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Chief Digital Officer Hiring Trends 2026: Analyzing the S&P 500 CDO

Who is the Chief Digital Officer today? An analysis of the current state and emerging trends in the career profiles of today's leading CDOs.



Slightly over one in four companies in the S&P 500 now has a C-suite level digital officer. The role is not a universal one, but many companies see the benefits of having a single person responsible for digital operations across the company, whether to ensure strategic alignment of digital offerings across regions and units or to integrate AI into digital operations.

The questions companies face around digital, however, often make the decision of hiring and scoping the CDO position more difficult than for other C-suite officers. Should the CDO be standalone and the single point person for digital coordination, or should digital responsibility be wrapped into the mandate of a CIO or CTO? Should it be a permanent position, or should the CDO's mandate and the position itself be time-bound and tied to specific transformation goals?

To better understand the contours of the role, particularly who boards are hiring for the position and what boards are prioritizing, we built a statistical profile of every CDO in the S&P 500. We tracked their career trajectories, credentials, and demographic information, and also compared recent hires (current CDOs appointed in 2023 and after) with longer-tenured CDOs (current CDOs appointed in 2022 or prior).

Our findings reflect the often provisional nature of the role and its mandate. Nearly 40% of sitting CDOs have held the position for less than two years, a rate of turnover unusually high for the C-suite.[1] A similarly high percentage of CDOs are first-time appointees (64.1%), and the CDO pipeline draws primarily from four different prior-role families, a wider mix than most other C-suite roles. This provisionality may sometimes be the outcome of intentional decisions. The board designs the role to be time-bound and aligned with specific transformation goals. It draws from a diverse pool of candidates and first-time appointees, because the shape of each mandate is different.

The customized nature of these roles, however, often risks confusion about their purpose or shape, uncertainty over what experiences and capabilities a candidate would need to succeed in the position, and organizational misalignment about the CDO's responsibilities and remit. Some of the role's aggregate provisionality and tenuousness, then, is likely unintentional and even harmful. A seat that turns over because its remit was never clear or settled produces short tenure too.

When pressing digital issues arise, therefore, a board's first question should not be who to appoint as

[1] Compare CDOs to other technology leaders, where 33.3% of CIOs, 30.8% of CTOs, and 25.7% of CISOs in the S&P 500 have less than two years of tenure. Other C-suite positions carry similar numbers to the CIO, CTO, and CISO figures: 28.9% of CHROs and 33.1% of CFOs have held the role for less than two years (N2Growth analysis. See forthcoming N2Growth papers).

CDO. The board should first consider whether the company needs a standalone CDO, whether the digital responsibilities in question should be folded into an existing role, such as that of the Chief Technology Officer or the Chief Information Officer, or whether the position should be combined with another role. Indeed, a full 64% of Chief Digital Officers' titles extend to include "Information," "Technology," or other domains.

Boards should not hesitate to create a standalone seat when the work requires concentrated executive accountability, cross-functional decision-making, capital allocation, and business-model change that existing CFO, COO, CIO, and CMO mandates may not naturally prioritize. The academic literature, after all, has characterized the CIO and CTO roles as following different logics of action from the demand-side orientation the CDO role was originally created to lead.[2]

The choice between a single accountable digital executive and digital accountability distributed across the core functions does not have to be mutually exclusive. A permanent standalone role can weaken broader ownership by allowing other executives to treat digital as someone else's responsibility. For many companies, the strongest version of the role will be an explicitly provisional one. The CDO is hired and positioned to accelerate a digital transformation that requires executive-level accountability. Once that work is done and made sustainable, the CDO is expected, from the first day, to hand digital ownership to the core functions.

Either way, the role has to be shaped in a way that does not invite failure. A CDO is likely to fail when authority overlaps materially with the CIO, CTO, COO, or CMO; when the title is not supported by budget, headcount, and decision rights; when the appointment is primarily symbolic; or when no one has settled whether the role has a defined end state or is indefinite. A mandate without clear authority over investment, reporting relationships, and measurable outcomes is particularly vulnerable to underperformance, conflict, and premature turnover.

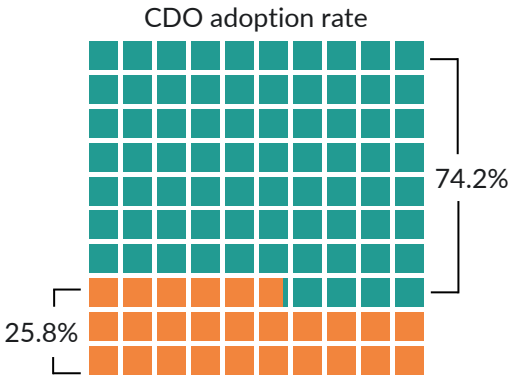
This paper's insights are intended to help:

1. **Boards and CEOs** understand the market and hiring patterns by cohort and industry
2. **Sitting CDOs** see how expectations for the role are changing
3. **Aspiring CDOs** shape their careers for the C-suite

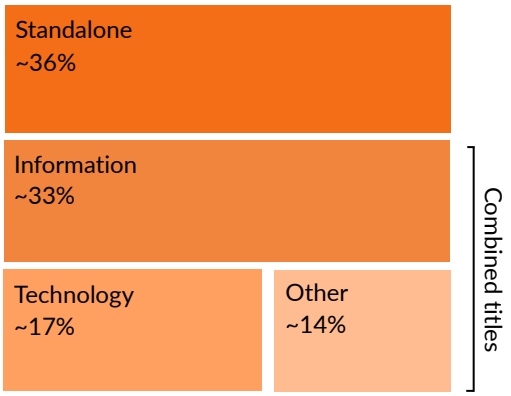
[2] Sanja Tumbas et al., "Digital Innovation and Institutional Entrepreneurship: Chief Digital Officer Perspectives of their Emerging Role," Journal of Information Technology, 33(3) (2018): 188–202, at 198.

The CDO today

About a quarter of S&P 500 firms have a CDO

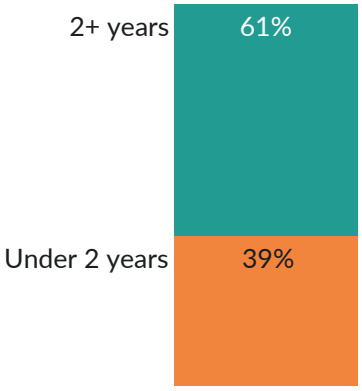


The role frequently extends beyond digital alone

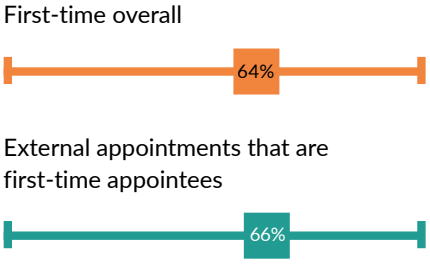


Signs of a provisional role

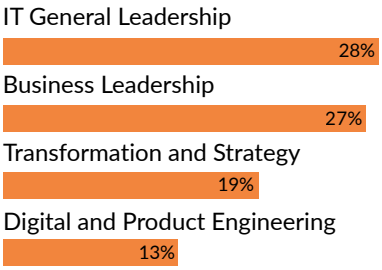
CDO tenure is unusually short



Most CDOs are first-time appointees, including external hires

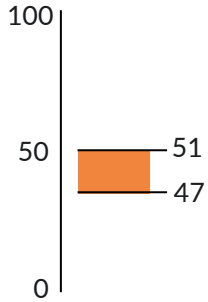


The CDO pipeline draws from four different prior-role families, wider than most C-suite roles

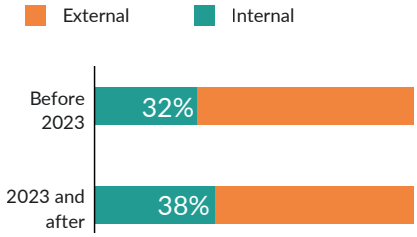


What's changed since 2022?

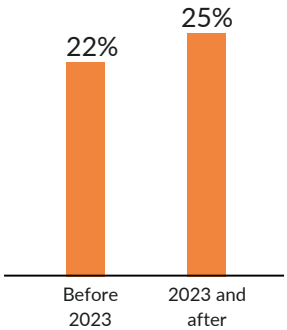
Recent CDOs are now older at appointment



Internal hiring is rising, even though outsiders are still the majority of hires



Female share is slowly rising



Three actions for boards and CEOs

1. Define the digital problem before you begin the search
2. Give the CDO budget, decision rights, and defined goals
3. Include candidates in the search who have never held the CDO title

Three actions for sitting CDOs

1. Ask for a written definition of what you own
2. Lead as both a business executive and a technologist
3. Build relationships with technology vendors and leaders in other industries

Three actions for aspiring CDOs

1. Pair your technical expertise with business leadership experience
2. Don't be afraid to take opportunities outside your industry
3. If your company has no CDO, make the case for creating one



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The prevalence and shape of the CDO

As digitization initiatives have matured into steady-state operations, companies have handled the CDO role in two ways. Some created the seat to deliver a defined transformation and expect to return its responsibilities to other executives once that work is done. Others kept the seat and redefined it, turning the CDO from a leader of transformation into a strategic coordinator of digital work across the company.[3] AI now gives some CDOs a new transformation mandate, converting digital offerings into AI-powered ones. As with digital transformations, some CDOs appointed for that task will likely have time-bound mandates. Other roles will transition from transformation to coordination as AI eventually becomes steady-state too.

The title itself reflects the role's evolving shape. Just over a third of C-suite officers with "digital" in their title are Chief Digital Officers only. Often, the title and remit extend to information and/or technology, indicating both that the role is not singular or universal, and that its responsibilities often overlap with those held by a CIO or CTO. In some companies the CDO reports to the CIO; in others, a single person performs both roles.

