



Seizing opportunity and equality:

The female chief data officer

If your organization is like most, you're likely wrestling with opportunities and challenges arising from the enormous volumes of data your business generates, collects, and distributes. As a result of these ever-growing volumes of data, [Chief Data Officers \(CDO\) are becoming increasingly common in the C-suite](#)—and this opens up a unique opportunity for women in data and analytics roles.

Data's full value can only be realized when it informs all parts of an organization. This requires a dedicated executive, and many industries are catching on. A [2018 survey](#) of business executives found that 62.5% of respondents had appointed a CDO—a dramatic increase from just 12% in 2012. As a relatively new executive position, the skills and knowledge brought to bear can vary. Generally, CDOs must understand data and its implications for the organization, but they must also be able to help the data tell a story, bringing distinct groups together to forge a shared vision for a more data-driven organization.

As this data role is being established, it's opening C-suite doors at a time when [women only hold 23% of senior executive roles](#) in the top 1,000 U.S. companies (by revenue). While stubborn trends that usually yield executive roles to men continue to frustrate gender parity in the boardroom, the CDO role is a position female professionals can and are seizing in greater number. [A Gartner survey of CDOs](#) found that nearly 20% of respondents were female, and among organizations with global revenue exceeding \$1 billion, that number climbed to 25%. Gartner predicts the CDO role will be the most gender diverse of all tech-related executive positions by 2021.

The growing prominence of female CDOs hinges on multiple factors. The CDO must balance a range of potentially conflicting issues, the greatest among them a cultural resistance to embracing data-driven strategy and operation. In this, their responsibilities cross data management, business strategy, and regulatory adherence. Even as executives may appreciate the rich value inherent in Big Data, an effective, comprehensive data strategy requires the participation of all organizational units and leaders. This requires change, which can be notoriously hard to implement across an organization.

As such, a CDO's role is in part to engender collaboration and buy-in, managing opposition to arrive at common data-driven ground. In this, female data professionals can deliver on the CDO's difficult mandate by playing to the long-noted strength of women's ability to foster partnership and agreement.

The increasing prominence of women in data fields owes also to the absence of entrenched gender role perceptions that surround other executive positions, like CEO and CFO. Given their participation and leadership, women are already shaping the long-term perception of who can serve as a CDO, clearing a path for future female professionals to enter.

This promise of female leadership in data fields can begin to rectify the persistent gender inequality across the tech sector. One factor in this is education. Currently, data science as an area of technology education shows the lowest representation of female students, according to an [analysis by the data company Priceonomics](#). This is reflective of the larger, longer-standing gender inequality in all science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education. In the United States, while women account for nearly 60% of college graduates, they [earn just 35% of undergraduate STEM degrees](#).

Thus, the growing prominence of the CDO role (and female professionals' access to it) is both exciting and essential. Encouraged by a career path that leads to the boardroom, women in data fields can seek out the work experiences and knowledge they need to capture greater levels of authority and success. From earning a degree in a STEM field to on the role of CDO, female professionals can enjoy data-focused careers and serve a greater role in reshaping organizations for a data-driven future.



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