



MARLIN HAWK

# Marlin Hawk Function Pulse

The State of the Chief Data Officer:

Insights from the Frontlines of Data

Leadership

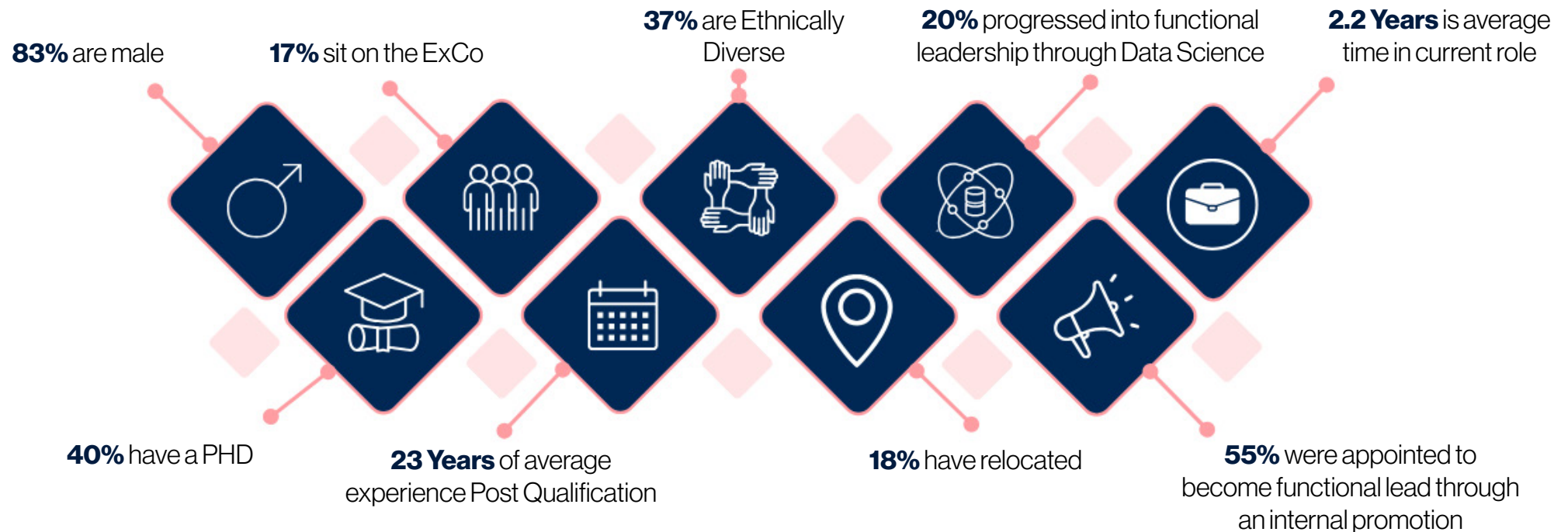
# Introduction

Once considered a peripheral role centred around compliance and governance, the modern Chief Data Officer (CDO) has rapidly evolved into a strategic powerhouse at the heart of modern organisations in a data-centric and driven world. Today's CDOs are not just gatekeepers of data, but instead have become key business partners and architects of innovation, leveraging analytics, AI, and technology.

As organisations become more data-driven, the CDO's influence extends beyond IT, shaping marketing strategies, financial planning, and operational efficiencies. As CDO's redefine how businesses can harness data as a competitive advantage, a demand grows for CDOs with cross-functional expertise.

This Function Pulse explores the latest CDO landscape, highlighting key trends, the increasing emphasis on diversity in data leadership, leadership archetypes, industry-specific challenges, and the competitive compensation trends around various sectors. By delving into the latest market insights, this pulse serves as a guide to understand the current and future CDO environment, and discover the experience and leadership qualities that define success in this now critical business transformation role.

# Decoding the CDO: How Data Leadership Differs Across Industries



## Results will vary across industries, and below highlights key contrasts between sectors:

### The average Data functional lead in Consumer:

- Is male (68%)
- Has 18 years of data experience
- Has worked abroad (29%)
- Progressed into Data roles from Marketing (48%)
- Holds a Masters degree as their highest certificate (45%)
- Is 42 years old

### The average Data functional lead in Financial Services:

- Is male (89%)
- Has 22 years of data experience
- Has worked abroad (30%)
- Progressed into Data roles from Data Science (25%)
- Holds a Masters degree as their highest certificate (50%)
- Is 46 years old

# Analysis: The Evolution of the CDO

While ROI challenges, operating models, and generative AI create significant hurdles for CDOs, they do not diminish the importance of data capabilities within organisations. In fact, as companies seek to leverage AI to enhance operating margins, effective data management and utilisation remain crucial, making it essential for someone in the business to take ownership of this responsibility.

