

## How Newly Appointed Chief Information Officers (CIOs) Take Charge

**Anthony B. Gerth**

Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, USA

812-855-9978

[tgerth@indiana.edu](mailto:tgerth@indiana.edu)

**Joe Peppard**

European School of Management and Technology, Berlin, Germany

[joe.peppard@esmt.org](mailto:joe.peppard@esmt.org)

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### ABSTRACT

The transition for any executive into a new appointment is a challenge. This transition for the newly appointed Chief Information Officer (CIO) is especially so given the breadth of their responsibilities. The CIO not only manages the delivery of IT services and projects but must be viewed as a legitimate business leader in order to influence strategic decision-making. This article reports on a study that explores the experience of CIOs taking charge of a new appointment. It integrates concepts from leader socialization and role theory with CIO leadership challenges. The data is based on in-depth interviews with twenty one CIOs. The findings suggest that CIOs experience three overlapping phases of taking charge: entry, stabilization and renewal. These phases result in confidence, credibility and legitimacy as a new leader in the organization. The data further reveals that the organizational situation encountered by the CIO is a significant influence on the taking charge process. In particular, transition type – start-up, turnaround, realignment or success-sustaining – impact the process as well as determining whether the appointment is an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider.’ The study suggests that CIOs experience organizational socialization in two domains of leadership, supply-side and demand-side leadership, with the data indicating that supply-side socialization occurs first. The article identifies the activities associated with each phase, concluding with recommendations for newly appointed CIOs as they seek to take charge.

**Keywords:** Taking charge, Chief Information Officer, new appointment, transition, leader socialization, executive integration, IT leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of the Chief Information Officer (CIO) is a unique executive challenge.<sup>1</sup> In some organizations the role has evolved from a leader of the technology function into an executive who is expected to drive innovation and transformation through information technology.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, having an effective CIO is seen as crucially important for an organization today as most could not survive for very long without their IT systems and for some IT is a source of competitive differentiation.<sup>3</sup>

Although there is no conclusive evidence, anecdotal data suggests that CIOs have average tenures comparable to other executive roles.<sup>4</sup> However, what is different is the involuntary turnover rate that is higher than other executives at approximately 23%.<sup>5</sup> For a newly appointed CIO, whether in a first CIO role or an appointment in a new organization, being effective and integrating successfully into the assignment is paramount for an organization to optimize value from IT. How the CIO takes charge significantly influences their effectiveness in the role, their tenure and ultimately can have implications for the value delivered from IT.

Taking charge is the process of learning and taking action that a manager goes through until he/she has mastered a new assignment in sufficient depth to be running his/her sphere of responsibility as well as resources and constraints allow.<sup>6</sup> While there are a small number of studies of CEOs, the literature is essentially mute on the topic of how newly appointed CIOs take charge. The purpose of the research reported in this article is to explore this phenomenon in more depth from the CIO's perspective in order to increase our understanding of the process of taking charge and the factors influencing this process (see Appendix for more details about this research). Based on these CIOs' voices we have identified distinct phases of taking charge together with specific activities

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<sup>1</sup> E. Karahanna and R. Watson, 'Information systems leadership', *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*, Vol. 53, 2006, pp. 171-176.

<sup>2</sup> C. Ranganathan and S. Jha, 'Do CIOs matter? Assessing the value of CIO presence in top management teams', In: Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Systems, Paris, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> We are assuming that CIOs are responsible for IT.

<sup>4</sup> P. Thibodeau, *CIOs aren't CIOs for long* [Online]. CIO.com, 2011. Available: [http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9214941/CIOs\\_aren\\_t\\_CIOs\\_for\\_long](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9214941/CIOs_aren_t_CIOs_for_long) [Accessed August 10 2013]

<sup>5</sup> See K. Nash, "One in four CIOs fired for performance," *CIO.com*, 2009. Available: [http://www.cio.com/article/484008/One\\_in\\_Four\\_CIOs\\_Fired\\_for\\_Performance](http://www.cio.com/article/484008/One_in_Four_CIOs_Fired_for_Performance) [Accessed August 4, 2013].

<sup>6</sup> This definition is adapted from J.J. Gabarro, *The Dynamics of Taking Charge*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 1987.

and outcomes. While the first 90 days of any executive's transition is important,<sup>7</sup> our research suggests that this is not the entire story and it takes a significantly longer time to achieve mastery in the role.<sup>8</sup> We studied the taking charge process for newly appointed CIOs as a dynamic mutual adjustment process between the executive and the organization. That is, the newly appointed CIO must transition into the organization by understanding the top management team's expectations while at the same time influencing the evolution of these expectations.

## THE CIO ROLE, NEW LEADER SOCIALIZATION AND TAKING CHARGE

The role of the CIO in an organization is generally portrayed as an evolving one.<sup>9</sup> The research exploring the role has progressed from understanding the nature of the emerging role<sup>10</sup> to developing more complex models of CIO effectiveness.<sup>11</sup> Apart from a study that collected data from CIOs about the first year they were in the job,<sup>12</sup> there has been no research exploring how newly appointed CIOs transition into the role.

Given the evolving nature of the CIO role, it is perhaps not unexpected that the role has been characterized as an ambiguous one.<sup>13</sup> Executives can have different views of their CIO depending upon assumptions that reflect their views on IT.<sup>14</sup> These assumptions include who controls IT direction, how central IT is to business strategy, the value placed on IT knowledge, justifications required for IT investment and who benefits from IT projects.<sup>15</sup> These

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of the first 90 days has been popularized by a number of writers. See, for example, M. Watkins, 'Strategy for the critical first 90 days of leadership,' *Strategy & Leadership*, Vol. 32, 2004, pp. 15-20 and his bestselling book *The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Gabarro's original research suggests that it can take a new executive almost three years to fully develop mastery and influence in a new assignment. See J.J. Gabarro, *The Dynamics of Taking Charge*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Illustrative studies include B. Ives and M. Olson, 'Manager or technician? The nature of the information systems job', *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1981, pp. 49-63; R.I Benjamin, C. Dickson and J. Rockart, 'Changing role of the corporate information systems officer', *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No 3, 1985, pp. 177-188; C. Stephens, W. Ledbetter, A. Mitra and F. Ford, 'Executive or functional manager? The nature of the CIOs job', *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1992, pp. 449-467;

<sup>10</sup> M. Chun and J. Mooney, 'CIO roles and responsibilities: Twenty-five years of evolution and change,' *Information & Management*, Vol. 46, 2009, 323-334.

