

CIO to CEO

WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE THE LEAP



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The CIO Association of Canada is a not-for-profit organization comprised of Chief Information Officers (CIOs). The Association's mission is to facilitate Canada-wide networking and sharing of best practices, and to provide advocacy and professional development opportunities for its members.

This white paper presents the results of a research project carried out by the Ontario Chapter of the CIO Association, in conjunction with the Institute for Research on Technology Management and Organizational Learning of the Ted Rogers School of Information Technology Management at Ryerson University. Partial funding for the study was provided by the MITACS Accelerate Program.

In undertaking this research study, the CIO Association sought insight on the evolving role of the CIO as a "C" level executive, and a deeper understanding of the professional development opportunities that may exist for aspiring CIOs. More to the point, is the CIO position a terminal one from which there is no additional C-level progression, or is it a springboard to additional career paths? To answer this question, the research team studied two sample groups: 36 CIOs, and nine CEOs who were formerly CIOs or senior IT leaders. More specifically, we examined the characteristics and environmental conditions of the CIOs who became CEOs.

The Chief Information Officer is now a well-established executive role, with CIOs appointed by most major organizations. Over the last 20 years, much has been written about the role and the responsibilities of the CIO and what it takes to be appointed and succeed at that level. Little, however, has been done to look at how CIOs advance beyond their role to the top executive position in organizations – the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). This project provides new insights by examining current theory, by reviewing documented cases of American and Canadian CIOs who have been appointed as CEOs, and by interviewing Canadian CEOs with a prior background in IT. The research has yielded a framework with which to assess a CIO's potential for promotion, and offers guidance for IT managers and CIOs who are interested in preparing for the CEO role.

Our work was completed in two stages. The first stage included a comparative analysis of current CIO and CEO theoretical leadership models and a validity test of these models through examination of identified well-documented U.S. cases where CIOs have achieved advancement to COO or CEO positions. Based on this analysis we prepared a new model of CIO to CEO progression and then, in the second stage, we tested the model through a study of a number of Canadian CEOs who had previously held CIO positions. In addition we asked the interviewed CEOs and a sample group of CIOs to complete a Leadership Dimensions Questionnaire (LDQ) which enabled us to examine the leadership competencies of Canadian CEOs and CIOs.

The proposed model, largely validated through the study, has three categories - *Environmental Factors*, the executive's *Work Experience and Responsibilities*, and the executive's *Personal Attributes*. Across the three categories, ten factors stood out as having the greatest influence on CIOs career progression at the executive level.

Within the *Personal Attributes* category, the six key factors were as follows:

1. Executive level communication skills
2. People and organizational development skills
3. The ability to lead change initiatives
4. The ability to build relationships
5. Knowledge of the industry in which the firm operates
6. Did the participant have an advisor or mentor who helped them in their career

Within the *Work Experience* category, the two key factors were as follows:

1. Increased business focus
2. Good at CIO basics

Within the *Environmental Attributes* category, the two key factors were as follows:

3. Strong IT governance
4. Organization is a mature user of IT

Two messages resonated from the interviews with CEOs. First, the interviewees spoke strongly and frequently about taking personal responsibility for career progression, and navigating to roles with more responsibility. Within *Personal Attributes*, interviewees spoke most frequently about their executive communication skills and their people and organizational development skills. Then, two elements in *Work Experience* stood out as the most important overall. The interviewees stressed that their career promotion relied on both a strong business focus and the ability to deliver on the CIO basics - namely effective technical and operations services.

The final research segment was the completion and analysis of the Leadership Dimensions Questionnaire (LDQ) to measure leadership competencies. The LDQ was administered to the CEOs who were interviewed, and to a sample population of CIOs who are members of the CIO Association of Canada. The LDQs enabled us to compare and contrast leadership competencies of the two groups, and to compare them to the overall database of thousands of managerial leadership profiles. The analysis showed that the CEOs and the CIOs engaged in this study were equally competent as leaders, with no statistical differences on the 15 measured leadership dimensions. When compared to a wider population of managers, both groups, CEOs and CIOs, demonstrated significantly higher levels of leadership competence.

So what do we conclude from this research?

First, CIOs have the leadership competencies required to become CEOs. Second, to move ahead to a more senior position, a CIO must build credibility through a combination of work experience and specific personal attributes. Third, CIOs need to take responsibility for their careers.

The results of the research provide an elevated awareness of how CIOs can leverage the position more strategically within the organization, and within the context of personal career development.

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