We believe a key part of the solution is rethinking the necessity of dedicated data leaders. Instead, organisations should focus on developing C-suite executives who combine deep domain expertise—acquired through roles with revenue or customer responsibilities—with strong data and analytics skills. This extends beyond basic data literacy; these leaders must grasp the essential components of a successful data strategy and be capable of building and managing teams to execute it effectively. Such an approach could help resolve challenges related to value creation, operating models, and AI adoption.

This shift is less drastic than it may appear, as 36.3% of data leaders already report to business leaders, according to the Data & AI Leadership Exchange's 2025 survey. While the CDO role has been seen as a career pinnacle over the past two decades, it may be more valuable to view it as a stepping stone to broader executive leadership roles.

\*MIT Sloan Management Review - The Chief Data Officer Role: What's Next

# The Push for Diversity in CDO Leadership

Globally, women represent approximately 25% of Chief Data Officers, highlighting a notable gender gap in this field. However, this figure has seen improvement, with a 15% increase in the number of women in such roles since 2020, reflecting a positive trend toward greater gender diversity in data leadership positions.

The CDO role, pivotal in driving data strategies, often lacks representation across gender, racial, and cultural areas. This disparity not only challenges the ethos of inclusivity but also hinders organisations from unlocking the full potential of diverse and nuanced perspectives in data-driven decision-making.

## Why Diversity Matters in the CDO Community

**Perspective:** Diversity in the CDO community brings varied life experiences, cultural insights, and problem-solving approaches, enriching how data strategies are designed and implemented.

**Talent Representation:** A diverse CDO sends a strong message about an organisation's commitment to DEI, helping attract top talent from underrepresented groups and create a diverse talent pipeline.

## Current Challenges

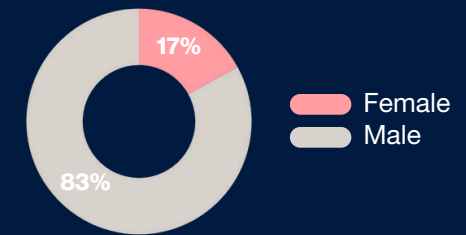
**Pipeline Issues:** A lack of diverse candidates in data-related fields stems from systemic barriers in education and career advancement.

**Retention Gaps:** Organisations may struggle to retain diverse talent due to inadequate support or unwelcoming corporate cultures.

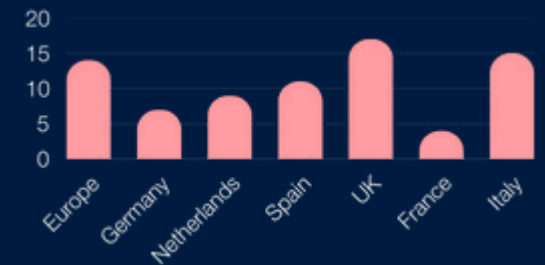


## DEI Representation: The market in numbers

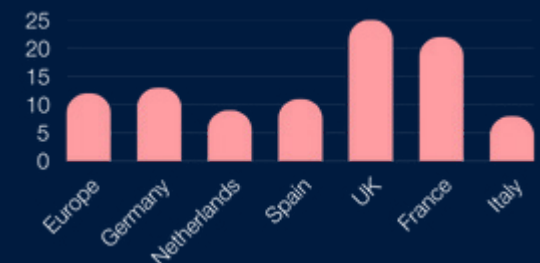
Chief Data Officer Gender Diversity



Gender Diversity by Country (%)



Ethnic Diversity by Country (%)



# The Chief Data Officer Archetypes

As the Chief Data Officer role evolves, four distinct archetypes have emerged, shaped by industry and expertise. Understanding these archetypes helps organisations hire the right leader to maximize data's impact and drive transformation.



## Technology & Data Science

Often the most technical of the CDO community, data scientists are often strongest implementing, designing, and curating AI/ML models for predictive and prescriptive analytics.

These candidates often own the full stack of the Data function (including data engineering) and are often much more closely aligned to the technology business by nature.



## Advanced Insights & Analytics

Typical of those progressing through a marketing route, these CDO's often have a bias towards artificial intelligence, machine learning, and other advanced data tools.

These CDO's are often heavily customer centric and use their marketing experience to utilise deep insights and study consumer behaviour, segmentation, and journey mapping.