<sup>11</sup> J. Peppard, 'Unlocking the performance of the Chief Information Officer (CIO)', *California Management Review*, Vol. 52, 2010, pp. 73-99.

<sup>12</sup> D.E. Leidner and J.M. Mackay, 'How incoming CIOs transition into their new jobs', *MIS Quarterly Executive*, Vol. 6, 2007, pp. 17-28.

<sup>13</sup> J. Peppard, C. Edwards and R. Lambert, 'Clarifying the ambiguous role of the chief information officer', *MIS Quarterly Executive*, Vol. 10, 2011, pp. 197-201.

<sup>14</sup> M.L. Kaarst-Brown, 'Understanding an organization's view of the CIO: The role of assumptions about IT,' *MIS Quarterly Executive*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2005, pp. 287-301.

<sup>15</sup> Kaarst-Brown, 2005 *op cit*.

assumptions will determine the CIO's status and influence<sup>16</sup> and to some extent their positioning in the organization structure.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding its ambiguous nature, the CIO role has been characterized in a number of ways. One binary typology defines CIOs either as Trusted Senior Executive Leader or Chief Technology Mechanic.<sup>18</sup> A less restrictive model of different roles for the CIO is based on the dimensions of focus (technology or business) and business climate (dynamic or stable).<sup>19</sup> This model identifies CIO types as Technologists, Enablers, Innovators or Strategists proposing an evolutionary axis. The "higher-level" roles of Innovator and Strategist emerge after the basic functions of Technologist and Enabler have been mastered.

Chun and Mooney<sup>20</sup> describe a similar continuum of the CIO role: that of executive level manager focused on strategy and process improvement or a technical manager focused on cost containment and leveraging existing IT infrastructure. These authors also point out that where the CIO falls on this continuum is a function of how strategic the organization considers IT to be. More recent research<sup>21</sup> identified five types of CIOs by evaluating them along the criteria of scope of the role, issues critical to success, performance metrics used, challenges faced, and the nature of the relationship between the CIO and top management team. These authors suggest that the evolution of the CIO role is a function of how much the business organization takes ownership of IT. At the end of the evolutionary arc the role of the CIO could revert back to being a technologist as the business takes complete ownership of strategic IT decision making.

### Role theory

Whatever the characterization of the CIO role, role theory provides some insight into the *actual* role experience. This theory focuses on social systems that are pre-planned, task-oriented and hierarchical.<sup>22</sup> An early theoretical

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<sup>16</sup> H.G. Enns, H. G., S.L. Huff, and C.A. Higgins, 'CIO lateral influence behaviors: Gaining peers' commitment to strategic information systems', *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 27, 2003, pp. 155-176.

<sup>17</sup> R.D. Banker, N. Hu, P.A. Pavlou and J. Luftman, 'CIO reporting structure, strategic positioning and firm performance', *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 487-504.

<sup>18</sup> M. Broadbent and E. Kitzis, *The New CIO leader: Setting the Agenda and Delivering Results*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> E. McLean and S. Smits, 'A role model of IS leadership', in *Proceedings of the Ninth Americas Conference on Information Systems*, Tampa, FL, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> M. Chun and J. Mooney, 'CIO roles and responsibilities: Twenty-five years of evolution and change', *Information & Management*, Vol. 46, 2009, pp. 323-334.

<sup>21</sup> Peppard et al., *op cit*.

<sup>22</sup> B.J. Biddle, 'Recent development in role theory,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 12, 1986, pp. 67-92.

model of how individuals take on organizational roles was introduced by Katz and Kahn.<sup>23</sup> Their model describes a dynamic interaction between “role-senders” who communicate organizational expectations of a role and the “focal person” who occupies the role. While role theory presumes that expectations are a major generator of roles, it does not presume congruence between expectations and performance. Executive performance should not be simply a function of what they *do*, but what they *do* compared to what is *expected*.<sup>24</sup> The executive, in this case the CIO, has an influence on shaping these expectations.

In this regard the notion of “enactment” is apt as it promotes an executive actively and deliberately creating the environment rather than solely reacting to it.<sup>25</sup> Essentially enactment is a way to close a gap between what is expected and what the executive actually does. A number of models of managerial behavior have been developed to capture the choices incumbents make in the enactment of a role.<sup>26</sup> For example, Fondas and Stewart<sup>27</sup> provide a robust model of “expectation enactment” to describe the dynamics of how an executive can modify expectations for the role.

It is worth emphasizing that the concept of role presents a perspective that is quite different from the dominant competency-based question of “what makes an effective leader?” By taking the perspective of a role, the basic premise is to change behavior rather than attempting to change personality.<sup>28</sup> The concept of role also recognizes the difference between the role as it is understood by the organization and role as it is implemented by the executive. This implies that executive behavior is a function of the system versus the executive’s personality. This systematic perspective is much more dynamic than a static matching of the role as defined by the organization and the individual personality traits and hoping for a match.

Indeed, the research on the CIO role and organizational role theory can be seen as complementary. As we have seen, the CIO role research suggests there are different “types” of CIO roles depending on different

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<sup>23</sup> D. Katz and R.L. Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, Wiley, New York, 1978.

<sup>24</sup> C.P. Hales, ‘What do managers do? A critical review of the evidence’, *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 23, 1986, pp. 88-115.

<sup>25</sup> K.E. Weick, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1969.

<sup>26</sup> For example, this concept was embraced by Stewart by including *choices* in her model of managerial behavior: demands, constraints and choices. See R. Stewart, ‘A model for understanding managerial jobs and behavior’, *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 7, 1982, 7-13

<sup>27</sup> N. Fondas and R. Stewart, ‘Enactment in managerial jobs: a role analysis,’ *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 31, 1994, pp. 83-103.

