When you talk about the CIO you talk about the internal IT function – now is the time [for CIOs] to get onto the front foot."

Retail architecture

Haywood is proof that IT bosses can be entrusted with building the retail architecture of the future because he has board-level responsibility for business transformation.

During his career he has spent time at companies that have undergone seismic shifts. Observing the bosses of those businesses has left him with a passion for leading change.

Haywood's mentors include former Asda chief executive Archie Norman and Boots boss Richard Baker.

"I've worked at some amazing organisations with fantastic role models, and if ever there was an area where you should be judged by your results then transforming a business is one of them," says Haywood.

Like any transformation programme, tough decisions have needed to be made along the way.

N Brown is offering staff the chance to apply for voluntary redundancy, but only a "small percentage" of employees are expected to leave.

As part of the move to becoming a digital-first business all 3,000 head office staff are eligible to apply for redundancy, apart from call centre and warehouse workers.

"When you transition from catalogue to digital by definition you have to reinvest in new skills and experience," says Haywood. "I would argue we are going through what every other retailer is going through."

Understanding data

As it moves towards being a digital retailer N Brown is looking for employees who can understand, model and apply data effectively.

However, retailers are finding that recruiting enough good-quality data scientists is no easy feat.

"It is a classic case of supply and demand because the demand is going through the roof and the supply is lagging behind," maintains Haywood. "I would expect the market to catch up over the next two or three years."

He says he relishes the pressures of his role, but harbours some concerns about the outlook for some IT bosses.

"We have reached the tipping point on digital," says Haywood. "I feel a bit for future CIOs because if you are not strong there is a chance you will be left looking after the plumbing."

Now is the time, he thinks, for IT bosses to be bold, and seize the initiative to avoid being always the bridesmaid and never the bride.

CV

2014 to present

Group CIO and business change director, N Brown

2012 to 2014

Group CIO, the Co-operative Group

2009 to 2012

CIO, Boots UK

2005 to 2009

Various senior roles at HBoS group and Halifax including CIO at Halifax Retail Bank, HBoS

2002 to 2005

IT director, Asda

1998 to 2002

Various business roles, Asda

Haywood believes that often his peers are set impossible challenges. But rather than blaming that on the businesses they work for, he believes IT bosses are sometimes culpable for not having the wherewithal to convince the board what is realistic.

"It is not about saying no," says Haywood. "The main job of a CIO is to come up with solutions that support the business and that are affordable."

Haywood argues it is now time for chief information officers to stand up and be counted and that they should start shaping the future direction of the business rather than allowing themselves to be seen as "the guy fixing the plumbing".