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GE CIO Jim Fowler Looks Beyond the Corporate Network

By *Steve Rosenbush*

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General Electric Co.'s offices in Baden, Switzerland. PHOTO: URS FLUEELER/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

Good morning. **General Electric Co.** is taking employees at more than 600 global offices off its corporate network and allowing them to securely access applications over the internet, CIO Jim Fowler says. He expects the move to save \$20 million next year. “We’re seeing workers (are) more distributed anyway, so why should we think about somebody working from home any different than somebody working from an office?” Mr. Fowler [told CIO Journal’s Sara Castellanos](#) during the ONUG Fall 2017 Conference in New York.

GE is hosting the event, which continues today in New York. IT leaders are sharing insights on networking, security, digital transformation and other issues. The group, previously known as the Open Networking User Group, advocates for open hardware and software-defined infrastructure.

The concept of a corporation without a corporate network reflects changes in the nature of the enterprise, in which borders are blurring at many levels. In 2016, GE ran a pilot program at about 100 GE offices around the world in which employees were taken off the corporate network and securely accessed work applications on the internet. The test ended earlier this year, and GE “proved we could absolutely do it” on a larger scale, Mr. Fowler said.

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Jim Fowler, chief information officer at General Electric Co., speaks at Tuesday at a conference in New York hosted by GE and ONUG. PHOTO: SARA CASTELLANOS / WALL STREET JOURNAL

The CIO as chief automation officer. For an enterprise to be successful, the roles of the chief information officer and chief digital officer roles should be clearly delineated, GE CIO Jim Fowler told CIO Journal at the ONUG event in New York City Tuesday. CIOs should focus on being “chief automation officers.” CDOs, by contrast, should be concerned with building software products to market to customers.

What does this look like? CIOs should be developing ways to use technology to automate highly mundane, repeatable work so that employees can focus on higher-level tasks such as training machines,

he said. They should also prioritize financial goals and metrics that will appeal to the business. Instead of talking about obsolescence, performance and upgrades, the CIO should be talking about revenue growth, operating profit and working capital. “That’s how you gain credibility,” Mr. Fowler said. At GE, his global IT team is in charge of driving profitability, cash and revenue growth for the company. “That’s how we keep score,” he said.