

From the Inside Out:

**CDOS ARE DRIVING
ORGANIZATIONAL BUSINESS
AND CULTURAL IMPACT**



Groundbreaking Study
Reveals Breadth and Depth
of DEI Leaders' Impact

THANK YOU, CORPORATE PARTNERS!

We are deeply appreciative of our corporate partners that believed in the vision and necessity of this study, *From the Inside Out: CDOs Are Driving Organizational Business and Cultural Impact*.

Because of your generosity we were able to conduct an innovative study that brings a new and much-needed narrative to better reveal the importance and impact of the CDO role and an organization’s DEI team.

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THANK YOU, CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICERS!

Chief diversity officers, your voices and shared experiences are priceless. Thank you for taking the time, lending your energy, and sharing your wisdom in this historic study. Collectively you have begun the process of reshaping the narrative of the CDO role to an asset-based model. I will be eternally grateful for your generosity!

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The True Narrative: CDOs Drive Business Impact

New research indicates that chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officers are needed now more than ever. Once considered a lesser position within human resources, the chief diversity officer role has evolved and expanded over its forty years of existence, maturing through several eras and incarnations. It has grown from compliance and affirmative action to valuing differences; to diversity and inclusion; to equity, social justice, and belonging; to now, when we face the real danger of affirmative action being gutted in an all-out assault on DEI. Today, the CDO is a fully fledged business executive who must smoothly traverse, and in some cases guide, an organization’s many complex and diverse business lines, priorities, and challenges.



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from her position as president of Harvard University and the pressures these events put on the DEI role.

This study includes interviews with nearly fifty CDOs who represent a broad range of companies and industries. Some entered the field during the post-George Floyd “racial reckoning” of 2020, while others have served in the CDO capacity for five-plus years. The study reveals the most common pathways these leaders took to the CDO role, best practices, their approaches to changing an organization’s culture, how they define impact, and the resilience and resolve needed to navigate the psychological toll resulting from the expectation that CDOs serve as everything to everybody.

These findings give us an intimate understanding of how the role is arguably more complex, expansive, and demanding than many other executive-level roles, and it therefore requires a unique skill set. Responsibility for large-system change draws on many technical and interpersonal skills, significant knowledge, and the ability to work with a wide range of people from a spectrum of backgrounds. Passion is not enough. Strong business acumen, change-management skills, interpersonal effectiveness, and the ability to deal with ambiguity are just a few of the other competencies needed to be a successful CDO.

In this comprehensive study, you will learn:

- **The CDO is an asset and brings a unique and complex set of capabilities for leading sustainable DEI impact.**
- **The CDO must lead proactive, strategic change to drive sustainable DEI impact.**
- **Leading DEI impact is not a solo endeavor. This work must be integrated within every level of an organization, with the full backing of senior leadership.**

The study also explores how the role of the CDO has changed since the 2016 presidential election—and the impact of this evolution on CDOs themselves. The role has become more complex and demanding, and the scope has widened considerably, in particular as national and world events have crashed into the workplace. For example, the Israel-Hamas war, which began after this study was commissioned, has put CDOs on the frontlines of crafting and implementing an organizational response. Many CDOs have reported that their organizations are relying on them to take the lead in quickly developing a strategy for navigating the organizational strife brought on by this tragedy. They are being asked to lead the formation of a corporate response, shape internal- and external-facing positions, and manage the tension between employee groups. In some cases, they have had to speak for other C-Suite leaders who have withdrawn and gone silent because they did not know what to do. **This heavy lift requires CDOs to bring their whole skill set to this complicated and emotional issue.** CDOs have done what they have always done, which is lean into this challenge and attempt to acknowledge the pain while making the workplace a psychologically safe space for all.

From the Inside Out: CDOs Are Driving Organizational Business and Cultural Impact

In recent years, the role of chief diversity officers (CDO) has gained prominence and attention, with numerous studies attempting to dissect their impact on the organization and community. However, most of the studies have examined the role through an external lens, relying on perspectives from those outside the profession to define the parameters and effectiveness of the position.

In this groundbreaking study we went straight to the source. We conducted in-depth interviews with nearly fifty CDOs, delving into the intricacies of their experiences and perspectives. By posing questions to those responsible for strategizing and implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, we have uncovered, for the first time, comprehensive and nuanced insights into the role and its impact.

