How Newly Appointed CIOs Take Charge

Based on in-depth interviews with 21 CIOs, this article explores the process of taking charge of a new appointment. We identified three overlapping phases: Entry, Stabilization and Renewal. We also found the organizational situation encountered by a new CIO significantly influences the process. Specifically, four CIO transition types—startup, turnaround, realignment and success sustaining—determine the degree of change required. We identify the activities associated with each phase and provide guidelines for newly appointed CIOs as they seek to take charge.1,2

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How CIOs Take Charge

The role of CIO is a unique executive challenge. 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. Indeed, having an effective CIO is seen as crucially important for organizations today because most could not survive for very long without their IT systems and for some, IT is a source of competitive differentiation. Yet it is also an ambiguous role; executives can have different views of their CIO, depending on assumptions that reflect their views on IT.3

Although there is no conclusive evidence, anecdotal data suggests that CIOs have average tenures comparable to other executive roles.4 However, what is different is that the involuntary turnover rate of approximately 23% is higher than for other executives.5 For a newly appointed CIO, whether in a first CIO role or moving to a new organization, being effective and integrating successfully into the organization is paramount for optimizing value from IT. How newly appointed CIOs take charge significantly influences their effectiveness in the role and their tenure, and ultimately has implications for the value delivered from IT, both operationally and strategically.

Taking charge is the process of learning and taking action to the point where a manager has mastered the new assignment in sufficient depth so he or she can run the sphere of

1 Dorothy Leidner is the accepting senior editor for this article.
2 The authors would like to thank the editor and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. We would also like to acknowledge the feedback on this research received when an early version of this article was presented at the Nineteenth Americas Conference on Information Systems in Chicago, August 15-17, 2013.
responsibility effectively, given the constraints and available resources. While there are a small number of studies of how newly appointed CEOs and CxOs take charge, similar research on CIOs is limited. The purpose of the research reported in this article is to explore in more depth how newly appointed CIOs take charge and to increase understanding of the process and the factors influencing it (the research for this study is described in the Appendix).

Based on our interviews with CIOs, we have identified three distinct phases of the taking charge process, the specific activities performed in each phase and the outcomes at the end of a phase. While the first 90 days—a timeframe popularized by contemporary writings on taking on a new leadership role—of any executive’s transition is important, our research suggests that achieving mastery in the role takes a significantly longer time.

**Three Phases of the CIO Taking Charge Process**

Research into the CIO role has hitherto been dominated by studies exploring how the role is evolving, particularly to better understand the requirements of the role for incumbents. Other research has studied CIO influence, the CEO-CIO relationship and the optimum reporting structure for CIOs. More recent research seeks to develop complex models of CIO effectiveness. Apart from a study that collected data from CIOs about the first year they were in the job, there has been no research exploring how newly appointed CIOs transition over a longer period into the role and take charge. However, there has been some research into how CEOs and general managers take charge. The seminal study was conducted by John J. Gabarro. 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. So do Gabarro’s findings apply to newly appointed CIOs?

Our analysis of the empirical data we collected suggests that the process used by CIOs as they take charge has three distinct and overlapping phases, which we label Entry, Stabilization and Renewal. These phases emerged from our interviewees’ descriptions of their timelines for taking charge as well as the types of activities in which they engaged. On moving to their new role or organization, CIOs always experienced an Entry phase of between four and six months. The Stabilization phase began shortly after the newly appointed CIO started the role and lasted between nine and 12 months. The Renewal phase commenced approximately six months into an appointment and overlapped the Stabilization phase. A generalized view of these phases is shown in Figure 1.

