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Find Great Talent To
Shape Great Change

AI Capability Assessment Scorecard

For evaluating CTO candidates in
the AI era





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**Every candidate sounds
AI-capable in the
interview.**

**The scorecard is how
you find out who
actually is.**

Sonia Sharma
Founder Director, Pipal Tree Services

CTO ASSESSMENT SCORECARD

| Dimension | What to Assess | AI-Capable Signal | Score 1-5 |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--|
| 1. Architecture | Can they make sound architectural decisions for AI-native systems, not just describe them? | Describes a specific system they architected and the trade-offs they owned. | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| 2. Data Infrastructure | Did they build the data foundation AI requires, or just the application on top? | Built data pipelines, quality systems, and governance before deploying models. | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| 3. Build vs Buy | Can they own the build-versus-buy trade-off with cost and capability logic? | Explains a specific decision with reasoning—not deference to a vendor or team. | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| 4. AI Talent Strategy | Can they attract, retain, and grow AI engineers in a hyper-competitive market? | Names how they attracted a key hire and why that person stayed. | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| 5. Commercial Thinking | Do they connect AI capability to business outcomes, or treat AI as an end? | Ties AI work to revenue, cost, or competitive position—with numbers. | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| 6. AI Restraint | Do they know when not to use AI, against pressure to use it? | Has killed an AI project or argued against AI for its own sake. | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |

Score each candidate 1–5 on every dimension.

1 = AI-informed (vocabulary only).

5 = AI-capable (consequential decisions, owned outcomes).

Look for specific decisions and trade-offs, not concepts

READING THE TOTAL SCORE (OUT OF 30)

24-30

AI-Capable

Genuine capability.
Consequential decisions across
most dimensions.

16-23

Developing

Real foundation, gaps in some
dimensions. Assess trajectory
and humility.

Below 16

AI-Informed

Vocabulary without
demonstrated capability. Probe
harder or reconsider.

THE 6 QUESTIONS THAT REVEAL AI CAPABILITY

↙ Pair each scorecard dimension with the question that surfaces it

Architecture

“Walk me through an AI system you personally architected. What were the hardest trade-offs?”

Listen for: specific decisions and constraints.
Red flag: describes systems in the abstract.

Data Infrastructure

“What data infrastructure did you build before your team deployed models?”

Listen for: pipelines, quality, governance.
Red flag: “we needed better data” with no action.

Build vs Buy

3 “Tell me about a build-versus-buy decision you made on an AI component.”

Listen for: cost/capability reasoning

Red flag: deferred entirely to vendor or team.

AI Talent

4 “How did you attract your best AI engineer and why did they stay?”

Listen for: specific person, specific reasons.

Red flag: “we hired AI people” generically.

Commercial Thinking

5 “Which of your AI initiatives changed a business metric & by how much?”

Listen for: numbers, outcomes.

Red flag: AI described as capability with no commercial link.

AI Talent

“How did you attract your best AI engineer and why did they stay?”

Listen for: specific person, specific reasons.

Red flag: “we hired AI people” generically.

Each dimension in this scorecard is explained in detail – with the interview questions that surface it and the red flags that signal an AI-informed candidate posing as AI-capable.



How to Assess an AI CTO: AI-Informed or AI-Capable?



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Let's Talk Leadership.

If you've never worked with an executive search partner before, let's start with a conversation - not a contract.

At Pipal Tree Services, we help organizations discover purpose-aligned leaders built for the age of transformation.

Let's Talk

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