The findings here extend beyond merely understanding the roles these leaders play; we demonstrate how CDOs themselves define impact, the strategies they employ to drive meaningful change, and the reciprocal effect of leading DEI initiatives on those steering them. Through exploring these dimensions of the role—and the people behind them—we arrived at a more comprehensive and authentic portrayal of the tangible effects and challenges faced by CDOs in advancing the vital work of DEI.

I am so filled with gratitude that we are making a difference, at least in the areas that I have influence—such as our policies, our programs, and the change in language. These changes and new initiatives are making a difference in people’s lives and have a ripple effect. People have told me they made a difference in their neighborhood and in their family. I pull out those notes that people sent me, just to remind myself that we are making an impact.”

ABOUT THE STUDY:
PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

One factor differentiating this from previous studies is that we used an asset-based lens, rather than the more common deficit-based lens, to reveal and highlight the positive contributions and impact of senior DEI leadership on large organizations. This approach is a corrective to the bulk of studies on CDOs, which tend to focus on shortcomings or areas where improvement is needed instead of recognizing and celebrating the various ways in which CDOs drive positive change and create lasting impacts.

ABOUT THE STUDY:
STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Our distinct group of CDOs encompassed both seasoned veterans and emerging figures in the industry. The diversity in the demographic makeup of our interviewees enabled us to encompass the perspectives of DEI leaders with varied experiences and perspectives that influenced their approach and guidance in their roles. The amalgamation of survey data and meticulously coded interview responses also yields valuable insights into the intersections of their social identities.

PARTICIPANT
DEMOGRAPHICS*

RACE/ETHNICITY		AGE	
82%	Black	12.5%	30–39
12%	Hispanic	31%	40–49
6%	Asian	44%	50–59
0.002%	White	12.5%	60–69
GENDER		EDUCATION	
84%	Women	26%	MA/MS
16%	Men	17%	BA/BS
		17%	JD
		11%	PHD
		5%	EDD
MARITAL STATUS		EMPLOYING- ORGANIZATION SIZE	
66%	Married	12%	Under 1,000
30%	Single/ widowed/ divorced	59%	1,000–10,000
		18%	10,000–75,000
		2%	75,000-plus

*The percentages reflect the responses of the 34 CDOs who completed the survey.

INSIGHT №1

The CDO Is Accountable for Managing an Expansive and Complex Set of Responsibilities

INSIGHT №2

Building Capabilities and Pathways to the CDO Role

INSIGHT №3

Defining Impact

INSIGHT №4

Driving Sustainable Impact

INSIGHT №1

The CDO Is Accountable for Managing an Expansive and Complex Set of Responsibilities

The evolution of the CDO role underscores the significant expansion in both the scope and influence of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within organizations over the past four decades. The CDOs in our study described a wide range of responsibilities that drive key organizational outcomes and the expansion of the role. These include:

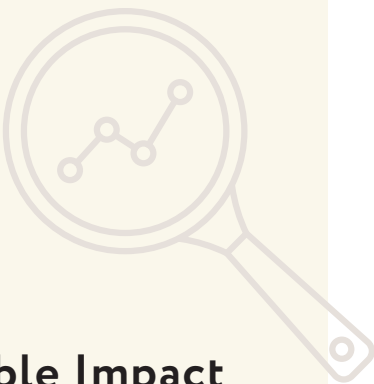
- Establishing infrastructure for DEI operations
- Managing their own DEI teams
- Budgeting for DEI initiatives
- Strategic planning for DEI throughout the organization
- Collecting and analyzing data
- Organizing and implementing recruitment and retention activities
- Developing crisis responses for world events and impacted communities
- Composing and reviewing internal communications and press releases
- Handling employee grievances and putting out fires
- Internal coaching and consulting

THE CDO’S COMPLEX WEB OF ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES CAN BE SUMMARIZED IN FOUR BROAD CATEGORIES:

CDO AS CHANGE CATALYST	CDO AS STRATEGIST AND INNOVATOR	CDO AS BRIDGE-BUILDER	CDO AS STORYTELLER
They must combine a depth of knowledge in DEI with a thesis of change and transformation that works in their context and the courage and skill to operationalize and actively promote it.	They must understand how things get done, where and how to influence, and how to introduce ideas and programs that make needed shifts that will benefit people and organizational outcomes.	They must recognize the importance of meeting the needs of all stakeholders, ensure the work of DEI resonates across cultures and social identities, and mediate conflict among groups within the organization.	They must develop and communicate a depth of understanding of lived experience in their organizational culture and context and connect it to key organizational outcomes in ways that inspire DEI engagement.