Other researchers have identified two domains of CIO leadership, supply-side and demand-side. Supply-side leadership is focused on exploiting the organization’s current IT infrastructure, with a focus on efficiency and effectiveness. Demand-side leadership is more business-oriented and includes how an organization might use IT as a competitive resource. These domains were clearly evident in the phases of how a newly appointed CIO takes charge. The Stabilization phase focused on supply-side leadership and the Renewal phase on demand-side leadership. Stabilization emphasized delivery of “in-flight” projects (those already underway), improving IT services, building an effective IT leadership team and establishing governance mechanisms and processes. The Renewal phase focused on the demand-side leadership activities of demonstrating the strategic contribution of IT and improving the extent to which business executives are IT savvy.

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9 Gabarro, J. J., op. cit., 1987. 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.
The key activities and outcomes of each of the three stages are summarized in Table 1 and described in detail below.

**Entry Phase**
All the CIOs interviewed described an initial phase of getting to know the business of the organization and the objectives of its top management team. They also reported that in their first few weeks, they spent time diagnosing the organization’s IT-related problems. The most frequently used mechanism during the Entry phase was to interview non-IT stakeholders and IT executives alike to collect information to inform their understanding. Another approach was observation: the CIO watched how decisions...
were made and how others behaved to discern the political landscape, the power bases, the key influencers and the culture. CIOs also reported reviewing existing documentation such as reports, presentations and plans.

In essence, CIOs described the Entry phase as primarily about 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

The majority of CIOs reported that it took four to six 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: the IT leadership team; IT governance structure, processes and mechanisms; and the IT-savvy of their top management team peers.

Assessing the IT Leadership Team. Having a strong leadership team was viewed by CIOs as critical for their success and the ultimate ability of the organization to derive value from IT. Most assessed their IT leadership team as being in need of rebuilding, but this was not always because of a lack of competence. Often CIOs explained that a lack of attention and investment in the IT organization had rendered it incapable of meeting the organization’s needs and the demands being placed on IT.

Assessing IT Governance Maturity. Newly appointed CIOs found a wide variation in the maturity of IT governance. Comments ranged from “non-existent” or “not very mature” to “high” or “strong” or “very good.” Maturity was assessed as low when the CIO found an absence of or ad hoc business decision making regarding IT, with accountability for “everything IT” residing with the CIO. In contrast, highly mature IT governance was evident when the CIO found there was a formal and transparent process for identifying, presenting and approving IT projects that were directly linked to the strategic business plan. Accountabilities for achieving business results from IT investments were clearly articulated and agreed, with many of these accountabilities residing outside the IT organization.

Assessing the IT-Savvy Level of the Top management Team. Strongly related to the maturity of IT governance was the top management team’s IT-savvy level. IT-savvy describes how well the organization’s top managers understand and appreciate the role that IT can play in helping them meet their business objectives and their role in the process. It reflects the extent of their engagement and involvement with IT matters. The CIOs in our study generally assessed IT-savvy as low. Paradoxically, some CIOs viewed the cause of low IT-savvy among top management as the inability of the IT organization to demonstrate value. Others saw its roots in a mindset where IT is seen as a technical issue rather than something top managers need to be concerned about.

The outcome of the Entry phase is that the newly appointed CIO has a working knowledge of the organization—an understanding of the key players, their objectives, what “keeps them up at night,” organizational culture and the general political environment. This phase also provides the CIO with an assessment of the IT leadership team and the efficacy of IT governance in the organization.

Stabilization Phase

For the CIOs in our study, the Stabilization phase began shortly after they were appointed and lasted for between nine and 12 months. The three key activities in this phase were 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.

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Taking Corrective Action and Delivering Existing Projects. This activity was based on the new CIO’s assessment of services that required improvement. The problems were identified by speaking to stakeholders during the initial months of the Entry phase and through the CIO’s own observations. Taking corrective action was seen as contributing to building credibility:

“... the interesting thing about establishing credibility was that I got ‘concussion’ from all the low-hanging fruit. I went to every department and said ‘give me your top-five 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 seven days and your predecessor couldn’t get it done in 1½ years!’” CIO, Travel Insurance Provider

CIOs reported having to deliver IT projects that were already “in-flight” when they arrived but felt that the credibility earned during the Stabilization phase provided them with the opportunity to make more strategic changes in the future.

