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The Technology Confusion Plaguing the C-Suite



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TOM DAVENPORT: You may have noticed that much of the C-suite is being inhabited by technology executives these days.

As information technology (IT) has become more important to corporations and the economy, a variety of new titles have been created to manage it. The chief information officer (CIO), a role created in the early 1980s, was the first iteration of this species. Its focus, of course, was on management and leadership of business IT—from data centers to networks to enterprise software applications. Shortly thereafter, the chief technology officer (CTO) role, originally created to address all types of technology in product development, began to drift toward IT. In hardware and software companies in particular, CTOs took responsibility for technology vision and execution—initially in products and services, but then increasingly for a company’s internal use as well.

The first IT C-suite role overlaps, and conflicts were born as CIOs and CTOs struggled to differentiate their responsibilities. But that relative simplicity was short-lived and other such

roles emerged quickly. Companies in financial services began to appoint chief data officers in the early 2000s. Data management was viewed as too important a responsibility to subsume it under CIOs or CTOs. Other IT-related roles proliferated rapidly—chief security (or information security) officers (CSOs or CISOs) in the 2000s to keep data and systems secure, chief analytics officers (CAOs) in the 2010s to lead analytics and data science, and chief digital officers (CDOs), also in the 2010s, to oversee a company’s online business capabilities. Some companies even have multiple versions of these roles—regional or business unit CIOs, CDOs and so forth.

There are so many IT roles in the C-suite that we can’t even keep the acronyms straight. Is CDO short for data or digital officers? Does the S in CSO mean security or strategy?

This confusion can be solve with creative terminology, but far more important is the potential overlap of responsibilities when all these jobs are established. With so many roles, even other C-levels may not know where to turn to address a particular IT-related issue or problem. And the overlaps and conflicts may well lead to infighting; at one company I know of, the chief data and analytics officers won’t even talk to each other.

There are really only two ways to avoid such conflicts. One is to create a hierarchy of C-level roles in IT so that they all report to each other. For example, some chief data officers and CTOs report to CIOs.

The other alternative is to make absolutely clear who is responsible for what. For example, if there are a CIO and a chief digital officer, it is really important to specify who is responsible for web servers and the delivery of web content (e.g., order status) from transactional systems.

IT is undeniably critical to an organization’s success today, and you may actually need all these roles. But it is absolutely critical to address how they relate to each other.

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