<sup>28</sup> I. Borwick, ‘Organizational role analysis: Managing strategic change in business settings’, in J. Newton, S. Long, and B. Sievers, (eds.) *Coaching in Depth: The Organizational Role Analysis Approach*, H. Karnac Ltd., London, 2006.

organizational factors. Role theory suggests that these factors will be taken into account by the organization's role-senders (primarily the CEO and Top Management Team) who will communicate those expectations to the CIO. A gap in understanding is possible between the two parties resulting in role conflict and ambiguity. Research has identified that building a shared understanding of the role is critical to a CIO's effectiveness.<sup>29</sup> The concept of enactment introduces an additional dynamic to this relationship as it implies that the CIO has the ability to shape the role expectations rather than simply accepting an existing organizational definition.

### Socialization

An individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role through a process of socialization.<sup>30</sup> Socialization characterized a process where "raw" newcomers are transformed into functional members of the organization. Organizational socialization can also be described as a process of mutual adjustment between the individual and the organization. The organization seeks to influence and shape its members while the individual is trying to define and shape his/her role within the organization.<sup>31</sup> Much of the research into socialization is concerned primarily with the actions that an organization can take to achieve certain socialization outcomes.<sup>32</sup> Research into organizational socialization is concerned primarily with the actions that

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<sup>29</sup> H.G. Enns, S.L. Huff, and B. Golden 'CIO influence behaviors: the impact of technical background', *Information & Management*, Vol. 40, 2003, pp. 467-485; H.G. Enns, S.L. Huff, and C.A. Higgins, 'CIO lateral influence behaviors: Gaining peers' commitment to strategic information systems', *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 27, 2003, pp. 155-176; D. Feeny, B. Edwards and K. Simpson, 'Understanding the CEO/CIO relationship', *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 16, 1992, pp. 435-448; J. Peppard et al., 2011, op. cit.; D. Preston, and E. Karahanna, 'Antecedents of is strategic alignment: a nomological network', *Information Systems Research*, Vol. 20, 2009, pp. 159-179; B. Reich and I. Benbasat, 'Factors that influence the social dimension of alignment between business and information technology objectives. *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 24, 2000, pp. 81-113.

<sup>30</sup> J. Van Maanen, 'People processing: Strategies of organizational socialization,' *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 7, 1978, 18-36; and J. Van Maanen and E.H. Schein, 'Toward a theory of organizational socialization,' in B.M. Shaw, (Ed.) *Research in Organizational Behavior*. JAI Press, Greenwich, CT, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> C.D. Fisher, 'Organizational socialization: An integrative review,' *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, Vol. 4, 1986, pp. 101-145.

<sup>32</sup> D.G. Allen, 'Do organizational socialization tactics influence newcomer embeddedness and turnover', *Journal of Management*, Vo. 32, 2006, pp. 237-256; N.J. Allen and J.P. Meyer, 'Organizational socialization tactics: A longitudinal analysis of links to newcomers' commitment and role orientation,' *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 33, 1990, pp. 847-858; B.E. Ashforth and A.M. Saks, 'Socialization tactics: Longitudinal effects on newcomer adjustment', *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 39, 1996, pp. 149-178; B.E. Ashforth, D.M. Sluss and A. M. Saks, 'Socialization tactics, proactive behavior, and newcomer learning: Integrating socialization models,' *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 70, 2007, 447-462; B. Buchanan II, 'Building organizational commitment: the socialization of managers in work organizations', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 19, 1974, pp. 533-546; G. T. Chao, A.M. O'Leary-Kelly, S. Wolf, H.J. Klein and P.D. Gardner, P. D. 'Organizational socialization: Its content and consequences', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 79, 1994, 730-743; G.R. Jones, 'Socialization tactics, self-efficacy, and newcomers' adjustments to organizations,' *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 29, 1986, pp. 262-279; A.M. Saks, K.L. Uggerslev and N.E. Fassina, 'Socialization tactics and newcomer adjustment: A meta-analytic review and test of a model', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 70, 2007, pp. 413-446.

an organization can take to achieve certain socialization outcomes. For example, Buchanan<sup>33</sup> studied how different organizational experiences impacted managers' commitment over the course of their tenure with an organization. Van Maanen<sup>34</sup> built on this concept and identified seven "people processing" dimensions for organizations. These seven dimensions describe the tactics that an organization could apply to the socialization process. This research launched a plethora of studies focused on identifying what organization actions/tactics would bring about positive outcomes such as turnover reduction, job satisfaction, commitment and promotion.<sup>35</sup> However, this stream of research focused primarily on the degree of individual conformity to the organization's demands and the resulting outcomes. It is a one-way perspective of how the organization can "process" newcomers. The weakness with this line of research for leaders is that it does not capture the leader's ability through the process to influence the organization.

Yet, socialization refers not only to the adjustment to a specific organization but also to the learned behaviors from multiple career experiences in the case of a specific vocation or profession.<sup>36</sup> CIOs, as leaders, bring a more complex set of beliefs built from previous experiences to a new appointment and a stronger set of expectations about the role than an inexperienced newcomer. They also have more discretion in enacting those role expectations.<sup>37</sup> Socialization theory is a way to study CIOs because it is sensitive to the processual phenomena of a leader's adjustment to a new appointment. Socialization is an important process because even a top

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<sup>33</sup> Buchanan, *op cit*.

<sup>34</sup> J. Van Maanen, 'People processing: Strategies of organizational socialization', *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 7, 1978, pp. 18-36.