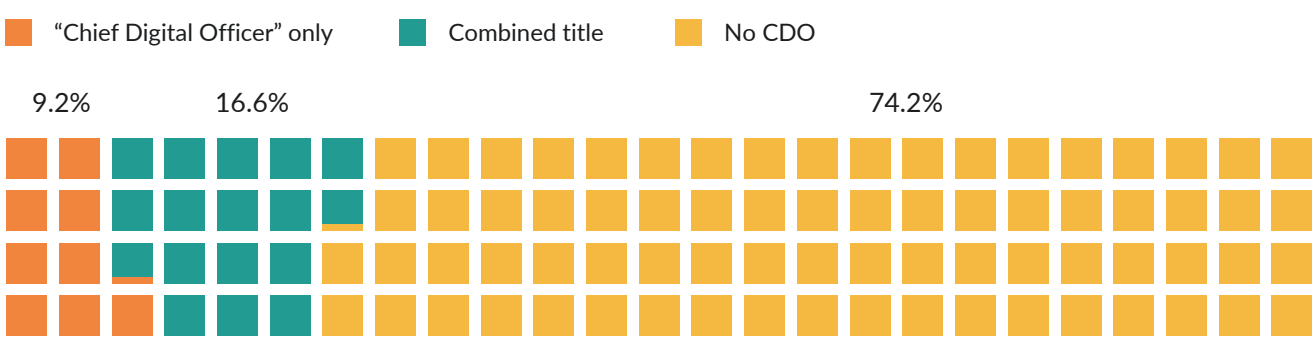
Roughly one in four S&P 500 companies has a CDO, most often as a combined title

25.8% of S&P 500 companies have a CDO. Of the 129 that do, 46 hold a standalone "Chief Digital Officer" title, and 83 hold a title that combines Digital with another C-level function. Combined titles outnumber dedicated ones by nearly two to one. That pattern is not uniform across industries. Standalone titles outnumber combined ones in Financial Services (7 to 2) and Business and Professional Services (6 to 5), while Healthcare and Life Sciences, Consumer, and Agriculture, Energy, and

[3] Sebastian Firk et al., "Chief Digital Officers: An Analysis of the Presence of a Centralized Digital Transformation Role," Journal of Management Studies, 58(7) (2021): 1800–1831.

Natural Resources are overwhelmingly combined.[4]

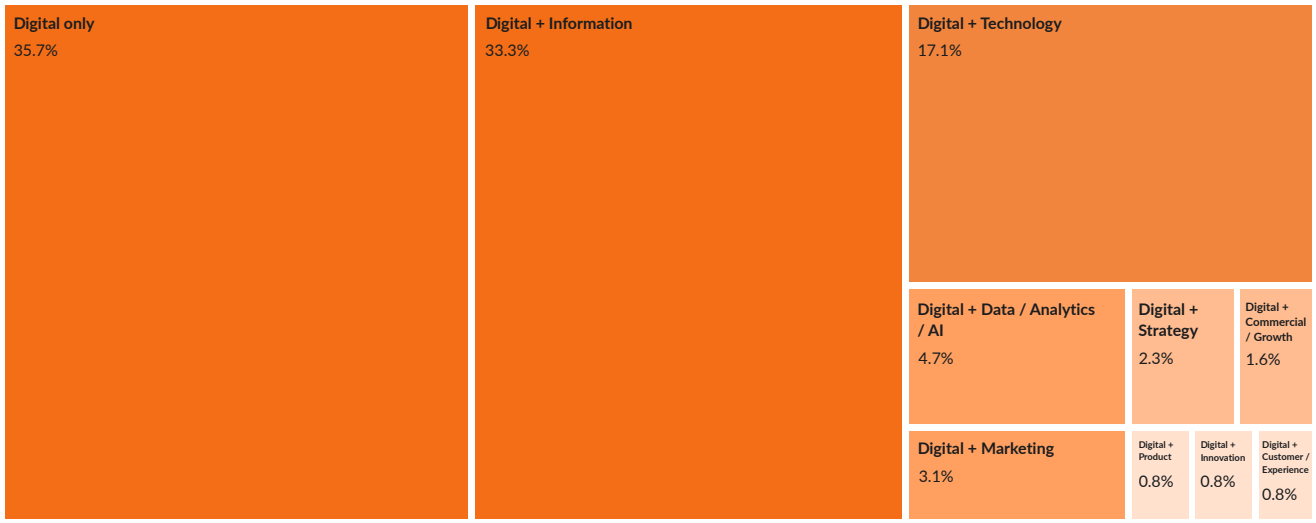
S&P 500 companies with a CDO, by title type



Information is the most common function paired with Digital in combined titles

Of all 129 CDOs, 33.3% hold a title pairing Digital with Information and 17.1% pair it with Technology. The remaining combined titles are thinly spread across Data/Analytics/AI (4.7%), Marketing (3.1%), Strategy (2.3%), Commercial/Growth (1.6%), and single-count pairings with Product, Innovation, and Customer/Experience.

Title composition

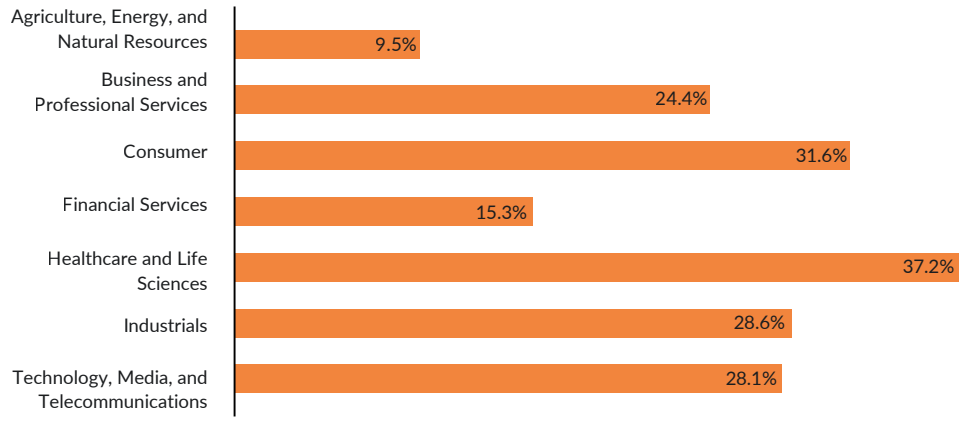


[4] This is a lower rate of "standalone" titles than other tech leaders. In the S&P 500, 86.9% of CIOs, 85.3% of CISOs, 74.8% of CTOs, 39.1% of CAIOs, and 38.8% of CDOs (Chief Data Officers) have standalone titles.

CDO adoption varies sharply by industry

Healthcare and Life Sciences has the highest CDO adoption rate at 37.2%, followed by Consumer (31.6%), Industrials (28.6%), and Technology, Media, and Telecommunications (28.1%). Financial Services (15.3%) and Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources (9.5%) sit well below the S&P 500 average of 25.8%.

CDO adoption rate, by industry



Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources (n=42 total, n=4 with CDO) is a small absolute count in the with-CDO column. The 9.5% figure is directionally reliable but individual movements in this industry will register as large swings.

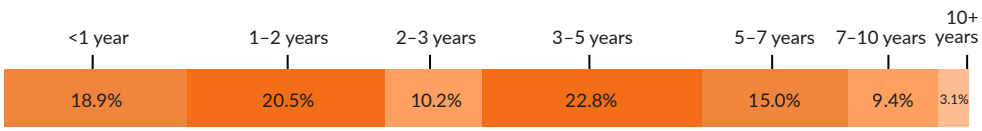
CDOs turn over quickly, especially in some industries

CDO tenure is unusually short,[5] the clearest expression of the provisionality described in the introduction. That shortness has more than one cause. In some companies it reflects a lack of clarity in the role or misaligned remits and ownership, and CDOs are brought in who either fail to meet the hiring firm's expectations or move on out of frustration at not being empowered to move the organization. In others, the seat was created to carry a defined body of work and was never meant to be permanent. As we discuss in the "What's next" section, boards and CEOs need a clear sense of what they want the CDO to achieve, how the role fits into the organization, whether it carries the ownership required to deliver, and whether it is meant to last.

CDO tenure clusters short, with nearly two in five having held the role for less than two years

39.4% of CDOs have been in their current role for less than two years (18.9% under one year, 20.5% between one and two years). Another 22.8% are in the 3–5 year bucket, and 12.6% have crossed seven years. The overall tenure distribution skews toward recent appointments.

Current CDO tenure distribution



Current tenure is the number of years held in the current CDO role as of the dataset cutoff.

[5] See footnote 1.

Most CDOs spent only a few years in the role that preceded their appointment

39.8% of CDOs spent less than three years in the role immediately prior to their CDO appointment; the largest single bucket is 3–5 years at 37.5%. Very few (8.6%) spent more than seven years in their prior role.

