





# Discover funding strategies for CDOs to drive mission success

Create funding strategies that align with your agency's mission by securing more support from stakeholders and finding new funding opportunities

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Chief data officers (CDOs) often find themselves with sweeping charters and accountability for large transformational organizational changes, while simultaneously balancing competing priorities within budget and staff.<sup>1</sup> On average, CDOs hold their position for 2.5 years, half the tenure of other C-suite executives, but the tide might be turning.<sup>2</sup> As was the case for chief information officers (CIOs) before them, CDOs tend to now be more involved in organizational decision-making and are increasingly successful in demonstrating the criticality of their role in achieving their organization's mission success.<sup>3</sup>

To help create value for their mission, a CDO needs a few things at a minimum:

- An understanding of mission needs and specific use cases in the data realm
- An equal understanding of their stakeholder network and enterprise buy-in across their organization
- Appropriately allocated resources for the expected impact of their office

Two companion articles in this series, *Don't just have a data strategy, have an effective data strategy* and *Organizing to drive change*, describe how CDOs may craft a data strategy to help meet the organization's needs and how they can consider structuring their office to then execute against that strategy and use data to drive change across the organization. CDOs should recognize the interconnectivity between strategy and structure. This article focuses on how CDOs can attract the right resources to help support their agency's objectives.

## Overcoming challenges to success

While government and public sector leaders may recognize the importance of having CDOs in their organizations, there remain numerous challenges to standing up and empowering a CDO and their team with the necessary resources. Limited budgets, insufficient staff, misaligned organizational priorities, and unclear authorities are some of the potential challenges that can impede a CDO's effectiveness. A 2022 survey found that over half of federal CDOs operate with less than 10 full-time equivalent staff members, which can limit their ability to drive change.<sup>4</sup> But acquiring adequate funding and staffing levels involves more than simply putting in a bigger budget request. CDOs often face structural challenges that can make it difficult to secure sufficient resources.

## Difficulty communicating value

CDOs often struggle to effectively communicate the value data projects can bring to the organization.<sup>5</sup> This may be especially acute in the government sector, where the value of mission improvements can be hard to quantify compared to the dollars and cents value of boosted sales in the commercial world.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, varying levels of data literacy throughout the organization can present obstacles. At the intersection of technology, mathematics, and artificial intelligence, messaging can get quite technical very fast, and communicating the fundamental *why* of a project can often be lost in overcommunicating the *how* to senior leaders in intricate technical detail.

## Ambiguity of role and authorities

In 2018, the Foundations of Evidence-Based Policymaking Act made it mandatory for all federal agencies to appoint a CDO.<sup>7</sup> To adhere to this directive, many agencies had to quickly hire from outside or promote internally to fill this new position without the benefit of the months or years it might take to adequately define the role or its responsibilities. As a result, some CDOs found it difficult to differentiate their role from that of CIOs or chief technology officers (CTOs) and struggled to communicate the value of their data-related mission projects to other parts of the organization. This lack of clarity may have also made it difficult for CDOs to compete for scarce resources around budget time, as they were often overshadowed by larger organizational priorities.

## Challenges in hiring staff and building a core team

Resource challenges aren't limited to dollars or staff sizes. Finding the right talent to execute data projects is often central. In fact, when the CDO council asked federal CDOs about their concerns, the top response was workforce hiring challenges.<sup>8</sup> Securing enough funding to hire or contract the right talent is an important step, with just under half of all federal CDOs having vacant positions in their offices.<sup>9</sup> But even when the opportunity to hire presents itself, hiring the top talent can also be difficult given the long hiring timelines and rigid pay scales of the government.<sup>10</sup>

## What can CDOs do?

CDOs should know where to begin, which means understanding the organization's priorities. CDOs can start by leaning in on what they have already done. For organizations with a data strategy in place, CDOs can use it to map their activities to the mission outcomes valued by the organization. Framing an analytics or data project as a mission enabler rather than just focusing on the technical solutions can help other leaders see how it contributes to the organization. This demonstration of how a project can improve mission outcomes can aid in communicating the value of the CDO to the wider organization.

