The Emerging Archetypes of Technology Leadership in the Boardroom

Russell Reynolds ASSOCIATES

In advising boards across industries and regions, we see companies that look nearly identical make very different technology appointments. The divergence is driven not by sector, scale, or access to talent but by something more consequential: whether boards are using tech defensively, to keep pace with change, or offensively, to build a competitive edge.

This shows up in the issues boards prioritize. Some are focused on modernizing legacy systems and managing risk as AI adoption accelerates. Others are determining how tech will reshape their growth, business models and customer engagement. Many boards face both sets of pressures, but tend to recruit tech leaders with experience aligned with where they feel exposed.

Over time, these appointments shape which strategies are explored, which risks are prioritized, and which opportunities are missed. By "technology leader," we are referring to the board member whose experience most strongly shapes how tech questions are approached, regardless of formal title or role. Across our work, we see tech leadership organizing into three archetypes, defined by how they apply recent lived experience to enterprise decisions. Each archetype influences which issues emerge early, how management assumptions are tested, and how boards balance offense and defense in pursuing long-term advantage.

This paper is a part of Russell Reynolds Associates' **Technology and Governance Series**, which examines how boards can strengthen their oversight and strategic decision-making as technology becomes increasingly central to enterprise performance.

The Growth Architect

Boards recruit this archetype when prioritizing offense. The Growth Architect appears when directors are less concerned about whether the organization can execute, and more focused on unlocking new value drivers.

Rather than anchoring discussion in what exists, Growth Architects help boards look forward. They bring experience from environments in which tech is integral in creating value, not just supporting operations. Their contribution is in helping directors see where emerging capabilities change the logic of the business, open avenues for growth, or redefine how to build advantage.

In the boardroom, this perspective shifts the conversation from optimization to opportunity. Growth Architects raise questions before options narrow, pressing management on where tech can change the business' trajectory. They focus less on prioritizing and delivery, and more on reframing what's possible.

In board settings, the Growth Architect typically brings:

- An offensive lens on where technology can create new revenue streams
- Experience in fast scaling or new product launches where tech directly created revenue
- The ability to move discussions beyond incremental improvements
- The ability to identify which opportunities warrant early board-level attention

When boards need to be careful

Growth Architects can stretch the strategic horizon faster than the organization can follow. If discussions aren't rooted in the reality of one's organization, it's difficult to move beyond theoretical strategies, leaving boards energized but unclear on where to act.

The Modernizer

While Growth Architects expand what's possible, the Modernizer is brought in to make sure ambition can be delivered. Boards turn to this archetype when tech has moved from aspiration to commitment—with execution, resilience, and risk determining whether intent translates into results.

Modernizers bring credibility rooted in recent, hands-on leadership. They're deeply attuned to how systems, teams and processes function today and where legacy constraints will arise as investments scale. Their value lies in helping boards assess readiness, priorities, and tradeoffs before momentum outpaces what's possible.

In boardroom discussions, Modernizers shift the conversation downstream. They focus attention on dependencies, integration, and capacity; often bringing risk to the fore earlier and more concretely than those with other perspectives. This grounding is essential, particularly as AI adoption and platform modernization increase the stakes of failure.

In board settings, the Modernizer typically brings:

- A defensive lens on whether systems can scale, integrate, and operate reliably without creating new risk
- Experience leading major system upgrades or integrations in complex legacy environments
- The ability to challenge whether the organization is ready to deliver what management is proposing
- Strong judgment shaped by recent experience

When boards need to be careful

If the Modernizer becomes a dominant voice, a board can default to managing risk and making incremental changes to operational efficiency. This focus may crowd out exploration, limiting tech to a lens of risk and exposure vs. a lever for advantage. The strongest boards pair Modernizers with offensive perspectives, keeping ambition alive, but grounded.

The Customer Strategist

Boards bring in this archetype when they want clearer insight into how tech decisions affect the customer. This perspective becomes critical as customer expectations shift, especially when retention and relevance increasingly hinge on digital experience. Customer Strategists help boards understand how tech decisions show up in customer behavior and business results.

Rather than approach tech through systems or strategy alone, Customer Strategists focus on how the market defines value. They come from settings where changes to digital experience impacted customer retention, usage, or revenue. Their contribution lies in helping boards understand whether tech choices improve engagement.