## Strategy

When a business is at the outset of setting a new strategic roadmap for its data function, a Chief Data Officer with a strategic background may be appointed.

It is common that this nature of candidate often comes from Professional Services, often having a background in consultancy, supporting a variety of businesses on better understanding data usage as part of a core operating process.



## Regulation & Policy

A Chief Data Officer with Regulatory and Policy experience is common in the Financial Services industry, due to the amount of time spent in the regulatory space.

Many of these leaders are experienced in delivering regulatory change and transformation programmes.

# What's the Future for Chief Data Officers?

As data becomes an integral part of organisations, CDO's are increasingly transitioning into broader business functions.



## Technology

### **Integrated Ecosystems:**

Data initiatives often rely on advanced technologies such as cloud computing, AI/ML, and data platforms. Combining the CDO and technology leadership roles can streamline the adoption and implementation of these tools.

### **Expansion of CDO Responsibilities:**

The role of a CDO has evolved from data governance and compliance to include driving innovation, analytics, and AI adoption. Technology is a natural extension of these responsibilities.



## Marketing

### **Data as a Core Asset:**

Marketing revolves around understanding customer behaviour, preferences, and journeys. CDOs bring expertise in leveraging data to uncover actionable customer insights.

### **Enhanced Personalisation:**

CDOs can drive advanced personalization strategies using data analytics, AI, and predictive modelling, improving customer experiences. This is particularly prevalent in retail and technology sectors.



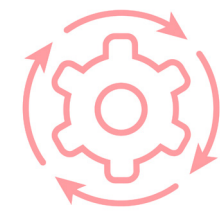
## Finance

### **Enhanced Forecasting:**

Finance functions increasingly rely on predictive analytics for revenue forecasting, cash flow management, and scenario planning. CDOs are well-equipped to implement these advanced models.

### **Automation in Finance:**

CDOs can introduce AI and automation in repetitive finance tasks such as invoice processing, expense management, and reconciliations, increasing efficiency and decreasing laborious tasks.



## Operations

### **Enhanced Visibility:**

CDOs can create comprehensive data systems that provide end-to-end visibility into operations and supply chains, helping organisations monitor and respond to issues in real time.

### **Waste Reduction & Demand Planning:**

Particularly prevalent in retail spheres, CDOs are being commonly leaned on for capabilities managing waste and reduction of fresh goods in supply chain management.

# Chief Data Officer Compensation Analysis and Trends

## B2C Platform Players and their Emphasis on Data

Platform businesses are increasingly relying on data capability to drive commercial growth. As such, the fight for talent is becoming fiercer, as businesses look to appoint the strongest commercially orientated data leaders to support business growth. Candidate skillsets in this environment often focus on pricing, personalisation, and revenue lines built from data utilisation.

## Retailers Struggling with Data Centralisation

Retailers often have dispersed data sources across business functions, often federated across different revenue lines including bricks and mortar, e-commerce platforms, and loyalty programs. Integrating this data into a cohesive system is proving challenging.

## Financial Services Remains the Most Lucrative Sector in the Industry

The protection of data in the FS industry continues to drive a demand for top-tier data capability. Candidates with experience in regulation, data security, and fraud detection often gravitate towards the heavily regulated industry.

Compensation Data, Sector Comparison





# Our Conclusion

Throughout the process of gathering insights, Marlin Hawk identified that organisations with a dedicated Chief Data Officer (CDO) function, rather than a federated approach, tend to be more effective. AI is set to have a significant impact on the CDO's role and could ultimately reshape the remit scope. Organisations that place data at the core of their operations will emerge as the most innovative players in the market.

In an increasingly competitive landscape where companies are striving for growth, data and insights into customer experiences and journeys will be critical in shaping effective customer strategies. Given the growing reliance on data to inform broader business strategies, it is essential for every member of the leadership team to actively contribute to this journey.

At Marlin Hawk, we continue to gather insights across customer, digital, and technology domains and would be delighted to share them upon request. If you'd like to discuss the current market landscape further, please email [client@marlinhawk.com](mailto:client@marlinhawk.com).

## About Marlin Hawk

Marlin Hawk is a global leadership advisory firm specializing in executive search, strategic intelligence, and interim management. For over 20 years, we've empowered our clients with data and insights to make diverse, inclusive and impactful leadership decisions. One globally connected team, we are headquartered in London with offices in New York, Denver, Toronto, Chicago, Amsterdam, Dubai, Singapore and Hong Kong. Unconstrained by a one-size-fits-all approach to both clients and candidates, we build relationships with care and attention to detail, while delivering at pace.

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