<sup>35</sup> Allen, D. G. 'Do organizational socialization tactics influence newcomer embeddedness and turnover', *Journal of Management*, 32, 2006, pp. 237-256; N.J Allen and J.P. Meyer, 'Organizational socialization tactics: A longitudinal analysis of links to newcomers' commitment and role orientation. *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 33, 1990, 847-858; B.E. Ashforth and A.M. Saks, 'Socialization tactics: Longitudinal effects on newcomer adjustment', *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 39, 1996, pp. 149-178; B.E. Ashforth, D.M. Sluss, and A.M. Saks, 'Socialization tactics, proactive behavior, and newcomer learning: Integrating socialization models,' *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 70, 2007, pp. 447-462; G.T. Chao, A.M. O'Leary-Kelly, S. Wolf, H.J. Klein and P.D. Gardner, 'Organizational socialization: Its content and consequences', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 79, 1994, pp. 730-743; G.R. Jones, 'Socialization tactics, self-efficacy, and newcomers' adjustments to organizations', *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 29, 1986, pp. 262-279; A.M. Saks, K.L. Uggerslev and N.E. Fassina, 'Socialization tactics and newcomer adjustment: A meta-analytic review and test of a model', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 70, 2007, pp. 413-446.

<sup>36</sup> D. T. Hall 'Careers and socialization', *Journal of Management*, Vol. 13, 1987, pp. 301-321; Van Maanen and Schein, *op. cit*.

<sup>37</sup> S.J. Ashford and S.J. Black, S. J. 'Fitting in or making jobs fit: Factors affecting mode of adjustment in new hires', *Human Relations*, Vol. 48, 1995, pp.421-437. Fondas and Stewart, *op cit*; S. Mantere, 'Role expectations and middle manager strategic agency', *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 45, 2008, pp. 294-316.



executive is influenced by the organization's belief systems and informal power structures. No leader, even the chief executive, has total control of all aspects of an organization.<sup>38</sup>

A significant study on leader socialization and taking charge was undertaken by John J. Gabarro.<sup>39</sup> From his data, he identified a five stage process and indicated it takes almost three years (an average of 33 months) for an executive to master a leadership assignment. More recently, Fondas and Wiersema<sup>40</sup> developed a theoretical model of CEO socialization and its influence on strategic change. Their model captures the combination of individual contribution to socialization and organizational influences although it has not been empirically confirmed. Another study of the first two years of a new CEO's appointment as leader of a teaching hospital suggested a dynamic model of a mutual adjustment process.<sup>41</sup> It is through the mutual adjustment process of leader socialization that convergence between the new leader and organization occurs. So how does this work for CIOs?

## **CIO TAKING CHARGE PHASES**

Our analysis suggests that taking charge is experienced by CIOs in three distinct and overlapping phases. We have labeled these phases Entry, Stabilization and Renewal. These phases emerged from the data as the participants described both the timeline of their taking charge process as well as the types of activities in which they engaged. CIOs always experienced an Entry phase of between 4-6 months upon initial transition into the new role/organization. A Stabilization phase began shortly after the new executive started and lasted 9-12 months. A Renewal phase started approximately 6 months into an appointment and overlapped the Stabilization phase. A generalized view of these phases is shown in Figure 1.

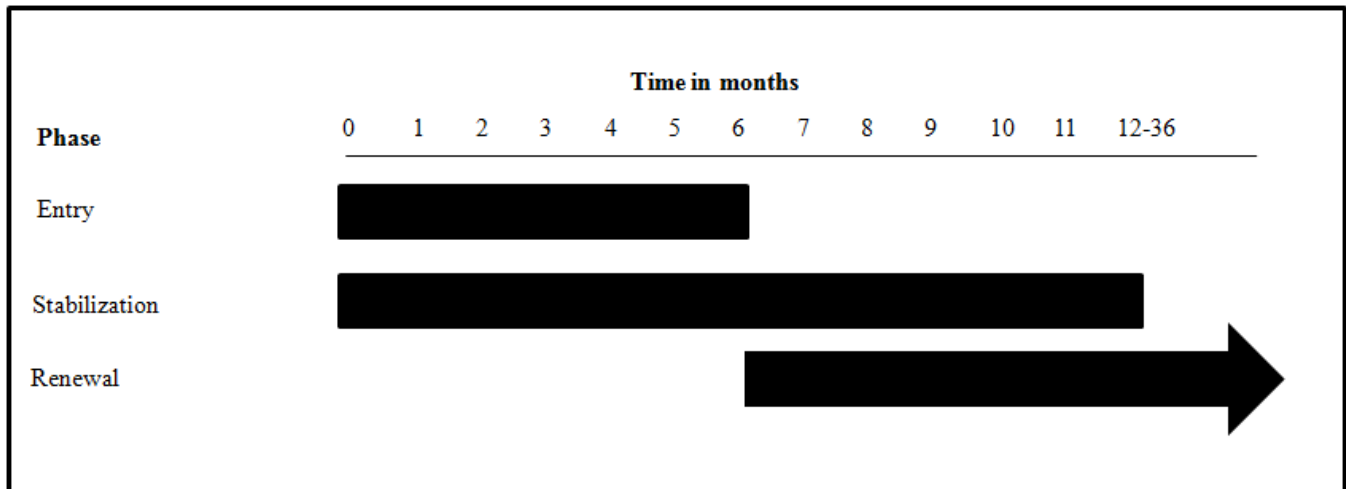
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<sup>38</sup> N. Fondas, and M. Wiersema, M. 'Changing of the guard: the influence of CEO socialization on strategic change,' *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 34, 1997, pp. 561-584.

<sup>39</sup> Gabarro, 1987 *op cit*. See also B. Buchanan II, 'Building organizational commitment: the socialization of managers in work organizations,' *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 19, 1974, pp. 533-546; D.C. Feldman, 'A contingency theory of socialization', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 21, 1976, pp. 433-452; E. H. Schein, *Career Dynamics: Matching Individual and Organizational Needs*, Addison-Wesley Co., 1978.

<sup>40</sup> N. Fondas and M. Wiersema, 'Changing of the guard: The influence of CEO socialization on strategic change,' *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 34, 1997, pp. 561-584.

<sup>41</sup> J.L. Denis, A. Langley and M. Pineault, 'Becoming a leader in a complex organization,' *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 37, 2000, pp. 1063-1100.



