



A Week In The Life of a CIO: Ryan Fay, ACI Specialty Benefits

It's 4 a.m. on Monday and the alarm clock is blaring. It's time to start the work week, which actually began with a two-hour planning phone call on Sunday. And that's if the weekend didn't bring about any technical fires in need of a good dousing.

When tasked with overseeing a global network of more than 50,000 mobile devices, private onsite data storage center, and every IT initiative in a company experiencing 300-percent growth annually, sleep comes at a premium. Ryan Fay would have it no other way.

Fay, the Global CIO for California-based ACI Specialty Benefits is meticulous about his weekly work schedule, understanding that a failure to plan is a plan for failure. Since joining ACI in 2010 as an IT Specialist, Fay ascended to Global CIO at the concierge-focused resource company in 2015, having implemented a complete onsite private cloud center and pushed the enterprise into the digital age with the use of a BYOD platform and global network to support the initiative.

But the broad scope of Fay's success begins in the day-to-day architecture of digital transformation.

"I have to get things going on Sunday, because by Monday, it's too late," he said. "That's just the reality of working for a company growing so quickly. It's like you're at a buffet, and you've already eaten, and now you're completely stuffed. Then someone fills up your plate over and over again."

Fay spends about two hours Sunday going over the week's meetings and top priorities with his executive assistant, so he's able to hit the ground running Monday morning. When the work week hits, Fay's up at 4 a.m., working remotely until about 7 a.m., and then heads into the office.

"I'm usually on the phone by 6 a.m. and done with calls by 10, maybe 10:30 a.m.," he said. "Then I'm in meetings until 2 p.m. Each day has a different structure with separate deliverables and workloads."

ACI strives to be a one-stop-shop for its concierge services, which range from enterprise-wide health and wellness programs to scheduling dry cleaning drop-off and pickup for individual clients. "We don't outsource anything," Fay commented. "It's incredible how many authentication codes it takes to drop off dry cleaning at someone's house. But the point is we don't want our end users to have to think about any of that. One simple program like that has a million legs and we have to manage that on the technical side."

The same tech oversight needed in a forward facing manner for the end user, Fay also has to focus toward the internal workings. Citing a lack of trust in other clouds, Fay's team has to keep the gears grinding on the company's onsite data center, which means managing their own hardware and software to keep the wheels turning.

Monday also brings structured team lead meetings, which are 15 minutes at a time. Fay oversees a dozen separate verticals within the IT department, including data analysts, IoT specialists, AI specialists, developers, and hardware and software technicians, among others. "We just don't have time to have big sit down meetings," he said, also noting the team frequently uses email and team chat app Slack to stay in touch. "So I schedule 15-minute meetings with each head and go over what's the priority for that day and anything upcoming. If there's a problem, we can discuss at any time, of course."

After working from home most of the evening, Fay curls up for a lengthy nap around midnight, prepped for Tuesday's 4 a.m. buzzer. It is then he meets with the executive team to update the company on the latest information and data processed through Monday. The work cycle continues as Fay and company handle – and fulfill – roughly 10,000 work orders on a weekly basis.

Thanks to the fast-paced culture of ACI's IT structure, Wednesday is often spent restructuring, patching, or enhancing what's been done Monday and Tuesday. By Thursday it's all hands on deck for software work and updates, and by Friday Fay is looking to close out whatever remaining deliverables were scheduled.

As the one atop a deep and wide IT food chain, Fay laments he has managerial qualities that need to be worked on, and in order to sustain his own work-life balance and that of his employees, the culture must be put in place for everyone to succeed.

"I've come to the realization that I need to answer those emails in the middle of the night to feel like I can accelerate the following day," he said. "I'm tasked with a lot of decision making and delegating, and my biggest goals in 2017 and 2018 are to work on creating better culture and retention. I came up in a very technical environment, but not everyone works that way, so I'm altering my soft people skills and learning more about my team."

While the weeks are hectic, they add up to productive months, which lead to successful years. Fay's been on board for seven years, when ACI had about 50 employees on its mobile network, and now has more than 50,000.

The young CIO – Fay was named a 30 under 30 by Forbes – isn't worried about the pace of his work schedule. After all, it's not "work" when you enjoy what you're doing.