


IT as a Team Sport

[David Lewis](#) recruits and retains team members who can make a strategic difference at the [University of Rochester](#)

By Russ Klettke





David Lewis
University of
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VP for IT, CIO



“My job is to help others achieve their results and be successful so that the university can be successful,” says David Lewis.

It’s a tall order, as Lewis, the vice president for information technology and CIO at the University of Rochester in New York, oversees a diverse team of IT professionals across 158 buildings that are home to more than 2,000 instructional faculty and staff members and more than 11,000 students. On top of that, the University of Rochester Medical Center includes an 800-bed teaching hospital and several more facilities, including a children’s hospital. Managing the information systems for this top-ranked university system is a massive task, but Lewis is up to the challenge of creating a modern IT ecosystem for the modern university environment.

How do you define sustainable infrastructure?

Lewis: It’s an IT organization and platform that keeps pace with and exceeds the expectations of the institution it supports. A big part of that is the ability to attract and retain great people, which is probably one of the most important aspects of maintaining a sustainable infrastructure.

In a market the size of Rochester, you’re the single largest employer. Still, you’re up against several companies where tech talent is also in demand, such as Rochester Regional Health, Xerox, Wegmans Food Markets, Paychex Inc., and Rochester Institute of Technology. Is recruiting a challenge?

Lewis: We haven’t had challenges, per se. We’ve made recruiting a strategic opportunity by selling candidates on the university’s values and strengths. We engage team members as empowered organizational owners and responsible decision makers. This creates a more responsive service model for us and makes our employees avid recruiters.

We have a saying: “You can bring your whole self to work.” That means we embrace diversity in its broadest sense, and we value everything you bring to the workplace and all of your experiences. We have a program called UR Valued that systematically reflects those values in everything we do as an organization.

What are some of the net effects of that, other than perhaps a high retention rate?

Lewis: The people who do the real work on the front lines of an organization always know what needs to be fixed if you make clear they are empowered to do so. But they also know they are getting the chance to work in a dynamic IT environment and have a major impact in supporting education, healthcare, and cutting-edge research.

Our philosophy also allows staff the opportunity to exercise their individual passion for community service, personal interests, and professional development.

Getting back to this idea of sustainable infrastructure, given the dynamics of both a university and healthcare environment, what are the harder parts of your job?

Lewis: I would probably never call the job hard in that respect. Instead, I think of it as interesting, challenging, and always changing. There is never a dull moment, and you always have to be thinking ahead.

My constant focus is to field an IT organization that scales and is agile enough to respond to the service levels my institution requires. That does entail a lot of moving parts and complexity.

Specifically speaking, what might that look like?

Lewis: I tell my team that I like to focus on three pillars: organization, operations, and strategy, with a service-centric approach wrapped around it all.

The organization serves the basis, and people are the foundation. If we are sound organizationally, we can use that strength to create operational excellence. If we are operationally strong, then we can focus on the strategic pillar as well. But you can’t play a strategically enabling role for your institution as an IT organization if you’re running a “break/fix” shop that fails to attract and retain good people.

The fun part for me, I think, is about taking the opportunity to bring people together across the university community to collaborate toward a more impactful outcome. It’s about everyone together achieving more than any one person could achieve individually.

There is a lot of conversation about effective governance. Can you describe what that looks like at the University of Rochester?



Lewis: As the primary hub for IT programs and initiatives, the office of the vice president for IT is responsible for building collaborative relationships across the university to create integrated, secure, and dependable IT systems and practices that support efficient and cost-effective distribution of information throughout the university community. IT governance has given our community a forum in which to come together and share information about their IT needs, challenges, and initiatives in a way that creates opportunities for collaboration and efficiencies. From a senior leadership perspective, it has created a holistic view of the university's overall IT portfolio and spend.

Through the IT governance process, we have identified and acted on opportunities to rationalize IT investments in support of implementing new and

▲ CIO David Lewis focuses on recruiting an IT team capable of exceeding the expectations of the University of Rochester.

updated services. IT security, networking, and authentication services are recent examples.

What's the net benefit to the University of Rochester in that?

Lewis: We provide our senior leadership with the ability to make informed choices in a very dynamic and ever-changing investment that includes research, health-care, teaching and learning, and administration. In the twenty years I have been at the University of Rochester, we have built out the entire IT ecosystem across the board into the modern environment that is required today.

But, what makes the University of Rochester special is its people and the highly important missions we serve. I never think of myself as being in IT but, more importantly, in education and healthcare. ●