THE FINDINGS

The study’s discoveries are extensive and at times profound. They are condensed into FOUR KEY INSIGHTS elucidating the evolution of the CDO role over the decades, the skills and experience possessed by accomplished CDOs, the definition of their impact, and the practical methods employed to drive that impact. Collectively, these insights provide a comprehensive understanding of the significant and indispensable nature of the CDO role for the prosperity of large organizations.



INSIGHT №2

Building Capabilities and Pathways to the CDO Role

The journey to the chief diversity officer role is diverse in and of itself and doesn't follow a one-size-fits-all pathway. The fact that CDOs come from various backgrounds and career trajectories highlights the multifaceted nature of the role and CDOs' need for a broad skill set. It also demonstrates the varying perspectives and professional experiences of CDOs.

Our survey revealed four primary pathways to the role:

- Linear (lower-level DEI director)
- Lateral (CDO at another organization)
- Linkage (leader or subject matter expert in related DEI field)
- Leap (initiated or invited, circa 2020, without prior DEI experience)

CDOs who took the **LINEAR PATHWAY** had prior DEI experience and were either hired from outside their organization or promoted from within their own organization.

CDOs who took the **LATERAL PATHWAY** formally served as CDOs in other organizations, so they brought subject matter expertise and leadership experience but were newcomers to their current organization.

CDOs who took the **LINKAGE PATHWAY** have been leaders or subject matter experts in a different field or organization but hadn't had an executive leadership role as a CDO prior to their current position.

CDOs who took the **LEAP PATHWAY** were typically invited to initiate new CDO roles circa 2020. The CDO role was a leap, positionally and organizationally.

FOUR PATHS TO THE C-SUITE

- LINEAR: Lower-level DEI director
- LATERAL: CDO at another organization
- LINKAGE: Leader or subject matter expert in related DEI field
- LEAP: Initiated or invited, circa 2020, without prior DEI experience

INSIGHT №3

Defining Impact

Understanding how CDOs define impact is crucial to grasping how they leverage their skills and backgrounds to drive change. CDOs aim to create a comprehensive and sustained impact on individuals, the organization, and society by focusing on long-term, transformative efforts that go beyond surface-level initiatives. They emphasize the importance of embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion principles throughout all aspects of the organization to drive meaningful and lasting change.

The study breaks down impact into four categories:

- Individual/Interpersonal Impact
- Organizational Impact
- Business Impact
- Societal Impact

INDIVIDUAL AND INTERPERSONAL IMPACT

The CDO's impact often begins at the individual level and spreads through interpersonal interactions within an organization. The CDOs shared that an individual's perspective shift or new behavior can catalyze buy-in for organizational change and create ripple effects that set the course for deeper and broader transformation.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT

Impacting individuals is effective only when combined with efforts that in turn drive organizational impact. CDOs drive broader impact via systemic organizational efforts, including business impact, representation, inclusion, equity in recruitment, and metrics.

BUSINESS IMPACT

Each CDO was responsible for addressing the people and culture dimensions of DEI. Their duties included defining objectives for diverse representation, creating initiatives, and formulating policies to foster understanding and mutual respect among individuals. The CDOs underscored the business necessity of promoting DEI. Consequently, they adopted a "business case" approach to secure support and enhance organizational performance. They noted that welcoming a wide diversity of ideas from different perspectives can help solve clients' problems, and thus increase revenue.

SOCIETAL IMPACT

CDOs are often charged with leading organization-wide efforts to positively impact society more broadly. They focus on a range of issues, often under the banner of ESG (environmental, social, and governance), including increasing health equity, reducing the racial wealth gap, increasing pathways and pipelines, promoting pro-environmental practices, and reestablishing governance standards for their industries.