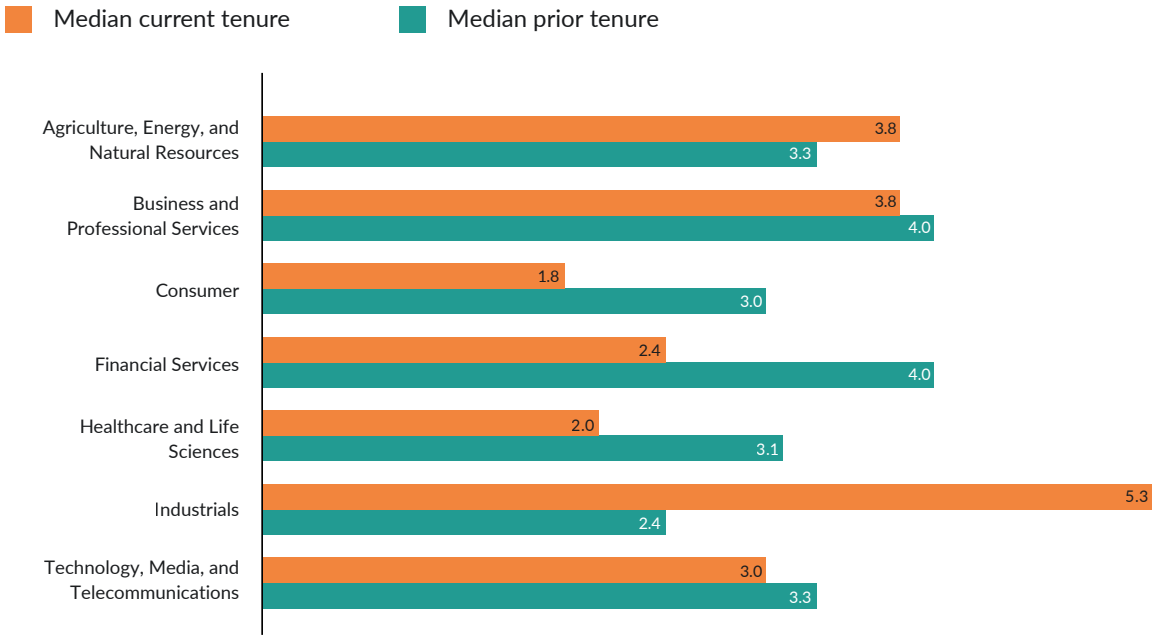
Prior role tenure distribution



Current-role tenure varies sharply by industry; prior-role tenure does not

Current-role median tenure ranges from 1.8 years in Consumer to 5.3 years in Industrials, a spread of over three years. Prior-role median tenure clusters more tightly, ranging from 2.4 to 4.0 years across all industries.

Median tenure, current and prior role, by industry



Medians use CDOs with known tenure, so Consumer (11 of 12) and Technology, Media, and Telecommunications (60 of 61) sit one below their counts elsewhere. Subsets are small; read the 1.8-year and 5.3-year figures with caution.

External hires and internal hires hold the role for a similar length

External hires hold the CDO role for a median of 3.3 years; internal hires hold it for a median of 2.5 years. The 0.8-year gap is small and, given the overall tenure distribution's skew toward recent appointments, should not be read as evidence that one appointment type lasts longer than the other.

Median current tenure, internal vs. external hires



External hires n=82, internal hires n=44. Two external hires have no recorded tenure and are excluded from this calculation.

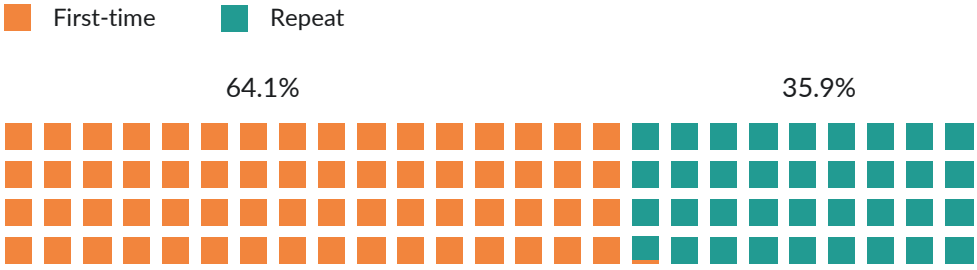
CDOs are often first-time appointees

A striking number of CDOs are in the role for the first time,[6] another marker of the role's provisional character described in the introduction. The high first-time rate suggests either that the talent pool is too small for a higher number of repeat appointments, or that boards and CEOs view the position as idiosyncratic enough that there is no ready-made template to draw from, and they consequently tailor their search instead.

Nearly two-thirds of CDOs are in their first CDO role

First-time CDOs account for 64.1% of appointments; repeat CDOs account for 35.9%.

First-time vs. repeat CDOs

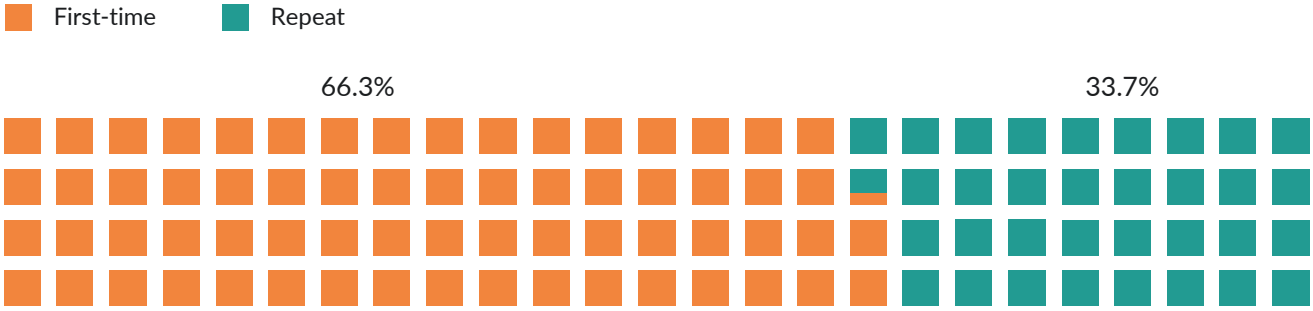


External hires are mostly first-time CDOs

Among externally appointed CDOs, first-time CDOs make up 66.3%. Repeat CDOs account for the remaining 33.7%.

[6] Compare, for example, to 48.8% of CIOs, 31.4% of CISOs, and 46.7% of CFOs in the S&P 500 being first-time appointments (N2Growth analysis. See forthcoming N2Growth papers).

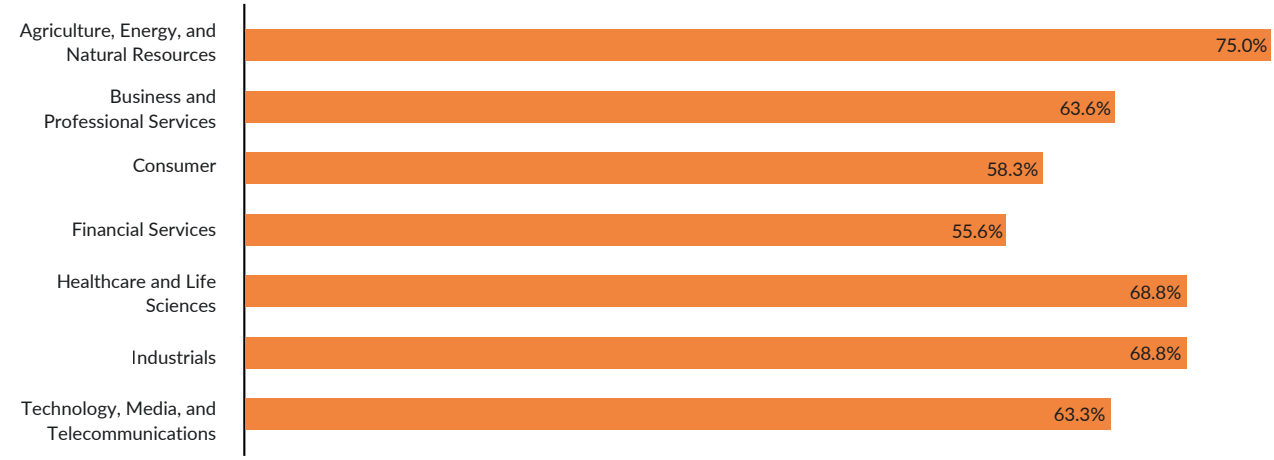
First-time vs. repeat CDOs, external hires only



First-time CDO rates run above 55% across every industry

First-time CDO rates range from 55.6% in Financial Services to 75.0% in Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources, with every industry above the halfway mark. No industry shows a majority-repeat pattern.

First-time CDO rate, by industry



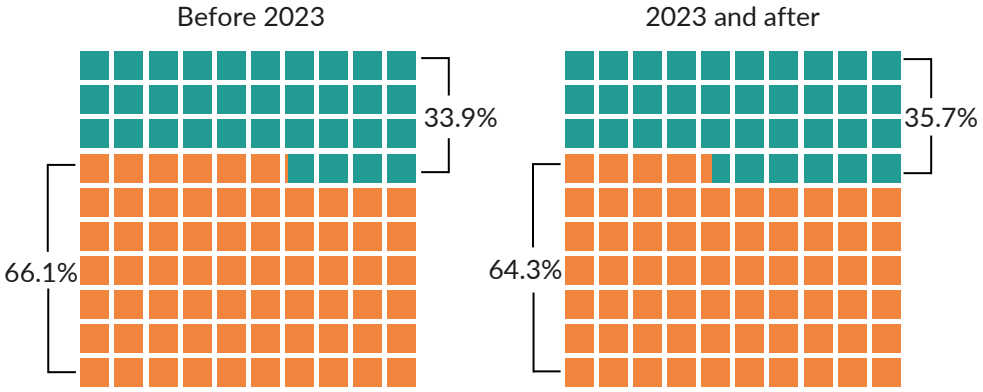
Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources (n=4) and Financial Services (n=9) are small subsets and should be interpreted with caution.

The first-time share has barely moved between cohorts

First-time CDOs made up 66.1% of appointments before 2023 and 64.3% in 2023 and after. The 1.8-point difference is within the statistical noise.[7]

[7] Cohort views throughout this paper exclude 2 CDOs whose current tenure is unknown and who therefore cannot be assigned to a cohort. Where applicable, cohort totals will differ slightly from the corresponding overall figures.

