As the speed of change in IT increases exponentially, many chief information officers (CIOs) are filled with trepidation. New strategic responsibilities have superseded the operational tasks that used to be their core mandate. Now they must anticipate what the future holds in order to find surer footing today.

The keyword for 2020 is “blended.” Everything from core technologies to C-suite dynamics will shift, eliminating cut-and-dried solutions and clearly delineated spheres of responsibility. The new strategy favors mixed approaches that leverage every resource available.

Centralized and distributed models of distributing technology to business users will both be affected by this shift. "Successful CIOs will have already figured out that centralized models are too brittle and slow while distributed models entail too much risk from lack of insight, integration and security," says Mike Pearl, partner and US Cloud Computing Leader at PwC, a multinational audit, assurance, tax and consulting firm.

A bevy of mixed models and technologies will create a new IT platform in their place. "At its foundation it will be a cloud-based platform, blended with high integration between public and private IT resources or between cloud and on-premise," says Pearl. As cloud security improves and mobility and access become more important to business users, this more flexible platform will become a necessity for organizations that need to be more agile than ever before.

Pearl believes that CIOs will largely transition from their current position as custodians of IT assets to become “brokers of services.” They will need to develop extensive skills in architecture and vendor management as they become responsible for managing the full range of services, data and technology their companies require.

But the increased responsibility given to CIOs does not mean they will be able to easily recapture the control that has migrated to business users. Increasingly tech-savvy employees are often key decision makers in the adoption of new corporate technology—from mobile devices to social tools, enterprise applications, cloud services and beyond. "CIOs will continue to combat so-called ‘shadow IT’ through improved customer service and by designing new IT platforms that clearly present a compelling value proposition for business users," says Pearl. Partnering with business users while staying ahead of the curve in recognizing the potential of key technology pieces will allow CIOs to steer their organizations’ IT strategy with less interference.

Being responsive to complaints and concerns will help keep business users working within the boundaries set by IT. However, the traditional role where IT provided services to business customers is also likely to give way to new, more blended approach. "The word ‘customer’ implies a passive relationship even when that is not the case," says Tina Nunno, research vice president in Gartner’s CIO Research group. "That attitude will give way to thinking of business users as active partners, infusing more energy and collaboration into the relationship.”

A new collaborative style is only one of the changes in store for the CIO. In the next few years, creativity will become the top differentiator in the CIO’s skill set. "IT systems are commodities now and will be even more so by 2020," says Nunno. "It will no longer be about who is the best system picker, but who has the most creative and experimental mindset. After all, the information that is ‘out there’ is only as valuable as the creativity in its use by the CIO and the organization.”

Technology expertise will be acknowledged as a baseline expectation in future. Nunno believes the new challenge for IT will be to know what the business needs and what the organization’s technology is capable of, in order to combine the two and adopt creative solutions.

Indeed, the importance of the CIO’s role is expected to rise sharply over the next several years as C-suite responsibilities and leadership lines continue to overlap. CIOs increasingly recognise that their responsibilities are evolving from operational to strategic: they are expected to be proficient at evaluating and implementing a variety of emerging technology tools. In addition, they are expected to help their organisations to craft a digital strategy that uses these new capabilities to support revenue growth, innovation and future relevance.

“There is already a correlation between the CEO and the CIO’s relationship and the success of the company,” says Pearl. “Look for them to become true peers soon.”