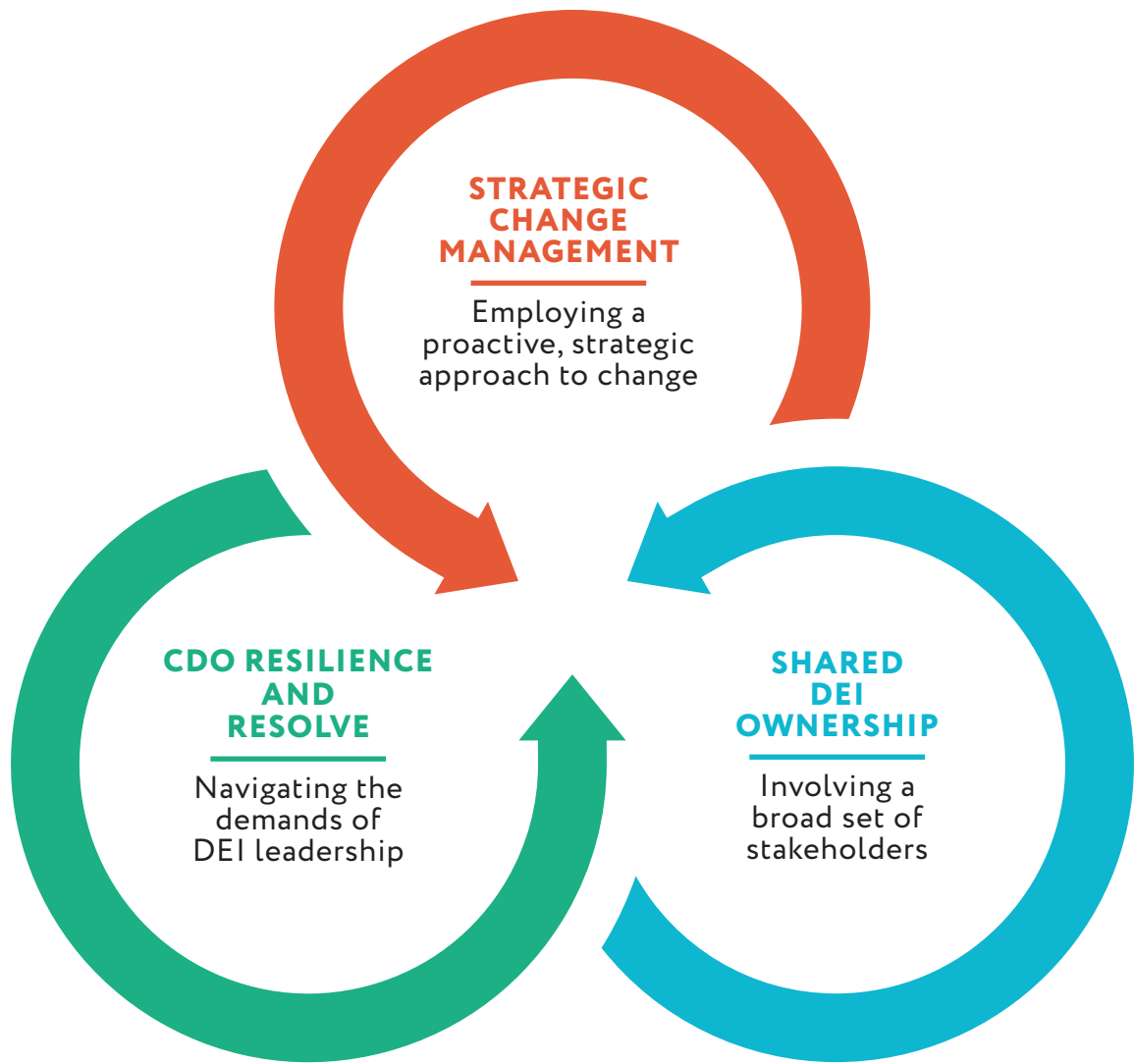
INSIGHT №4

Driving Sustainable Impact

Driving impact is, of course, the CDO’s ultimate objective. This requires a focus on both immediate needs and longer-term goals that can be accomplished only through coordinated efforts to transform systems.

We found that CDOs used a three-pronged approach to drive sustainable DEI impact across individual, organizational, business, and societal levels:

CDOS’ APPROACH TO STRATEGIC CHANGE



1. STRATEGIC CHANGE MANAGEMENT: EMPLOYING A PROACTIVE, STRATEGIC APPROACH TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

CDOs who embraced a broader perspective on DEI outlined their change-management theories. Although tactics and programs constituted elements of these theories, they didn’t represent the entire emphasis. According to those interviewed, CDOs were perceived as pivotal in establishing direction and mapping out the course of action. In this approach to change management, CDOs’ organizational awareness was central to comprehending their scope of influence and position within the organization, as well as in cultivating relationships.

The tactics to drive systemic change can be broken down into three key steps:

A. CLARIFYING CDO ROLE EXPECTATIONS AND ASSESSING DEI ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

The CDOs emphasized the significance of understanding and defining their scope of responsibility and expected outcomes. They actively sought clarity regarding their organization’s stance on DEI, particularly the perspectives of the CEO and other C-Suite members. Additionally, they aimed to comprehend their position within the organizational power structure and identify the areas and methods through which they could exert influence. The challenge for CDOs lay in aligning organizational requirements with leaders’ expectations and the organization’s strategic objectives, all while securing the essential resources to facilitate lasting impact.