**Figure 1 Taking charge phases across time**

In addition to the process of taking charge we were interested in how CIOs described their adjustment to the new organization. We categorized these descriptions into “socialization outcomes.”<sup>42</sup> These outcomes describe the degree of convergence in the expectations of the CIO and TMT. Outcomes can be characterized as parallelism, assimilation, accommodation and transformation. Parallelism indicates lack of convergence and ultimately signifies a failed transition. Assimilation indicates an adjustment where the CIO accepts most, if not all, of the organization’s expectations of the role. Accommodation describes a “meeting in the middle” adjustment of negotiated expectations. Transformation describes an adjustment where the CIO primarily sets the expectations for the role themselves.

CIO leadership has been described as existing in two domains, supply-side and demand-side.<sup>43</sup> These domains emerged clearly in the phases of a new CIO taking charge. The Stabilization phase focused on supply-side leadership and the Renewal phase on demand-side leadership. Each phase resulted in a socialization outcome for the newly appointed CIO. The next sections will describe CIOs’ experiences in each of these phases in detail.

<sup>42</sup> This is consistent with Denis et al.

<sup>43</sup> D. Chen, D.S. Preston, D. S. and W. Xia, ‘Antecedents and effects of CIO supply-side and demand-side leadership: A staged maturity model,’ *Journal of Management Information Systems*, Vol. 27, 2010, pp. 231-271.

## Entry Phase

All the CIOs interviewed described a process of getting to know the business of the organization and the objectives of its top management team. CIOs also reported using this time to diagnose the IT-related problems in the organization. Several mechanisms were used by CIOs during the Entry phase. The most frequently used was interviewing non-IT stakeholders and IT leaders alike to collect information. Another mechanism was observation, whereby the CIO watched how decisions were made and how others behaved. Lastly, CIOs also reviewed existing documentation such as reports and plans.

CIOs described the Entry phase as learning and relationship building:

*“The first 60 days was 7am to 7pm every single day, six, sometimes seven days per week. At the end of 60 days I remember distinctly waking up one morning and thinking I finally get it. I understand where all the skeletons are. I understand who all the people are. I understand all the processes. I understand what the priorities are; now let’s go make some changes”* CIO – Semiconductor Manufacturer

*“The first thing I did in the first 30-90 days was sit down with every functional department leader. This not only helped me learn the business, but also to build critical relationships. I asked ‘what are your biggest problems right now’”.* CIO – Air Medical Transport Services

CIOs reported that it was 4-6 months before they felt capable of making significant decisions and having a sufficient understanding of the organization’s issues and people. Our analysis identified three areas where CIOs focused much of their attention during the Entry phase. These areas of assessment were the IT leadership team, IT governance processes and the IT savvy of their top management team peers.

Having a strong leadership team within their IT organization was viewed by CIOs as critical to their success. While most CIOs assessed their IT leadership team as being in need of rebuilding, the capability of the IT leadership was not always identified to be a lack of individual competence. Often CIOs explained that a lack of previous attention and investment in the IT organization had rendered it incapable of meeting the organization’s needs.

The state of IT governance processes varied as the new CIOs took charge. Comments from CIOs ranged from *“non-existent”, “low”, or “not very mature”* to *“high” or “strong” or “very good”*.

IT savvy describes how well the top managers of the organization understand and appreciate the role that information technology can play in helping them meet their business objectives. Across our CIOs, this was generally assessed as low. Many CIOs viewed the cause of low IT savvy in top management as the inability of the IT organization to demonstrate value. Increasing the TMT's understanding of the potential contribution by IT was highlighted as a priority during the Renewal phase. Creating this shared understanding was reported as an important step in the socialization of the CIO because it consists of negotiating and influencing TMT expectations for the role.

The outcome of the Entry phase was a working knowledge of the organization for the new CIO. This working knowledge consisted of understanding the key players, their objectives, what "kept them up at night" and the general political environment. It also provided the CIO with an assessment of their IT leadership team and the efficacy of IT governance in the organization. The Entry process lasted approximately 4-6 months and set the stage for Stabilization and Renewal.

CIOs described different situations that they inherited upon arriving in a new appointment. We wanted to capture the situational context of the taking charge process and evaluate its influence. These situational descriptions were categorized using transition types.<sup>44</sup> From our data we identified four types of CIO transitions:

**Start-up:** the CIO is charged with assembling the IT capabilities (people, funding and technology) to get a new business, product, or project off the ground.

**Turnaround:** the CIO takes an IT organization that is recognized to be in trouble and works to get it back on track.

**Realignment:** the CIO is challenged to revitalize an IT organization that is drifting into trouble.

**Success-sustaining:** the CIO takes responsibility to preserve the vitality of a successful IT organization and take it to the next level.

The frequency of the transition types encountered by the CIOs interviewed is shown in Table 1. Most of the transitions were described as Turnarounds or Realignments.

| Transition Type    | Frequency |
|--------------------|-----------|
| Start Up           | 1         |
| Turnaround         | 7         |
| Realignment        | 9         |
| Sustaining Success | 4         |
| Total Participants | 21        |

**Table 1** Frequency of participants by transition type at time of data collection.

We were also interested in whether there was any relationship between the transition type and whether the CIO was an insider or an outsider. A combination transition type and succession type at time of data collection provides some additional perspective as show in Table 2.

| Transition / Succession Type | Insider | Outsider |
|------------------------------|---------|----------|
| Start-Up                     | -       | 1        |
| Turnaround                   | 1       | 6        |
| Realignment                  | 2       | 6        |
| Success sustaining           | 3       | 2        |

**Table 2** Frequency of succession type by transition type at time of data collection.

The CIOs interviewed expressed a range of perspectives regarding the environment and situation they encountered when they took up their new role:

*“The picture painted prior to my taking the role...did not fully reflect the situation. You look down at a fire from an airplane and say wow, it looks pretty bad. But when you’re down on the ground it’s a different perspective.”* CIO – Visual Computing Technology Manufacturer

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<sup>44</sup> Adopted from Watkins, 2004, *op. cit.*

*“When I arrived...it was far more urgent, complicated and dysfunctional than I had imagined even with a fair bit of due diligence.”* CIO – Global Hotel and Resort Company

*“People made it very clear to me what kind of situation I was walking into. I think the company was very forthright and so I had a heads-up on most of the real problem areas.”* CIO – Air Medical Transport Services

We also found that CxO colleagues expect CIOs to understand their issues and bring solutions to the table, but in general do not reciprocate in trying to understand IT better. They also describe themselves as “fairly IT savvy.” CIOs report that this is primarily based on their familiarity with consumer IT such as smartphones, tablets and wireless home routers. Furthermore, this was primarily their understanding of how IT enables their part of the business. Their understanding of managing IT at an enterprise level was weak.