Building the IT Leadership Team. Another action CIOs took in the Stabilization phase was to communicate expectations to their IT team and to begin the process of building trust with them. Consistent with prior research, participants in our study recognized the crucial importance of the IT leadership team for the effectiveness of the CIO. We found that significant changes in personnel were instigated, with some 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 business colleagues, built the foundation for executing strategic initiatives and also consolidated the CIO’s power base.

Implementing Basic IT Governance Processes. The findings from our interviews suggests that CIOs generally either initiated or enhanced IT governance processes and mechanisms in the Stabilization phase to achieve two objectives. The first was to take control over IT operations, particularly infrastructure and applications. The second was to define decision rights for setting strategy and IT investment priorities. Both of these actions helped establish the CIO’s authority to control IT operations and to facilitate more formality, accountability, transparency and oversight of IT-investment decision making within the top management team, as attested by the following quotes:

“One of the first things we did was 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. We also 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 metrics around each of the key areas of service delivery.” CIO, Global Hotel and Resort Company

There are several key outcomes of the Stabilization phase. The CIO has gained credibility as an IT leader, has implemented governance processes to prioritize IT initiatives with significant business impact and developed a leadership team to execute those initiatives.

Renewal Phase

The Renewal phase was characterized by CIOs as building on their credibility to implement changes that position them to become legitimate business leaders with a more strategic focus. This is the essence of demand-side leadership. Setting a more strategic direction for IT and enhancing technology’s contribution to the business objectives was reported as a key activity in the Renewal phase:

“The 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 their teams a priority by focusing the Renewal phase on increasing their level of business-savvy 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 by coaching them one-on-one. CIOs were wary about using formal educational processes, instead focusing their time mostly on their peers in the business who were already open to exploiting IT to accomplish business objectives. In this way, CIOs attempted to build a coalition to help raise awareness of IT among other members of the top management team.

CIOs also enhanced IT governance processes in the Renewal phase. By this phase, they were driving more significant change into the organization, though 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 newly appointed CIOs, as expressed by two of them:

“So, what we’ve introduced ... we spent a lot of time carefully introducing ... [our mantra is] introducing things at 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 concluded 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 outcome for CIOs in the Renewal phase is to gain legitimacy as a business leader. This demonstration of demand-side leadership enables the new CIO to operate as an effective member of the top management team. Two CIOs described gaining this legitimacy as follows:

“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 CIOs building on their credibility (achieved in the Stabilization phase) to implement changes that position them to become legitimate business leaders, exerting influence in setting strategy. They also enhanced the capability of their IT leadership teams and improved IT governance processes during the Renewal phase.

Phase Timing and Activities Are Not Influenced by CIO Background

We found that the timing and activities of the three phases of the taking charge process were not affected by the newly appointed CIO’s background (insider or outsider, industry experience, prior experience of the CIO role). For example, intuitively, insiders might be expected to get fully up to speed more quickly than outsiders. However, insiders reported that they had limited functional knowledge of the organization, often restricted to the IT organization, before becoming CIO. Moreover, they usually had no leadership experience outside of leading project teams, the organization's IT development organization or infrastructure operations. Insiders also had to contend with the fact that former peers would now be reporting to them, some of whom may have felt that they should have been given the job. They also needed to build a broader understanding of the various stakeholder groups and build relationships with executives with whom they had not previously worked. This required time to accomplish.

Intensity of Change in Each Phase Varies by Transition Type

Closer inspection of our interview data revealed that the intensity of change within each phase of the taking charge process varied. This variance was accounted for by the situation
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that CIOs inherited when they took up their new roles. The different situations were categorized using transition types, and from our data, we identified four types of CIO transitions:

**Start-up Transition.** The CIO is charged with assembling the IT capabilities (people, processes, funding and technology) to get a new IT organization off the ground.