In the boardroom, this perspective grounds both ambition and execution in customer reality. Customer Strategists help directors pressure-test whether growth strategies are resonating, where modernization efforts are improving experience, and where platform decisions are strengthening the customer relationship. They often flag disconnects between internal priorities and external outcomes that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In board settings, the Customer Strategist typically brings:

- A commercial lens on how tech decisions affect customer behavior, retention, and long-term revenue
- Experience linking tech investment to measurable changes in customer engagement or revenue
- The ability to connect strategic decisions to how customers actually experience the company
- Clear judgment on when tech improves the customer experience and when it creates friction

When boards need to be careful

If the Customer Strategist perspective becomes the primary lens, boards can over-index on near-term experience metrics at the cost of long-term capability building. The risk is imbalance, rather than misplaced focus, prioritizing today's experience at the expense of tomorrow's competitiveness.

The key is the combination

Boards face constant pressure to balance offense and defense as tech continuously changes the game. Effective oversight depends on whether the board has the right mix of perspectives to do both well. Combining Growth Architects, Modernizers, and Customer Strategists positions boards to move early where it matters, manage risk where it counts, and build a sustainable advantage over time.

What distinguishes highly effective tech directors

Based on our advisory work, the most effective technology leaders tend to share several characteristics:

- **Active curiosity**, staying engaged in how tech is being applied today

- **Recent experience**, with perspectives shaped by current operating environments rather than historical precedent

- **Breadth of perspective**, allowing them to scan widely and filter effectively

- **Judgment, not just expertise**, in assessing what's relevant

- **Translation skills**, connecting technical developments to operational implications

Authors

James Roome is a senior member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Technology practice and leads the Services sector. He is based in London.

Sean Roberts is a senior member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Board and CEO Advisory Partners and Technology practices. He is based in London.

David Finke is a senior member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Board and CEO Advisory Partners and Technology practices. He is based in Palo Alto.

Ravenna Stafford is a member of the Russell Reynolds Associates' Commercial Strategy & Insights team. She is based in New York.

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Russell Reynolds
Associates

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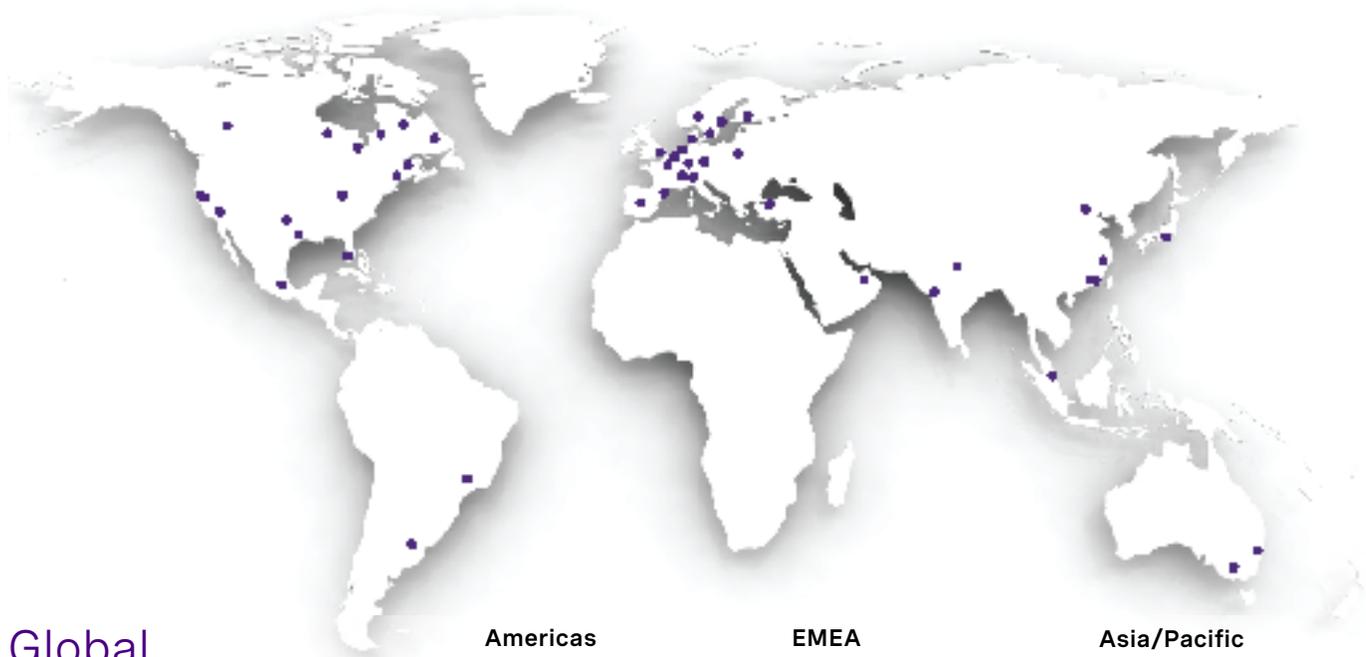
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