First-time vs. repeat CDOs, before 2023 and 2023 and after



CDOs come from an unusually wide pipeline of prior roles

Unlike most C-suite roles, the CDO chair does not have a dominant feeder function, another sign of how provisionally the role is defined. The relatively balanced spread among IT general leadership, non-IT business leadership, transformation and strategy, and digital and product engineering reflects the diverse set of skills and capabilities a CDO needs.[8] Success in the role calls for the ability to work cross-functionally, the business acumen to deliver results that are often core to strategy, and the IT chops to understand the possibilities and limitations of various technologies. Yet the same spread also reflects, as noted in the introduction, ongoing uncertainty in the market about which prior experience best prepares a candidate for the seat.

No single function dominates the CDO pipeline

Among first-time CDOs, IT general leadership is the largest single pathway at 28.0%, closely followed by business leadership (non-IT) at 26.7%, transformation and strategy at 18.7%, and digital and product engineering at 13.3%. Consulting and advisory accounts for another 9.3%, with the remaining pipeline distributed across vendor and product leadership, infrastructure and operations, and cybersecurity and risk. Unlike other C-suite pipelines that concentrate in one or two dominant functions, the CDO pipeline is distributed.

[8] Prior role family is the function each CDO held immediately before appointment, grouped into eight categories: IT general leadership, business leadership (non-IT), transformation and strategy, digital and product engineering, consulting and advisory, vendor and product leadership, infrastructure and operations, and cybersecurity and risk.

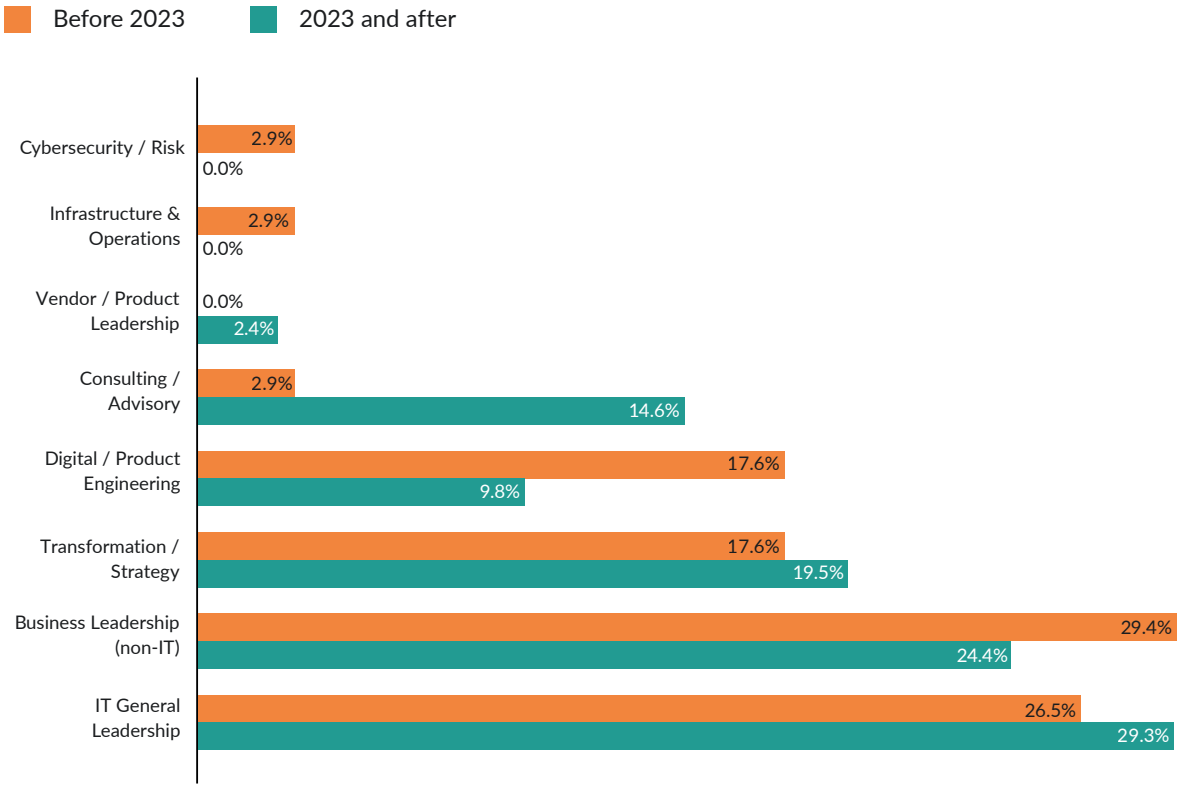
Share of first-time CDOs by prior role family



The pipeline stayed broad between cohorts, though consulting rose and digital and product engineering fell

IT general leadership held roughly steady (26.5% before 2023 to 29.3% in 2023 and after), as did transformation and strategy (17.6% before 2023 to 19.5% in 2023 and after). The largest cohort movements are digital and product engineering, which fell from 17.6% to 9.8%, and consulting and advisory, which rose from 2.9% to 14.6%.

Prior role family, first-time CDOs, before 2023 and 2023 and after

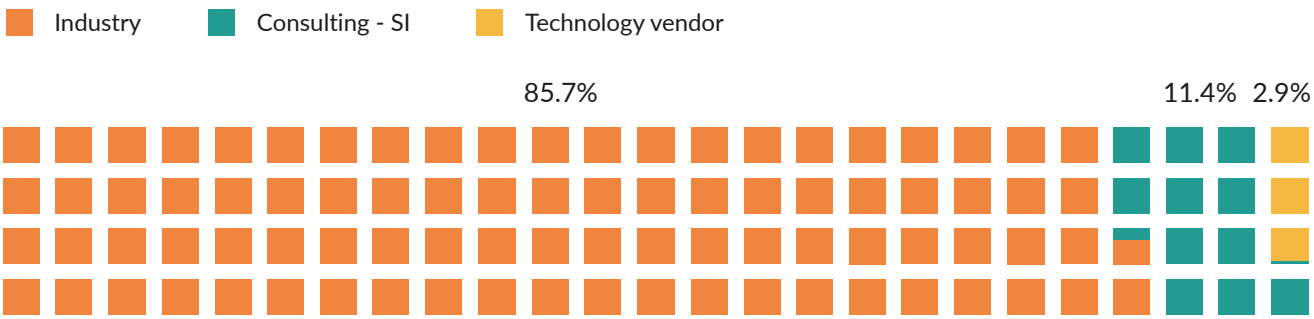


Cohort cells are small (n=34 and n=41). Movements of a few percentage points reflect only one or two individual CDOs and should be interpreted with caution.

The large majority of first-time CDOs came from an industry employer

Of first-time CDOs with a classified pre-CDO employer type, 85.7% came directly from an industry employer. Consulting and system-integration firms supplied 11.4%, and technology vendors supplied 2.9%.

Pre-CDO employer type, first-time CDOs



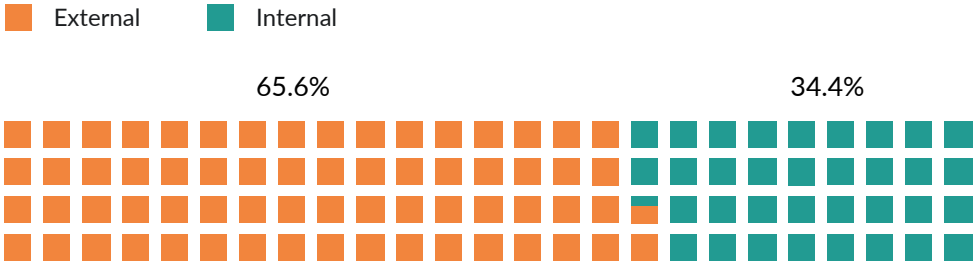
Boards look outside more often than they promote from within

Perhaps because there is rarely a natural promotion line to the CDO, companies hire externally more often than internally. Given the typically short tenure of CDOs, however, this preference for external candidates may reflect the search for "unicorn" candidates who can do it all. External candidates may look more attractive since less is known about them, thereby allowing the hiring committee to wishcast for qualifications that are, in practice, nearly impossible to meet.

External hires account for two-thirds of CDO appointments

External hires account for 65.6% of appointments; internal promotions account for the remaining 34.4%.

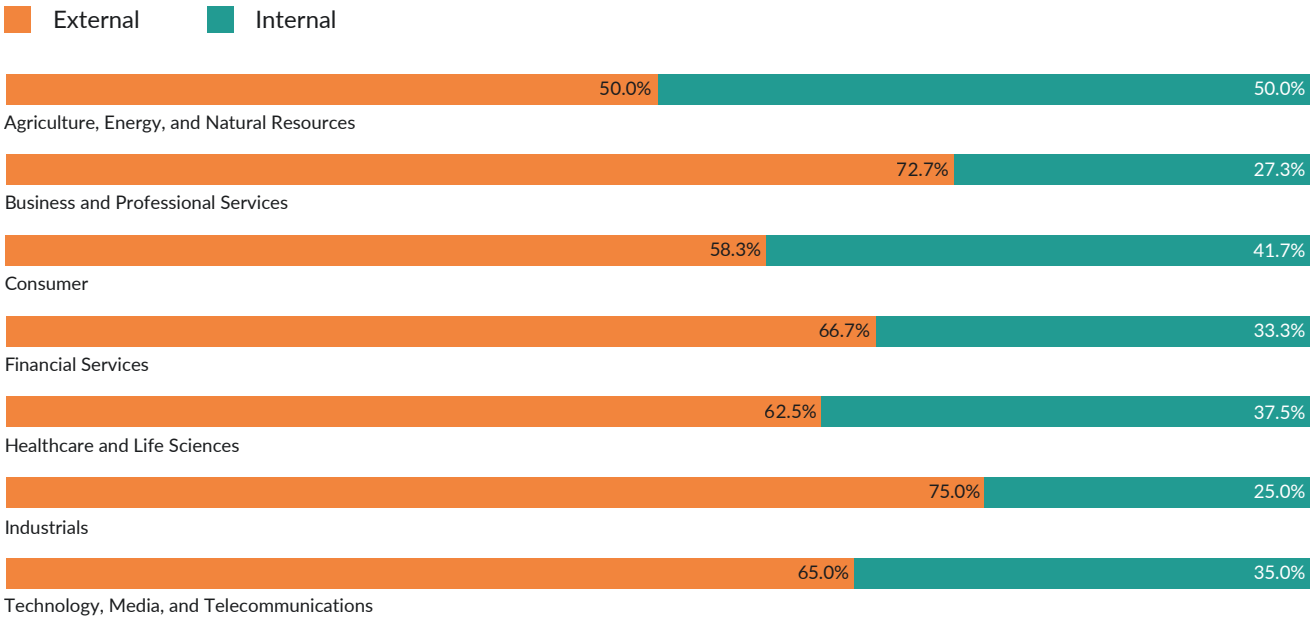
Internal vs. external hires



No industry favors internal CDO promotion

External hiring runs highest in Industrials (75.0%) and Business and Professional Services (72.7%), and is closest to even in Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources (50.0%) and Consumer (58.3%). No industry favors internal promotion.