**Turnaround Transition.** The newly appointed CIO takes on an IT organization that is “in trouble” and works to get it back on track. In this transition context, the perception of the top leadership team is that IT is not delivering expected business outcomes, and the previous CIO was seen as having failed to meet expectations.

**Realignment Transition.** The new CIO is hired to revitalize an IT organization that is “drifting into trouble.” Prior to the CIO’s appointment, tensions were beginning to emerge, often due to a new reporting line for the CIO, changes in the makeup of the IT leadership team, or a new mandate for IT (e.g., a shift from cost minimization to a more strategic role). Given the new expectations, the existing IT organization was often characterized as “not fit for purpose.”

**Success Sustaining Transition.** The new CIO takes responsibility to preserve the vitality of a successful IT organization and “take it to the next level.” The previous CIO was perceived as being successful and having performed well in the role and has either moved into a new role, to a new organization or retired.

The distribution of the CIO transition types among our interviewees is shown in Table 2, which shows that most of the transitions were turnarounds or realignments.

We were also interested in understanding if there was any relationship between the transition type and whether the CIO was an insider or an outsider (see Table 3). Perhaps not surprisingly, outsiders were appointed primarily when the CIO transition type was turnaround or realignment. If the IT organization is considered in trouble, it follows that an insider might be viewed as part of the problem rather than the solution. Likewise, if the IT organization is viewed as successful, then an insider would be regarded as a good succession candidate.

We also analyzed our interview data to relate the transition types to the three phases of the taking charge process. This analysis revealed patterns that enabled us to develop descriptions of three of the transition types across the phases. These are summarized in Table 4. (We could not identify a pattern for the start-up transition type because there was only one start-up CIO in our sample.) What was apparent from the data was that for each transition type, CIOs implemented degrees of change ranging from significant to incremental. As might be expected, start-up and turnaround transition types demanded significant changes, while success sustaining transitions required the least. The timelines for the three phases were also longer for turnaround transitions.

**Experience of a Start-up Transition**

One CIO in our study was recruited for a start-up transition. He made significant changes because he was starting from scratch in each area of leadership. He built the leadership team by hiring almost all of them externally and spent significant time recruiting. He also instituted IT governance processes and mechanisms where none previously existed. As the business grew, he made substantial changes to those

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**Table 2: Number of Transition Types**

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<th>Transition Type</th>
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<td>Start-up</td>
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<td>Turnaround</td>
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<td>Realignment</td>
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<td>Success Sustaining</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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**Table 3: Insider/Outsider CIO Appointments by Transition Type**

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<th>Transition Type</th>
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<th>Outsider</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Turnaround</td>
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<td>Realignment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Success Sustaining</td>
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15 Adapted from Watkins, M., op. cit., 2013.
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processes to reflect an ever-increasingly complex organization. This start-up CIO was challenged to demonstrate that every IT initiative was adding value to the new business and that there was close alignment between IT and business strategies.

**Experiences of Turnaround Transitions**

The CIO at a global consumer products company was hired as an outsider for a turnaround transition and described the situation she found as follows:

> “When I arrived, we had some in-flight projects that were failures. There was infrastructure that was simply not serving the users’ needs and poor service that created credibility issues for the IT organization. Things were pretty clear—this organization needed some pretty

<table>
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<th>Table 4: Summary of Transition Types across the Three Phases</th>
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<td><strong>Phase</strong></td>
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significant help. I don’t think there is any CIO that can ever say in the interviewing process that you can learn exactly what you’re getting into. When I arrived, for a while it was like “whack a mole.” Every time I fixed something, another issue sprang up!”

The CIO of a global hotel and resort company, also hired as an outsider into a turnaround situation, described his experience this way:

“When I arrived, the organization was crises-laden. It was far more urgent, complicated and dysfunctional than I had imagined even with a fair bit of due-diligence. The former CIO … and all of his direct reports had been removed, and there had been a number of field promotions. There was no transparency with respect to what IT was doing; it was just a black box. On top of that, the organization was bifurcated into domestic and international groups with little to no coordination between them.”