### **Stabilization Phase**

The Stabilization phase began shortly after the CIO started taking charge and lasted for approximately 9-12 months. This phase consisted of three sets of activities: taking corrective action and delivering existing projects, building the IT leadership team and implementing basic IT governance processes. These actions were consistent with the concept of supply-side leadership.

Taking corrective action was based on the CIOs diagnosis of services that required improvement. These problems were identified by speaking to stakeholders during the initial months of the Entry phase and through the CIO's own observation. This was seen as contributing to building credibility.

*“...the interesting thing about establishing credibility was that I got concussions from all the low hanging fruit. I went to every department and said give me your top 5 client problems. Then we went out and actively attacked the number 1 pain point in every department...then they say ‘hey you got this done in 7 days and your predecessor couldn’t get it done in 1½ years!’”* CIO – Travel Insurance Provider

Improving IT services was not the only priority. The CIO also had to deliver IT projects that were already “in-flight” when they arrived. CIOs felt that the credibility earned in Stabilization would provide them the opportunity to make more strategic changes in the future.

Another one of the first actions CIOs take is to communicate with the team about their expectations and to build trust with the IT team. The importance of the IT leadership team to the effectiveness of the CIO is recognized in the research<sup>45</sup> and also the participants of this study. We found that significant changes in personnel were undertaken, with CIOs replacing a high percentage of their leadership teams during this phase. Replacing inherited IT leaders with people viewed as more capable by the CIO contributed to building credibility with non-IT business partners, built the foundation for executing strategic initiatives and also consolidated the CIO's power base.

The data suggests that CIOs generally either initiated or enhanced IT governance processes in the Stabilization phase to achieve two objectives. The first was to take control over IT operations such as infrastructure and applications. The second was to define decision rights regarding IT investment priorities. Both of these actions helped establish the CIO's authority to control IT operations and to facilitate more formality and transparency in decision making within the top management team regarding IT investments.

*"One of the first things we did actually, put a more collaborative governance process in place. Select those guys in charge but expose them to more of the varying demands of what they need to invest in IT and also we made things much more transparent in terms of reporting progress."* CIO – Electronic Components Manufacturer

*"We had to put in place a change management process. We had to put in place an IT steering committee."* CIO – Air Medical Transport Services

*"We established a quarterly IT operating review with metric around each of the key areas of service delivery."* CIO – Global Hotel and Resort Company

There were several key outcomes of the Stabilization phase. The CIO had now gained credibility as an IT leader, had governance processes to prioritize IT initiatives with significant business impact and a leadership team in place to execute those initiatives. The CIO experienced a supply-side socialization outcome at the end of the Stabilization phase.

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<sup>45</sup> Peppard, 2010 *op cit.*; D.A. Marchand, W.J. Kettinger, and J.D. Rollins, 'Information orientation: People, technology and the bottom line', *Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 41, 2000, pp. 69-80.

## Renewal Phase

The Renewal phase is characterized by the CIOs as building on their credibility to implement changes that position them to become a legitimate business leader with a more strategic focus. This is the essence of demand-side leadership. Setting a more strategic direction for IT and ITs contribution to the business objectives was a key activity in the Renewal phase. An example of this transformation is described succinctly by one of the CIOs we interviewed:

*“The business people on the retail side of the business never had anyone who told them or indicated that technology can drive significant improvements or efficiencies or anything like that. IT has never really been a business partner but IT has turned that around.”* VP-IT – Gaming Company

CIOs made growing the capability of the team a priority by focusing on increasing the business savvy of their IT team and providing other development opportunities. They also sought to raise the IT savvy of their business partners by demonstrating how IT could help them achieve their goals and one-on-one coaching. CIOs were less ambitious about using formal educational processes. They focused their time mostly on their peers who they identified as being already open to incorporating information technology to accomplish their business objectives. In this way they attempted to raise awareness among the other top management team of how information technology might help them as well.

CIOs also enhanced IT governance processes in the Renewal phase. By now the CIO is driving more significant change into the organization although most of the interviewees recognized that this can be difficult and slower than they would like. Understanding the pace of change that the organization was capable of absorbing was a key adjustment for the new CIO.

*“So, what we’ve introduced...we spent a lot of time introducing, carefully introducing and as a phrase we use...introducing things in the culturally appropriate speed.”* CIO – Semiconductor Manufacturer

*“If you are a sprinter and you come into a walking organization you are going to walk. I actually had to slow down a little bit on some things and conclude you can only do one large change at a time. One thing I am always wary of when you come into a place requiring a lot of change is...change fatigue.”* CIO – Travel Insurance Provider



The most significant transition for the CIO in the Renewal phase was to gain legitimacy as a business leader. This demonstration of Demand-side leadership for the new CIO is how they operate as a fully functional member of the top management team.