Internal vs. external hires, by industry



Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources (n=4) and Financial Services (n=9) are small subsets and should be interpreted with caution.

Boards have moved slightly toward internal promotion in recent hires

External hires fell from 68.4% of appointments before 2023 to 62.3% of appointments in 2023 and after, a 6-point move toward internal promotion. The move is directional, but the cohort bases are small (n=57 and n=69) and should be read with caution.

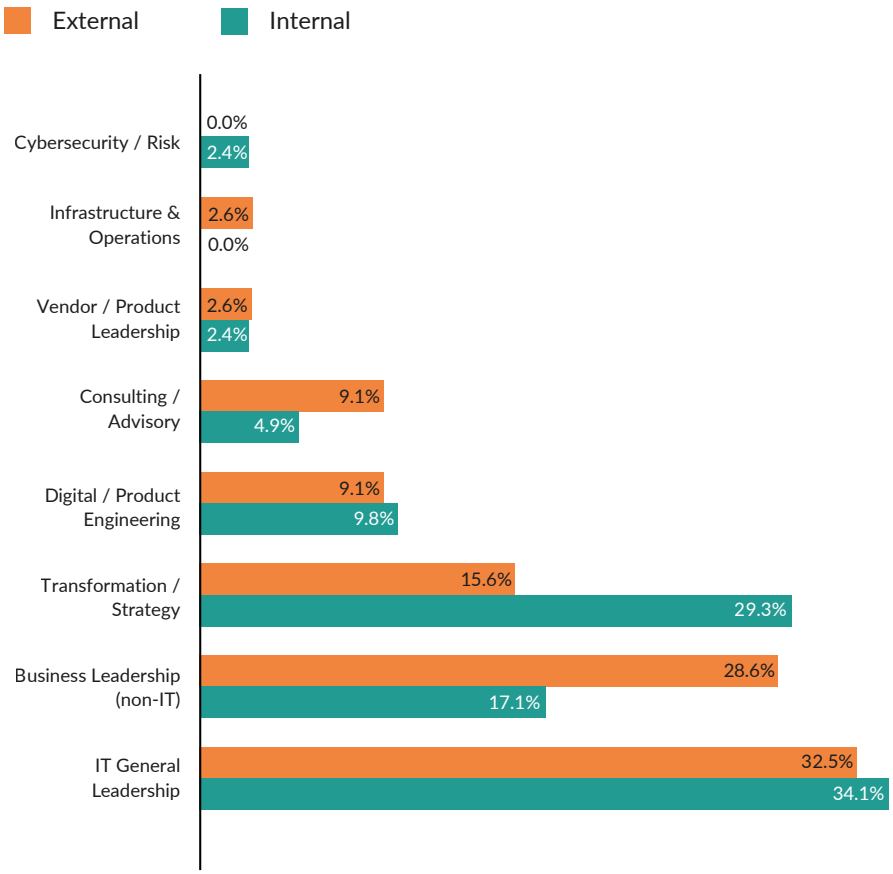
Internal vs. external hires, before 2023 and 2023 and after



External and internal appointments most often come from IT general leadership roles

IT general leadership is the leading source for both paths, at 32.5% of external hires and 34.1% of internal appointments. Beyond that, the two paths diverge. External hires come more often from business leadership (non-IT) (28.6% vs. 17.1%), while internal appointments come more often from transformation and strategy (29.3% vs. 15.6%). Consulting and advisory backgrounds are also more common among external hires (9.1% vs. 4.9%).

Prior role family, external hires vs. internal hires



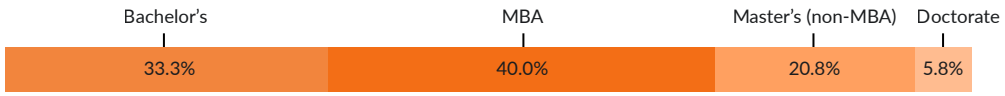
Credentials and vendor experience

The challenge of the CDO is that the role calls for both technical depth and business acumen, and no single credential profile has emerged to meet it. About a quarter of CDOs hold both a CS degree and an MBA, and nearly a third hold neither. In aggregate, the profile is graduate-level, with 66.7% holding a master's degree or higher and CS degrees outnumbering MBAs 51.8% to 44.1%.[9] What has shifted is experience, not credentials. The share arriving with prior vendor experience rose among recent hires, while CS and MBA shares held roughly steady.

Most CDOs hold a graduate-level credential

Among CDOs with a known degree level, the MBA is the most common highest degree, at 40.0%. Combined with other master's degrees (20.8%), master's-level credentials account for 60.8%. Bachelor's-only degrees account for 33.3%, doctorates for 5.8%.

Distribution by highest degree earned



CDOs may hold degrees at more than one level; this chart categorizes each CDO by their single highest known credential.

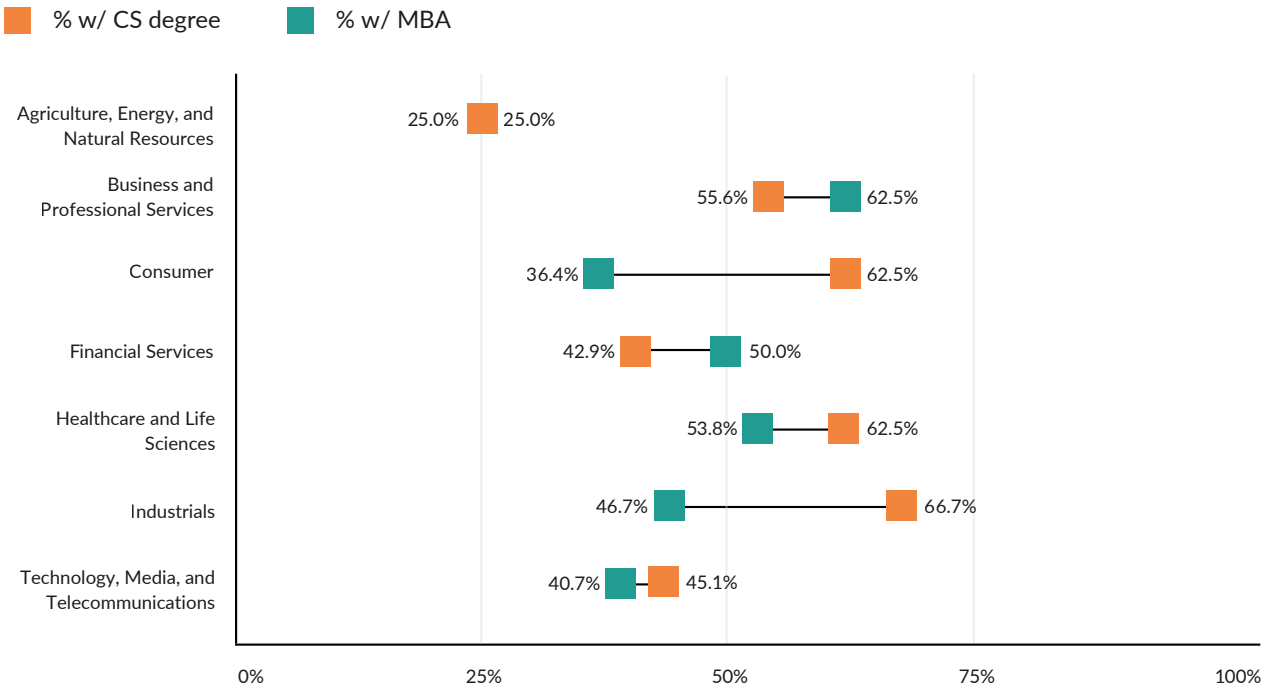
[9] These shares count any CDO holding the credential at any level, and each is calculated among the CDOs whose status is known for that credential: 110 for a CS degree, 111 for an MBA. They are not comparable with the highest-degree distribution chart, which assigns each CDO to a single tier.

CS rates run high in most industries; MBA rates show more variance

CS-degree rates run above 40% in every industry except Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources, where the small subset (n=4) makes the 25.0% figure difficult to read. MBA rates are above 40% in most industries but sit below in Consumer (36.4%) as well as Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources (25.0%). The two industries above 50% on both credentials are Healthcare and Life Sciences (62.5% CS, 53.8% MBA) and Business and Professional Services (55.6% CS, 62.5% MBA).

26% of CDOs hold both an MBA and a CS degree.[10]

CS and MBA share, by industry



Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources (n=4), Financial Services (n=6 to 7 depending on credential), Business and Professional Services (n=8 to 9 depending on credential), and Consumer (n=8 for CS degree, of 12 CDOs) are small subsets and should be interpreted with caution. CS counts any CDO with a CS degree at any level. A CDO holding both a CS degree and an MBA is counted in both.