B. USING DATA TO SET PRIORITIES AND HELP ALIGN DEI EFFORTS WITH THE ORGANIZATION’S STRATEGIC AIMS

The primary instrument for CDOs in steering strategic change was data. Nevertheless, they frequently encountered challenges in obtaining or accessing data that captured essential DEI metrics. Consequently, they allocated significant resources to collect diverse forms of quantitative and qualitative data, analyzing these alongside existing databases. Data played a crucial role in highlighting the necessity for change, thereby strengthening CDOs’ capacity to influence their organizations. It also facilitated the prioritization and redirection of attention toward areas presenting the most significant DEI challenges and opportunities.

C. INCORPORATING ACCOUNTABILITY

While establishing role clarity and utilizing data were crucial in shaping the direction of DEI initiatives, CDOs propelled their efforts by instituting accountability practices. In the absence of such practices, DEI endeavors remained confined to voluntary programs and outreach events. The active involvement of organizational members, particularly leaders, in DEI initia-

tives increased significantly when CDOs implemented accountability practices, such as data-informed dashboards, scorecards, benchmarks, and public reports. In numerous organizations, the DEI practices and outcomes of leaders were directly linked to performance evaluations and compensation. Collaborating with enterprise leaders, CDOs also played a role in establishing accountability for learning through mandatory training and representation by promoting the hiring of diverse teams.

2. SHARED DEI OWNERSHIP: INVOLVING A BROAD SET OF STAKEHOLDERS WHO SHARE OWNERSHIP OF ADVANCING DEI

The CDOs underscored the collaborative nature of driving systemic change, emphasizing that it is not an individual effort. They highlighted the importance of going beyond mere diversity in hiring for successful DEI initiatives. To achieve genuine success, DEI principles and strategies need to be integrated into every facet of an organization.

For CDOs to have a lasting impact, organizations must grant them authority and provide support to link DEI with business services, markets, operations, and outreach. Embedding DEI throughout the organization serves as a strategic approach to insulate DEI initiatives from fluctuations in organizational urgency and leadership commitment, further motivating CDOs to pursue this comprehensive integration.

The most vital endorsement must come from the C-Suite, starting with the CEO. CDOs conveyed that their impact was more pronounced when their CEOs were actively involved in and publicly supportive of DEI efforts.

The CDOs reported that managing resistance to change and their work consumed a significant proportion of their workload. A recurring theme was the absence of widespread support within the company. This lack significantly hindered their capacity to implement DEI strategies effectively.

The challenges posed by geopolitics, political divisions, and societal discord added complexity to the task of promoting DEI. Chief diversity officers and other organizational leaders exercised careful judgment in their public statements, aiming to express support for one affected community without alienating another. Additionally, they remained mindful of the limitations placed on DEI.

The CDOs emphasized various strategies to navigate resistance and secure support. A crucial element was framing the work, which involved CDOs employing a “business case” approach to elucidate why DEI is a



strategic imperative intricately connected to the organization’s core functions. In addressing concerns that DEI might have adverse effects on certain individuals, CDOs highlighted the universal advantages derived from enhanced inclusivity and a sense of belonging for everyone.

3. CDO RESILIENCE AND RESOLVE: NAVIGATING THE DEMANDS OF DEI LEADERSHIP

In recent years, CDOs increasingly have had to invest concentrated efforts to counter resistance to DEI initiatives and manage the impact of global events on employees. These tasks can be taxing, and many organizations still assume that the entire burden of DEI impact rests solely on the shoulders of the CDO or their team. CDOs find themselves tasked with resolving intricate problems while also connecting with, supporting, and advocating for others. These aspects of the role exemplify the various forms of invisible labor often associated with DEI work, which exact both cognitive and emotional tolls on the practitioner.

Nevertheless, the CDO is rarely recognized as an individual undergoing the same dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as other members of the organization. This observation held particularly true for Black women in our study. A higher proportion of Black women indicated that this burden was notably significant.

The CDOs’ perspectives on coping strategies for the challenges of their role can be categorized into three key areas: seeking social support, establishing and managing boundaries while prioritizing self-care, and gaining clarity of purpose.

ENGAGING SOCIAL SUPPORT

CDOs relied upon their internal and external professional networks, mentors, coaches, and DEI teams to help them drive impact in sustainable ways. Family, close friends, and confidantes served as additional sources of social support.