*“The CEO said to me ‘I love all the directions you gave us on IT, your guidance and collaboration. But you have more to offer so don’t just limit yourself to having a view on IT related topics. We need to hear more from you.’”*

CIO – Electronic Component Manufacturer

*“My boss in the senior leadership team uses me to go out to our remote sites and articulate our strategic vision as a company. Now, that’s kind of weird for the IT guy to be the one doing that.”*

CIO – Visual Computing Technology Manufacturer

The Renewal phase was characterized by the CIO building on their credibility to implement changes that position them to become a legitimate business leader. They enhanced the capability of the IT leadership team and improved IT governance processes. The CIO exerted influence in setting IT strategy and started the evolution from IT leader to business leader. The CIO experienced a demand-side socialization outcome in this phase. CIOs experienced the taking charge process in three overlapping phases that led to building confidence, credibility and legitimacy over time. This taking charge process is summarized in Table 3.

| Phase                 | Entry  | Stabilization  | Renewal   |
|-----------------------|--|--|---|
| <b>Timeframe</b>      | Month 0-6  | Month 1-12   | Month 6-24+   |
| <b>Key Activities</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning about the organization</li> <li>• Diagnosing service delivery issues</li> <li>• Building relationships</li> <li>• Assessing personnel</li> <li>• Evaluating IT governance</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving service delivery</li> <li>• Delivering in-flight projects</li> <li>• Building IT leadership team</li> <li>• Implementing IT governance</li> </ul>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influencing strategic initiatives</li> <li>• Enhancing the IT team</li> <li>• Building IT savvy within top management team</li> </ul>                |
| <b>Outcomes</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Understanding of issues</li> <li>• Action agenda</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credibility as IT leader (supply-side socialization)</li> <li>• Influence via IT leaders</li> <li>• Coherence, coordination and control via governance</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legitimacy as business leader (demand-side socialization)</li> <li>• Increased IT strategic contribution</li> <li>• Improved TMT IT savvy</li> </ul> |

**Table 3** CIO taking charge phases, activities and outcomes.

We found that the taking charge phases were consistent regardless of situational variables. Moreover, CIOs reported similar timelines regardless of the transition type. What might seem like a counter-intuitive finding, CIO background characteristics (insider/outsider, industry experience, CIO experience) did not significantly influence the timelines).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEWLY APPOINTED CIO

The study's findings lead to several main conclusions. First, CIO background did not influence the taking charge process as much as the literature would suggest. Second, CIO socialization occurred differently in the domains of supply-side and demand-side leadership. Finally, transition type influenced the taking charge process and socialization outcomes.

Prior role and industry experience have been identified as characteristics that influence the effectiveness of the CIO and the taking charge process. The taking charge process for those interviewed without relevant industry experience was not significantly different from the other participants. The same research also suggests that prior CIO role experience would provide an advantage. No advantage in the taking charge timeline was discernible as

they still followed a similar timeline and activities in taking charge. It may have influenced the “quality” of their decisions, however this study did not evaluate that aspect.

Transition type was the most influential factor in how the CIOs took charge of their appointment and the resultant socialization outcome. Transition type directly influenced the degree of change that the CIO was required to implement but did not significantly influence the phases themselves or the timeline described. Moreover, companies requiring a leader for turnaround or realignment transitions were more likely to hire outsiders into the CIO role. The transition type of success sustaining was almost evenly split between insiders and outsiders. The degree of change implemented by new CIOs was described by Leidner and Mackay<sup>46</sup> as “incremental” or “radical”. Evidence from our study suggests similar conclusions. This is also consistent with the definitions of the different transition types.<sup>47</sup> Different degrees of change were also observed by Gabarro<sup>48</sup> between “turnaround” and “normal” situations. What we also discerned is that expectations are higher when a new CIO arrives where there is a change mandate.

The Leidner and Mackay study linked CIO actions to the type of predecessor that they followed in the role. In contrast, our study suggests that the CIO actions in taking charge are better described in terms of the transition type. Our data would suggest that the transition type is a function of the gap between the CEO’s vision for IT and the current state of IT in the organization.

Our findings also indicate that CIOs approach the taking charge process in several phases. The CIO tends to focus on supply-side leadership activities in the Stabilization phase and demand-side leadership in the Renewal phase. CIOs establish supply-side leadership relatively early in their taking charge process, but it might be 18-24 months before they influence demand-side outcomes. Chen et al.<sup>49</sup> proposed a phased model of CIO leadership where supply-side leadership influenced demand-side leadership and the findings of this study are consistent with that conclusion. Denis et al.<sup>50</sup> found that a new CEO taking charge experienced socialization uniquely in two different domains. Similarly, this study suggests that CIOs experience socialization uniquely between supply-side and demand-side leadership domains and that the outcomes are linked.

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<sup>46</sup> *Op cit.*

<sup>47</sup> Watkins, 2004 *op cit.*

<sup>48</sup> Gabarro, *op cit.*

<sup>49</sup> *Op cit.*

<sup>50</sup> *Op cit.*

For the newly appointed CIO, we have the following recommendations:

*Be prepared for surprises, even after extensive due diligence.* CIOs report that the situation they encountered when they eventually assumed the role was always different than they had initially understood. Nothing beats actually being in your new organization. Remember, the initial information you collected (and that was given to you) was during a process designed to encourage you to join! You can only fully understand the situation you inherit by working with people daily and digging into details difficult to assess during the recruiting process.

*Taking charge requires more than a 90 day plan.* A 90-day plan is fine, but recognize you will need to plan the next two years plus. Don't assume what happens in the first 90 days is all that matters.

*Do not try to introduce changes too quickly.* You may be eager to make an impact but the evidence suggests that you should not be in too much of a hurry to make changes. Obviously, if you are in a turnaround transition you may be forced to take corrective action immediately after taking up the role.

*Transition type influences intensity, not timing.* Turnarounds certainly consist of more intensive actions than success-sustaining transitions (e.g. major IT leadership team turnover versus very minor changes in the IT leadership team). However you will likely experience the phases and timelines discussed the same way. Taking charge in a successful environment still takes 2 years plus. There are no short cuts to effective leadership.

*Entry is about learning.* Use the first 90 days to learn about the organization. This goes beyond simply diagnosing IT problems. It includes understanding the political environment, company culture and strategy as well as who are the key influencers and power brokers. You also need to assess your IT leadership team and their ability to lead in the future. Even "insiders" need to focus on this learning.

*You need to proactively seek information and build relationships.* Your peers expect this and likely will not come to you.<sup>51</sup> Beyond doing the normal tour of stakeholders in the first 90 days you need to do detailed stakeholder analysis. Discover who are IT advocates and who are adversaries or, at best, skeptics. Directly ask questions that elicit information about the decision-making culture and priority setting. Understand the executives with the most strategic business initiatives.