A clear road map can greatly help CDOs cocreate with other departments and demonstrate their value to other parts of the organization. CDOs can succeed by bringing together seemingly disparate stakeholders to collaborate on smaller, bite-sized projects to achieve a shared vision. This cocreation could lead to ongoing conversations and continued support that helps solidify roles and responsibilities. Once the projects are successfully performed, CDOs shouldn't hesitate to share the value they added. Communicating these wins to stakeholders is an important step toward clearing the path for additional investment, as they can better visualize future returns.

In fact, these small wins can also help fill the talent gap facing many CDOs. With 54% of American workers surveyed saying that "making a meaningful impact on society" was very important to them when choosing a job, the demonstrated impact of small-scale projects can help attract talent to the government.<sup>11</sup>

## Demonstrate value to build trust to earn resources

While resource decisions can often seem like dry dollars-and-cents calculations, in reality, they are very human decisions. But earning the trust of other leaders can start with demonstrating the value of data to their missions. A few steps can help CDOs demonstrate value, build trust, and access the resources they need.

### 1. Understand the current state:

Before jumping head-first into creating new initiatives and planning with stakeholders, CDOs should understand the current state of the organization's data. From the basics of knowing what data exists and where, to more nuanced issues such as assessing data literacy across the organization, CDOs can benefit from evaluating their organization's data maturity. In fact, a data inventory may be more than just taking stock of what boxes are in the warehouse. It can help the CDO establish their mandate and reason for being. If an organization is awash in data it didn't even know it had, it is likely not getting the most mission benefit from that data. And that realization of the current state can be a powerful force behind the CDO as they embark on change.

But CDOs don't—and perhaps shouldn't—undertake these assessments alone. Engaging other leaders in *data visioning* sessions can provide CDOs with insights into the organization's priorities and current capabilities and create trust with key mission leaders.

### 2. Pick pilot projects aligned to long-term business needs:

Pilot projects are a fantastic way to showcase a department's progress and capabilities to the rest of the organization. These *quick wins* are often small in scope but may provide a big impact. During the initial assessment, it can also be important to identify opportunities where other leaders can benefit from data capabilities and then prioritize the top two or three based on current resources, level of effort, and intended impact. Communicating the value added from these projects may be nearly as

important as a successful launch, as they could pave the way for additional resources based on proven successes.

### 3. Identify sponsors and key stakeholders:

While working on pilot projects, CDOs should build relationships with key partners and C-suite executives to ensure continued sponsorship and funding. The diverse roles that CDOs tend to play means that potential sponsors may differ dramatically depending on the organization or the specific pilot projects. In organizations where the CDO is driving technical change via a data platform, key sponsors may be the CTO and other technical leadership. On the other hand, when CDOs drive change via mission projects or data literacy initiatives, they may need to engage with the mission and human capital leaders. Nurturing relationships with these leaders can create more advocates in leadership who can speak to the power of data, thereby helping seed success across the organization.

### 4. Tie funding requests to business impact:

Similarly, when communicating the requirements or successes, it can be helpful to focus the message on the impact of the data and technological resources provided rather than updates on the technical progression. Decision-makers who allocate funding may not understand what a data lake is, but if they learn that multiple divisions of their agency shared data and saw better outcomes, this can drive additional funding and future buy-in. Highlighting key wins across stakeholders and tying them back to the technical solution show a strong and tangible business impact that CDOs can refer to when making budgetary requests.

Many government CDOs may still find themselves in a transitional zone, where their positions are set forth by law, but their value still needs to be fully understood. Demonstrating this value can be critical to earning the trust needed to win access to the funding and talent CDOs need. Without these resources, the potential for mission improvements promised in data strategies and elsewhere will likely go unfulfilled. While quickly demonstrating value can be difficult, by layering trust on top of sound data strategy and organizational structure, CDOs can have confidence that they can get the resources they need to improve mission accomplishment for their organization and the public.



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## Endnotes

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