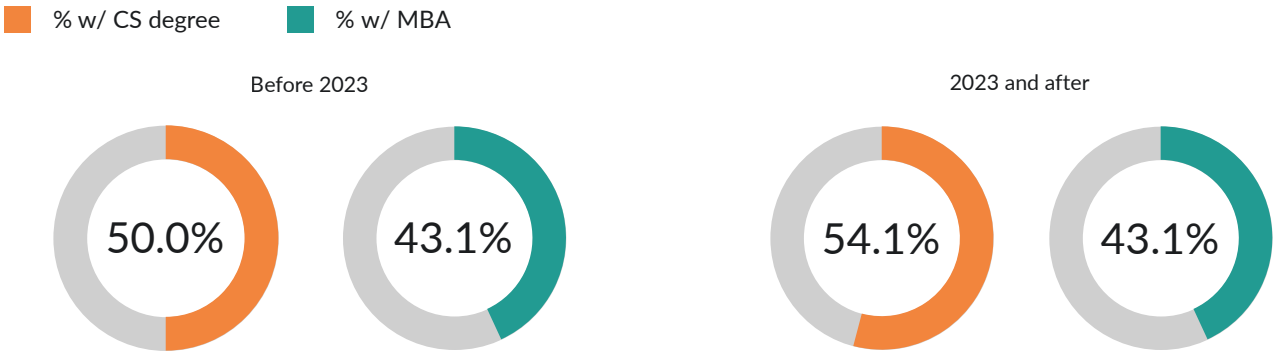
MBA share has held steady across cohorts

MBA share is 43.1% among CDOs appointed before 2023 and 43.1% among those appointed in 2023

[10] Among the 100 CDOs whose status is known for both credentials. Status is known for a CS degree in 110 cases and for an MBA in 111; the 21 CDOs with only one credential confirmed are excluded here, so this breakdown does not reconcile exactly to the overall CS and MBA shares.

and after. CS-degree share rose slightly over the same period, from 50.0% to 54.1%. The credential profile of recent hires closely matches that of their predecessors.

CS and MBA share, before 2023 and 2023 and after

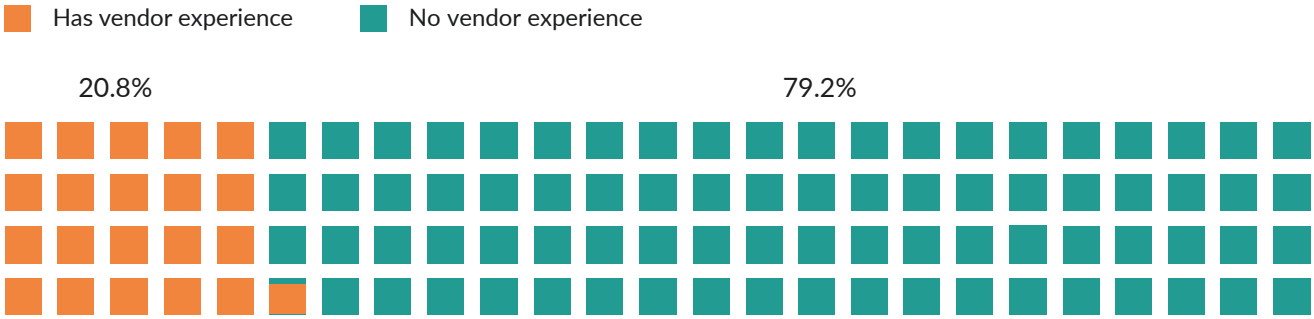


Shares are calculated among CDOs with known status. MBA status is known for 51 of the 57 CDOs appointed before 2023 and 58 of the 70 appointed since; CS status is known for 48 and 61, respectively.

One in five CDOs has prior vendor experience

20.8% of CDOs held at least one prior role at a technology vendor, consulting firm, or systems integrator before their appointment.

Prior vendor experience



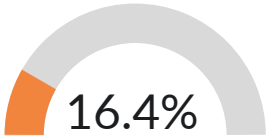
Counts roles held at any point in a CDO's career, not only the role immediately before appointment.

Vendor backgrounds have become more common in recent hires

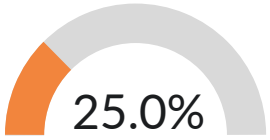
Vendor experience rose from 16.4% among CDOs appointed before 2023 to 25.0% among those appointed in 2023 and after, an 8.6-point rise. The absolute cell counts are small (9 CDOs with vendor

experience in the earlier cohort, 17 in the later one), so the size of the shift should be read with caution even as the direction is clear.

Vendor experience, before 2023 and 2023 and after



% with vendor experience before 2023



% with vendor experience 2023 and after

Small n-counts (n=9 with vendor experience in the earlier cohort, n=17 in the later one). The direction of the shift is clear; the magnitude should be interpreted with caution.

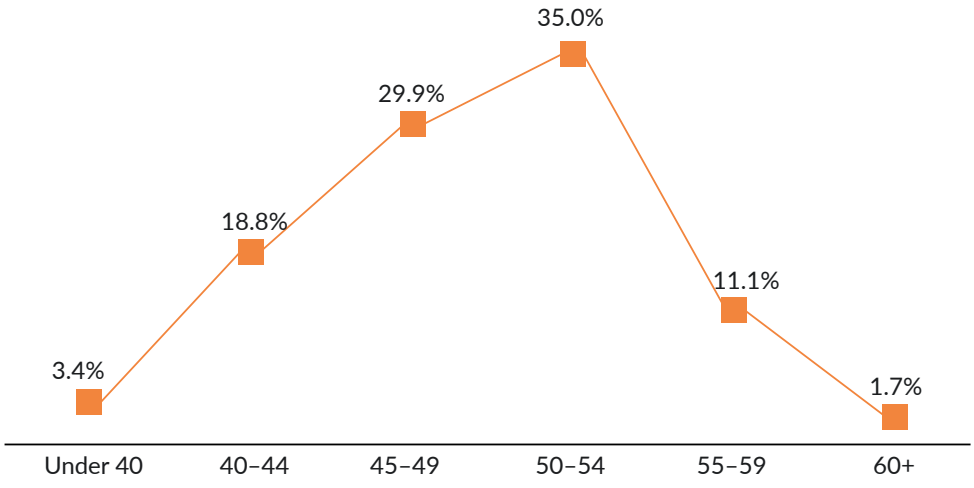
CDOs reach the role in their late 40s or early 50s

Recent hires are settling into their late 40s and early 50s, a meaningful shift from the profile of CDOs appointed just a few years earlier.

Most CDOs reach the role in their late 40s or early 50s

The median age at appointment is 49.5. The 45–49 bracket accounts for 29.9% of appointments and the 50–54 bracket for 35.0%, together capturing nearly two in three CDOs. Appointments under 40 (3.4%) and at 60 or older (1.7%) are rare.

Age at appointment

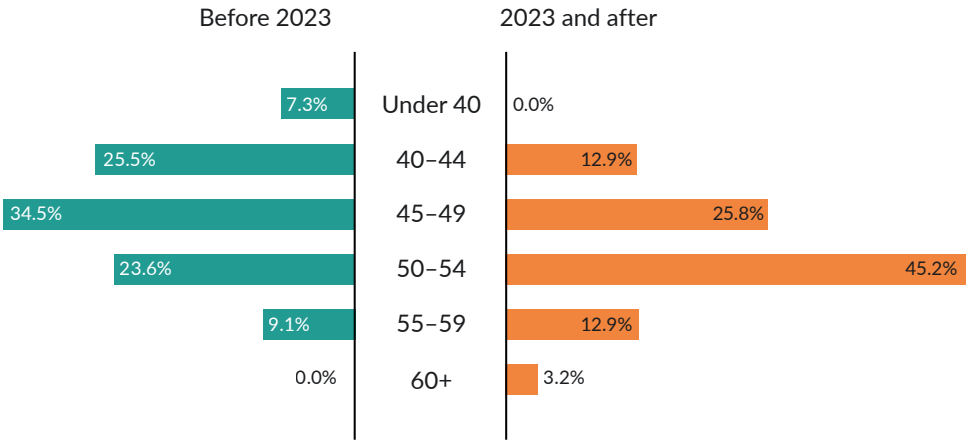


Age is inferred from public biographical sources and should be treated as approximate.

Boards are appointing older CDOs than they used to

The median age at appointment rose from 47.1 among CDOs appointed before 2023 to 51.1 among those appointed in 2023 and after, a 4-year shift. The under-40 share fell from 7.3% to 0%, and the 50–54 bracket rose from 23.6% to 45.2%. The 40–44 bracket also softened, from 25.5% to 12.9%.

Age at appointment, before 2023 and 2023 and after



Age is inferred from public biographical sources and should be treated as approximate.

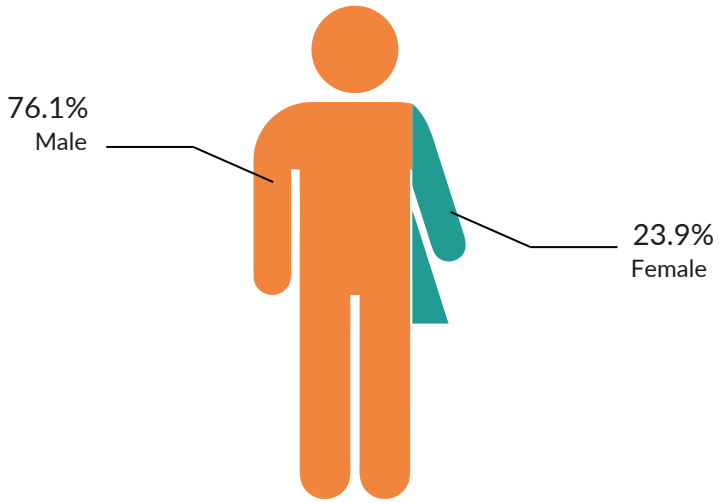
Female representation is climbing, but remains low

Women are underrepresented as CDOs across most industries, though their share is slowly rising. Female CDOs are more likely to hold a CS degree, but less likely to hold an MBA, though the female subset is small enough that this comparison should be read with caution.