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<sup>51</sup> This was confirmed in interviews with non-IT executives conducted as part of this research project. This will be reported in a future article.

*Be clear as to what constitutes success.* Remember, the notion of success can be very subjective; what you interpret as success might be at odds with that of the CEO and the c-suite. The definition of “success” needs to be identified early and these expectations managed.

*You need to earn the “right” to be strategic.* You need to build credibility as an effective leader of the IT organization before you can influence your peers and the business strategy. Many executives are likely to withhold support until you have earned their credibility; remember credibility is something you are given not what you possess. This means effectively delivering and improving IT services, successfully completing in-flight projects and building an IT leadership team that evokes confidence in their peers. Only then will you gain the legitimacy you need to influence more strategic business decisions.

*Build a shared vision for the role and contribution of IT.* Your success will ultimately be determined by the extent to which you set the direction for IT and build a shared vision for this in the organization. Being forward-looking – envisioning exciting possibilities and enlisting others in a shared view of the future – is the attribute that most distinguishes leaders from non-leaders.

*What worked for you in the past might not be successful again.* Successful transitions were described as “doing the right things (*i.e. getting results*) the right way (*i.e. fitting the culture*)”. You cannot assume that what worked in your previous organization will be successful in the current environment. In the Entry phase it is important to understand “how things are done” and the organization’s capacity for change. Your go-forward action plan should include a “culturally appropriate” pace of change.

*Build CxO IT savvy by delivering demonstrative value.* Brown bag lunches and seminars are fine, but don’t expect these to increase the IT savvy of your executive stakeholders. The best way to do this is to demonstrate IT can generate value and enable key business strategies. This requires setting realistic expectations before any project, effective project delivery and measuring results post-implementation. You can then use this as an example to others in the organization and build momentum for your change agenda. Remember, most executives will not have bought into the shared responsibility view of IT and will see anything to do with information and IT as falling outside the scope of their responsibilities.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research has developed a better understanding of how CIOs experience taking charge of a new appointment. Our three phase model enhances our understanding of the CIO taking charge process and extends the work of Leidner and Mackay by taking a processual view of the phenomenon. This phased model can be used to further explore CIO taking charge processes. The model can also provide the basis to explore the taking charge process for non-IT executives.

Moreover, the findings of this study move the conversation regarding newly appointed CIOs beyond incremental / radical change to a deeper discussion of specific activities and the outcomes that CIOs' experience from those activities. The processes of building confidence, becoming a credible IT leader and stretching to be identified as a legitimate business leader have been hidden from the literature on newly appointed CIOs. This descriptive model of CIO socialization can be useful to newly appointed CIOs as they develop more complete transition plans and expectations beyond the 90-100 day window. CIOs must plan on a 2-3 year transition period and manage the organization's expectations accordingly.

## APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research reported in this article sought to address the question as to how CIOs take charge in a new assignment. Given its exploratory nature it sought “understanding” rather than “explanation”. In-depth interviews with CIOs allowed us to explore the range of experiences they have had with the taking charge process. Seeking understanding requires data that is “rich” in the sense that it expresses CIOs’ experience in their own words and semi-structured interviews are an effective way to explore these experiences.

The interview instrument was developed based on the research question and existing literature. We reviewed an initial data collection protocol with two CIOs in a structured walk-through where the CIOs were not asked to answer the questions but rather to focus on the clarity of the questions. They were also asked if there were questions that they felt were missing. These reviews elicited edits for clarification. We then conducted three pilot interviews to assess both the interview protocol as well as the interview process itself and to ensure that it interviews would generated the data needed to address the research question.

The sampling technique adopted was a combination of convenience and snowballing. CIOs personally known to us were contacted. This was a convenience sample. People in our professional network that work with CIOs were also contacted for referrals and introductions. This approach incorporated snowball sampling. Participants were either a current or past Chief Information Officer. Since the study was interested in understanding what factors influence the taking charge process we did not *a priori* select executives from specific backgrounds, industries, company sizes, etc. This open selection added breadth to the data collected.

Given the broad geographic locations of the participants, interviews were conducted by telephone, recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol consisted of a number of open ended questions and focused on three main areas. The first was simply background information related to their time in role, CIO experience, reporting relationship and prior experience in IT and industry. The second area of inquiry was to have them describe the situation that existed when they took over the appointment. The third area consisted of questions that probed the taking charge process that they had experienced.

The data was coded using template analysis, a group of techniques for thematically organizing and analyzing textual data. At the point of the twenty first CIO interview the data reached a point of theoretical saturation in that

no new categories emerged for coding. Therefore sampling was stopped at twenty one interviews in the main study.

Participants were primarily male and there were only three female executives. The participants approximate the general gender distribution of CIOs, however this approximation is purely coincidental since no sampling strategy was used to achieve a representative sample of gender. Time in the current role varied across a broad range. Table a shows the distribution of tenure in the current appointment.

| <b>Tenure in current role (years)</b> | 0-1 | 1 - 2 | 2.1 – 3 | 3.1 – 5 | Over 5 | Average |
|---------------------------------------|-----|-------|---------|---------|--------|---------|
| <b>Frequency</b>                      | 3   | 10    | 2       | 3       | 3      | 2.8     |

**Table a** Distribution of participants' tenure in current appointment.

Seventy-one percent of the participants have been in their current role three years or less. Table b shows the frequency of prior experience by succession type. Success type is identified in the literature as an “insider” or “outsider”. An “insider” is one promoted to the role from within the organization while an “outsider” is a CIO hired from outside the organization.



| Prior CIO Experience | Insider | Outsider |
|----------------------|---------|----------|
| Yes                  | 1       | 10       |
| No                   | 5       | 5        |
| Total                | 6       | 15       |

**Table b** Frequency of prior CIO experience by succession type.

The range of total years CIO experience was from 1.5 to 17 years. The total work experience of the participants was high with an average of over 23 years (range was 15-32 years). The number of years of IT experience ranged from 2-30 years, yet only seven participants (33%) had non-IT business experience.