MANAGING BOUNDARIES AND PRIORITIZING SELF-CARE

The CDOs shared the various strategies they used for managing boundaries and practicing self-care to mitigate the pressure and ensuing cognitive and emotional toll associated with leading DEI. These included time off spent with family and friends; travel, sports, creative, and leisure activities; a focus on mental and physical health through activities such as yoga, massage, journaling, and therapy; mindfulness and spiritual practices; and the undertaking of entrepreneurial ventures (e.g., consulting).

FINDING CLARITY OF PURPOSE

Clarity of purpose was universally recognized as the key to navigating the complexities and demands of this role, as it can provide the motivation for continuing to persevere, even in the face of extraordinary headwinds. The CDOs underscored the importance of gaining a clear sense of purpose to guide them through both personal and organizational challenges in their leadership of DEI. Having a clear purpose served as an internal compass, ensuring that CDOs stayed on course and aligned their energy, focus, and behaviors in the right direction. While many CDOs in our study had a personal passion for this work, possibly rooted in experiences of feeling marginalized and a commitment to preventing others from facing similar exclusion, they acknowledged that passion alone was insufficient to sustain their commitment over time.

Recommendations

The findings in this study are revealing—and can serve as the basis for an action plan. Based on these insights, we offer recommendations for both CDOs and their organizations to create a road map to how the CDO role may evolve to meet the changing needs and emergent opportunities for leading sustainable DEI impact.

CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICERS

CDOs embody diverse roles as strategists, innovators, bridge-builders, storytellers, and change catalysts. As stewards of institutions, they drive enduring impact throughout the organization, influencing individual experiences, organizational systems, and societal norms. Sustaining this impact necessitates deliberate intentionality. Our research accentuates the significance of the CDO’s role and responsibilities, with recommendations centering on fostering the mindset, skills, and leadership behaviors essential for the successful implementation and execution of DEI initiatives.

The study identifies three key areas where CDOs can leverage their role and agency to instigate change:

- 1. The CDO must know their organization’s business to effectively implement and integrate DEI into all that an organization does.
- 2. The CDO is an executive leader, and as with other C-Suite members, leading with confidence, curiosity, and competence must be the cornerstone of their leadership.
- 3. CDOs must have and demonstrate a high degree of emotional intelligence because of the mental strain of the position and the complex interactions that they navigate daily.

ORGANIZATIONS

The responsibility for success does not rest solely on the CDO’s shoulders. Many organizations lack the executive leaders or management capabilities necessary to advance DEI, primarily because they haven’t fully invested in their DEI infrastructure, including their CDO. To optimize their value and enhance positive social impact, organizational leaders can reinforce their support for CDOs through the following measures:

- 1. The CDO is an asset to the organization. As such, organizations must invest in the continued development of CDOs’ skills just as they would with any other business leader.
- 2. Organizations need to make the CDO role more attractive to their most promising and dedicated leaders by providing resources and opportunities to succeed.
- 3. It is essential that organizations recognize the necessity of the CDO role and DEI agenda and tie them to their core mission.

Conclusion

Previous research on the impact of CDOs has predominantly concentrated on external perceptions of their roles. However, in this groundbreaking study, we adopted a direct approach, engaging with primary sources through interviews with nearly fifty CDOs. Our investigation delved into unexplored facets and offers insights that more accurately depict the actual influence of CDOs in advancing DEI initiatives. Our emphasis was on comprehending how CDOs conceptualize impact, the strategies they utilize to propel it, and the reciprocal impact of leading DEI efforts on the CDOs themselves.

The CDO position stands as one of the most demanding, intricate, and mentally challenging roles within contemporary organizations. Despite the role’s formidable challenges, CDOs emerge as paramount catalysts for impact across all organizational levels. In an era shaped by artificial intelligence, cultural debates, remote work, and geopolitical tensions, the dynamics of how organizations and their stakeholders interact and coexist are constantly evolving. CDOs find themselves on the front lines, skillfully anticipating and navigating these complex issues, making them an indispensable asset to organizations—especially in today’s quickly evolving, complex, and challenging landscape.

ADOPT UNIVERSAL STANDARDS

It is imperative that the DEI profession develops a universally agreed upon set of professional standards and body of knowledge that codifies the CDO experience.

This standardization of the requirements for this position would establish a clear and delineated pathway, develop shared competencies and skills, and provide a common curriculum and education necessary to serve in the CDO role. As with other professions, such as physicians and attorneys, these certified qualifications would assist with creating validity, stability, permanence, and industry and organization buy-in for DEI leaders and their work.



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