Roughly one in four CDOs is female

Female CDOs hold 23.9% of S&P 500 CDO seats; male CDOs hold the remaining 76.1%.

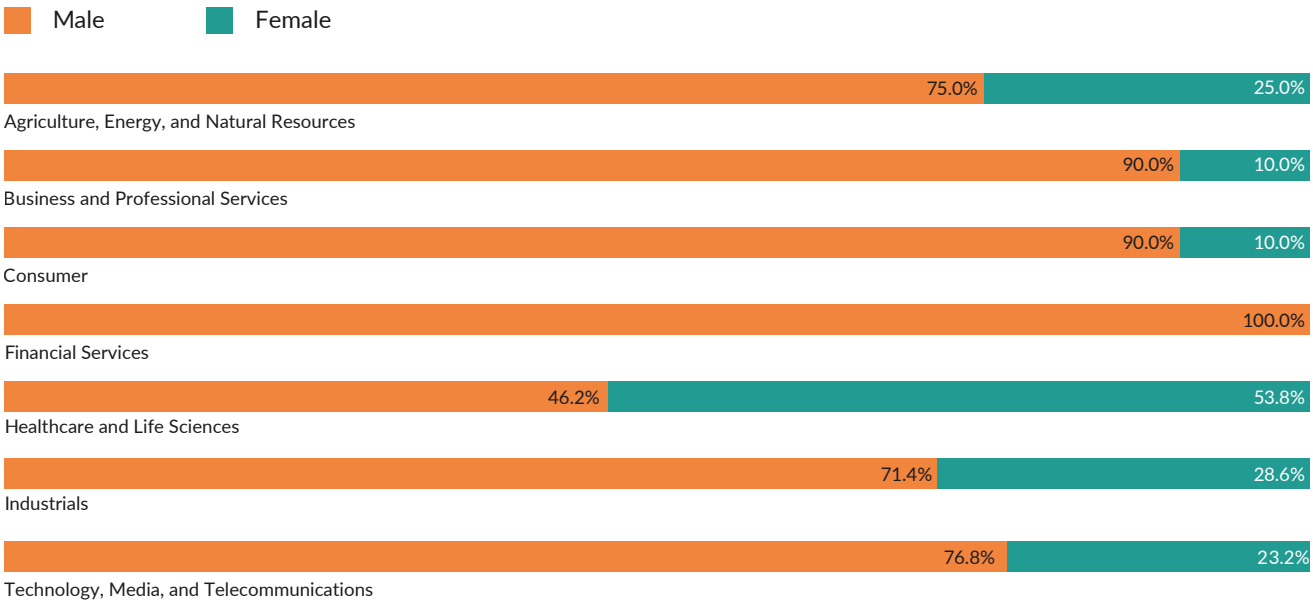
Gender breakdown



Healthcare and Life Sciences is the only majority-female CDO industry

Female share ranges from 53.8% in Healthcare and Life Sciences down to 10.0% in Consumer and in Business and Professional Services, with no female CDOs among the six Financial Services CDOs whose gender is known. Healthcare and Life Sciences is the only industry where female CDOs outnumber male CDOs, at seven to six. Technology, Media, and Telecommunications, which accounts for half the CDOs with known gender, sits almost exactly at the overall 23.9% average. Industrials (28.6%) and Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources (25.0%) are the only other industries above it, both on small subsets.

Female and male share, by industry

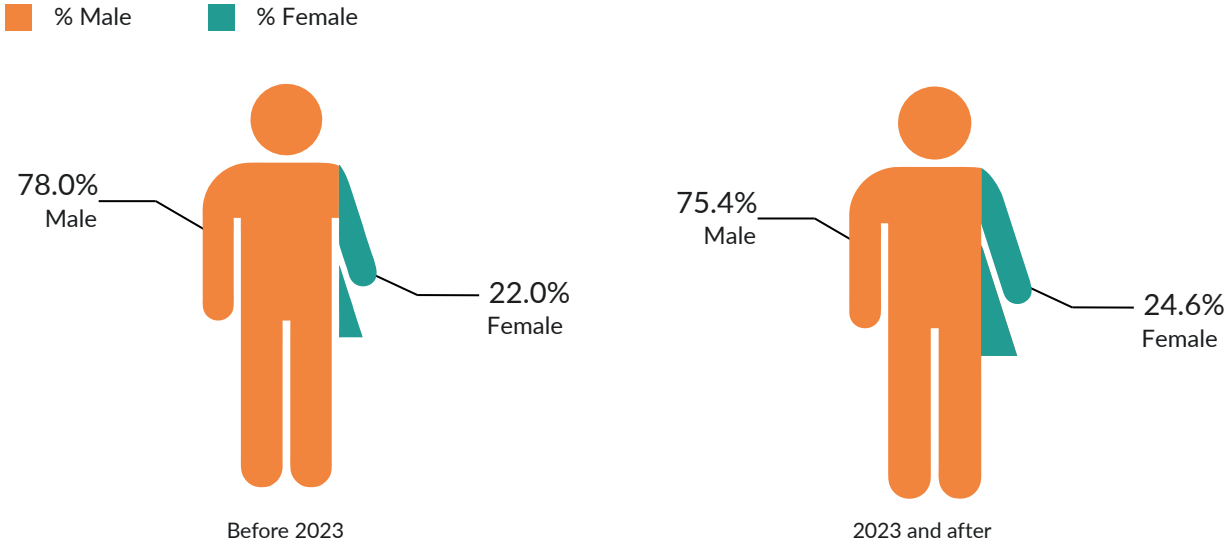


Financial Services (n=6), Agriculture, Energy, and Natural Resources (n=4), and Healthcare and Life Sciences (n=13) are small subsets.

Female share is rising in recent hires

Female share rose from 22.0% among CDOs appointed before 2023 to 24.6% among those appointed in 2023 and after, a 2.6-point gain.

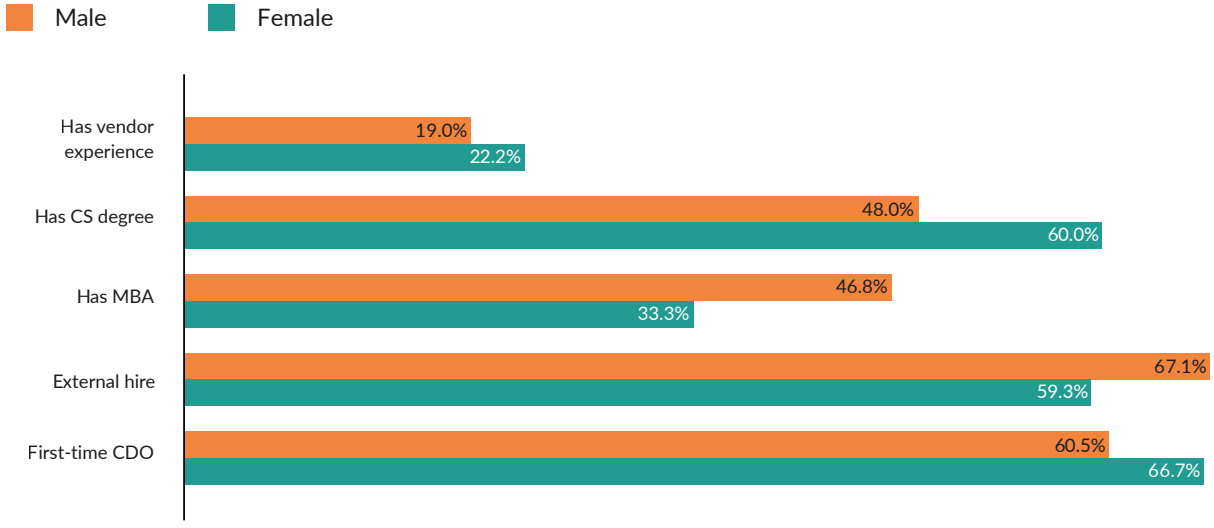
Gender, before 2023 and 2023 and after



Female and male CDOs differ mainly on credentials

Female CDOs are less likely than male CDOs to hold an MBA (33.3% vs. 46.8%, a 13.5-point gap) and more likely to hold a CS degree (60.0% vs. 48.0%, a 12-point gap). They are slightly less likely to be external hires (59.3% vs. 67.1%) and slightly more likely to be first-time CDOs (66.7% vs. 60.5%). Vendor experience is close between the two groups (22.2% female vs. 19.0% male).

Profile comparison, female and male CDOs



Female subset is small (n=27 of the 113 CDOs with known gender); figures should be interpreted with caution, particularly for finer comparisons. Credential shares rest on smaller bases still: MBA status is known for 24 female and 77 male CDOs, and CS-degree status for 25 female and 75 male.

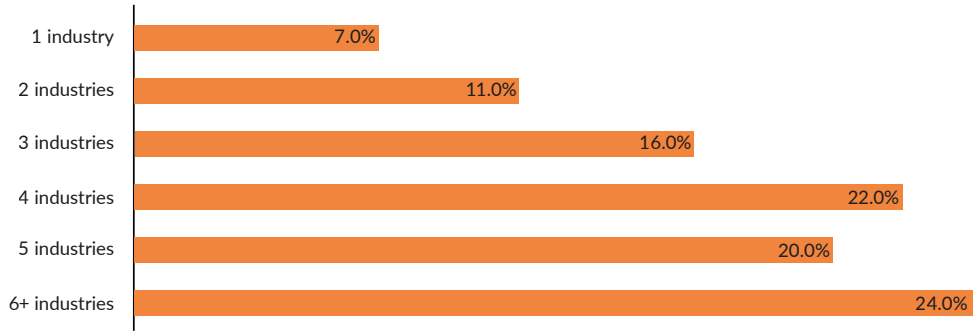
Many CDOs have cross-industry experience

Boards are not prioritizing industry familiarity when selecting CDOs. Cross-industry mobility is the norm, even when counting only external appointments.

Most CDOs have worked in three or more industries over their careers

82.0% of CDOs with a known career industry count have worked in three or more industries across their careers; 66.0% have worked in four or more; and 24.0% have worked in six or more. Only 7.0% have spent their careers in a single industry.

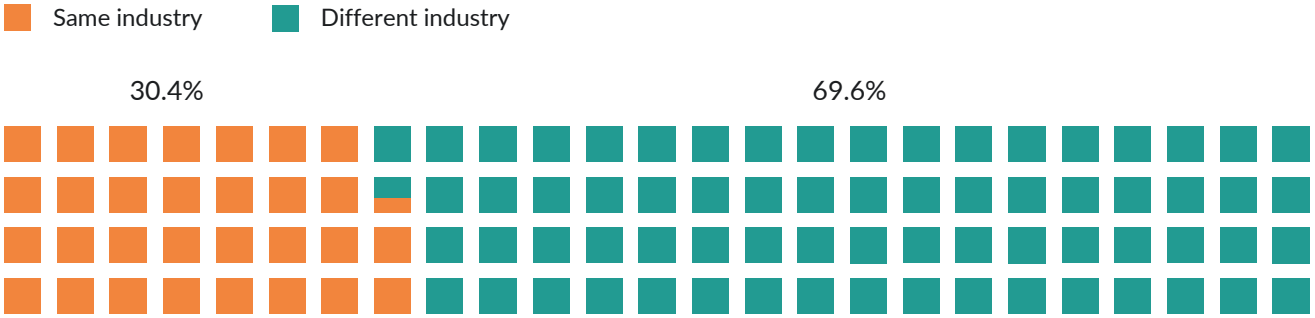
Industries worked in across career



When boards hire externally, they look outside their own industry more often than within it

Among external hires, 69.6% came from a different industry than the hiring company; 30.4% were same-industry moves.

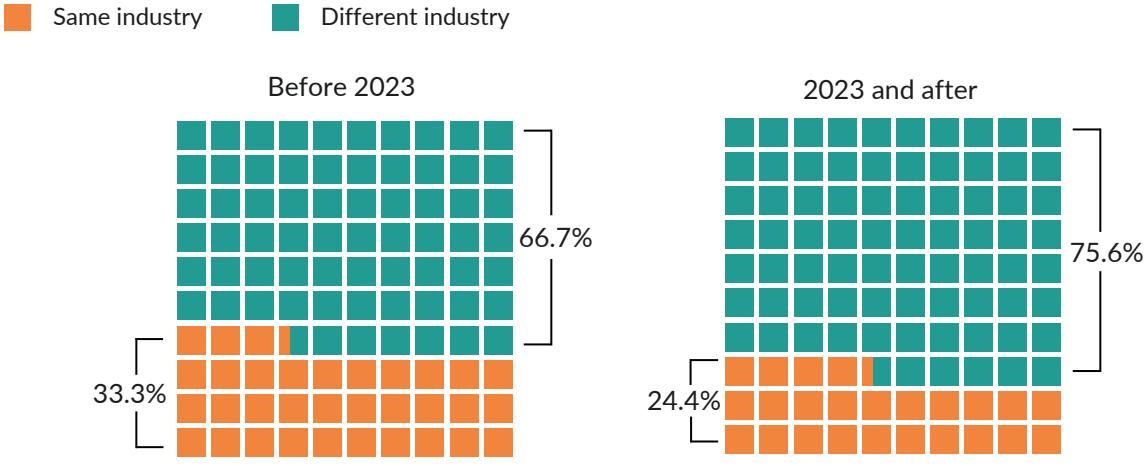
External hires, same vs. different industry



Recent hires are drawn from outside the industry more often than earlier hires were

Same-industry hiring fell from 33.3% of external hires before 2023 to 24.4% of external hires in 2023 and after, a 9-point shift toward different-industry hiring. Cohort bases are small (n=36 and n=41), so the size of the shift should be read cautiously, though the direction is clear.

External hires, same vs. different industry, before 2023 and 2023 and after



What's next? Action items for boards, CEOs, sitting CDOs, and aspiring CDOs

For boards and CEOs

1. Define the digital problem before you begin the search. Start with whether the company needs to build the digital capability or buy it, and, if it needs to build it, whether it is building a job or a function. Only then decide whether the answer is a standalone CDO or a mandate folded into or combined with a CIO or CTO position. Nearly two-thirds of CDO titles in the S&P 500 combine Digital with another function, most often Information or Technology. Do not choose a combined title because it is common. Choose it because it matches the problem. Apply the same test to the seat you already have. Many CDO roles were created for transformation programs that have since concluded, and a remit that no longer matches its original problem is a reliable precursor to an early exit.

2. Give the CDO budget, decision rights, and defined goals. A CDO is most likely to fail where authority overlaps materially with the CIO, CTO, COO, or CMO; where the title carries no budget, headcount, or real decision rights; where the appointment is largely symbolic; or where no one has settled whether the role is bounded or permanent. Test the proposed role against all four conditions before the search opens. Settle the reporting line as part of that test. Strategic mandates need direct CEO access; mandates focused on operational integration may sit elsewhere, but the tradeoff should be deliberate. If the mandate is provisional, say so from the outset and name the conditions that would justify folding it back into the core functions.

3. Include candidates in the search who have never held the CDO title. External hires account for two-thirds of CDO appointments, and 64.1% of all CDOs are in the role for the first time. Boards cannot rely on filling the seat with someone who has already done the job. The pipeline is correspondingly broad. IT general leadership, business leadership outside IT, transformation and strategy, and digital and product engineering each supply a meaningful share, and no single function dominates. Match the background to the problem defined in the first step rather than requiring a prior CDO title.

For sitting CDOs

1. Ask for a written definition of what you own. Turnover in the position is unusually high, often the result of confused expectations, remit, lines of ownership, and/or overlapping sets of responsibilities with other technology leaders. If your board or CEO has not defined what you own, coordinate, or advise on with enough precision, ask for that in writing.

2. Lead as both a business executive and a technologist. More than four in ten CDOs hold an MBA, and more than half hold a CS degree, pointing toward a role that draws on both general business skills and technical depth. Identify your strengths and how they help you succeed in your role, while also making sure to boost areas of weakness to be able to lead digital as part of the business.

3. Build relationships with technology vendors and leaders in other industries. Vendor experience is rising in recent hires, from 16.4% to 25.0% between cohorts. Cross-industry mobility is the norm. Deliberately build relationships outside your industry and outside your current company. Your next role is more likely to be in a different industry than in the same one.

For aspiring CDOs

1. Pair your technical expertise with business leadership experience. Boards regularly turn to candidates with CS degrees or MBAs, and about a quarter of CDOs hold both. The prevalence of these degree types shouldn't be taken as evidence of a need to obtain a certain degree, but as a sign that businesses value CDO candidates who can lead a technology function from a full business perspective.

2. Don't be afraid to take opportunities outside your industry. 82% of S&P 500 CDOs have worked in three or more industries and 66% in four or more, and 70% of external hires came from a different industry. We do not take this as evidence that firms are avoiding candidates with inside industry experience. Instead, we see the relatively high percentage of CDOs coming into a position from another industry as indicating that firms value candidates who possess the right general business and technology leadership experiences more than those who can demonstrate industry knowledge.

3. If your company has no CDO, make the case for creating one. Three-quarters of S&P 500 companies have no CDO, and roughly a third of the CDOs who do hold the title were internal appointments. Combined with a first-time rate of 64.1%, that means the seat is more often created than inherited. If you are running digital work at a company without a CDO, write the case yourself. Name the specific coordination problem that currently has no owner, the decision rights and budget solving it would require, and what the company gains by concentrating that accountability in one place. Propose it as a defined mandate with an end state rather than as a permanent addition to the C-suite. A board that will not create an open-ended seat will often fund a bounded one.

Methodology

N2Growth identified every CDO in the S&P 500 (n=129) at the time of the study (March to July 2026), and from that built a statistical profile of over 5,000 data points across 45 analytical dimensions. We also compared CDOs appointed before 2023 with those appointed in 2023 and after to identify how and where the profile is shifting.

Denominators vary by chart. Each figure is calculated on the CDOs whose status is known for that attribute rather than on the full 129, so the base varies by chart and is smaller than 129 wherever status is unknown for some CDOs. Cohort comparisons are derived from tenure in the current role rather than from recorded appointment dates. Two CDOs whose tenure is unknown cannot be assigned to a cohort and are excluded from cohort views, so cohort totals differ slightly from the corresponding overall figures. Where a breakdown requires two attributes to be known at the same time, such as the combination of CS degree and MBA, the base is smaller still, and those figures will not sum exactly to the individual credential shares.

We included every C-level title with “digital” in it, whether standalone (Chief Digital Officer) or combined with another function (e.g., Chief Digital and Information Officer, Chief Digital and Technology Officer). We sourced data from company and executive directories, corporate websites, public LinkedIn profiles, and a proprietary database. Human researchers manually verified data sourced through APIs or AI scraping. Industry groupings use N2Growth’s own classification system.

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