CIOs in turnaround transitions reported implementing significant levels of change. They described replacing almost all of their direct reports and retaining only a few leaders. The new leaders came primarily from outside the organization, and many had previously worked with the new CIO. Turnaround CIOs reported that the maturity of IT governance processes was low when they arrived and focused significant effort on improving them. These processes ranged from budget-allocation decisions to migrating technical changes into production applications. CIOs in turnaround transitions also described the IT-savvy of their top management teams overwhelmingly as low. These CIOs expended significant effort on building a shared understanding with their top management peers by demonstrating the contribution of IT to achieving the organization’s business objectives.

Case 1 describes the experience of an outsider hired into a turnaround transition.

**Case 1: Outsider Hired for a Turnaround Transition**

The new CIO of a global apparel company faced a big challenge. He had previous experience as a consultant and as the CIO of another apparel company. He stated that “IT needed a transformation” in his new organization. A new CEO had established an aggressive growth strategy that included expansion in new global markets which “required a whole new IT approach and mindset,” according to the new CIO.

He started by executing a rigorous on-boarding process of his own design, conducting interviews with the board, the top management team and his own IT leadership team. He addressed several challenges. The first was to refashion his leadership team. He sought to move it from focusing on technology to focusing more on business issues and priorities, but there were many on the team who were not able to make that transition. He replaced almost the entire leadership team in the first year. This was followed by renegotiating existing outsourcing agreements that were too inflexible to support the new business strategy of speed and innovation. Another transformational approach was to start planning, measuring and evaluating the value contribution of each IT initiative rather than focusing only on cost.

Because this CIO reported to the CEO, the focus on value raised his level of influence in the top management team. “I spent two hours per week with the CEO talking about our operating model and the implications of what IT is doing on the business. It was extraordinarily helpful for me, and it’s changed the way he talks about IT in our business.” This CIO had gained legitimacy as a business leader who contributed to strategy.

After three years as CIO, this executive was promoted into a broader role at the executive vice president level.

**Experiences of Realignment Transitions**

Whereas a turnaround transition is needed when the IT organization is already experiencing significant problems, a realignment transition is characterized by an IT organization drifting into trouble. The new CIO of a high technology manufacturer told this story:

“The former CIO reported to the CFO. The CFO treated IT as a cost center and not as a value-add to the company. The CEO had a view that IT should be a more strategic
contributor and elevated the CIO role to his senior staff. The CFO disagreed with this change and actually left the company. When I interviewed with the CEO, I asked ‘why the organizational change?’ The CEO realized that he had relegated IT too far down in the organization and that the CFO had focused too much on cost and that IT had been treated as second-class citizens. The CEO felt that the growth of the company depended on investing more in people and technology. I worked with the executive team and my IT organization to lay out a plan, and we’ve been able to establish a lot of credibility by meeting those commitments.”

CIOs in realignment transitions reported implementing change in an incremental fashion. They tended to replace a portion of their leadership team but not in the wholesale manner described by turnaround CIOs. While there might be some departures and some new blood brought in, much of the existing IT team was retained. Occasionally, some members of the leadership team were competent people in the wrong role and were reassigned rather than released.

Our data revealed incremental changes made in the areas of IT governance and improving the top management team’s level of IT-savvy. IT governance maturity was generally described in realignment transitions as present, but needing improvement. Hence realignment CIOs built on the foundation of existing IT governance by both enhancing existing processes and implementing new processes and mechanisms.

Realignment CIOs described top management’s IT-savvy as generally good, but varying among executives. These CIOs tended to focus time and effort on improving the IT-savvy of a few laggard executives rather than the entire top management team.

Case 2 describes the story of an insider who took over an IT organization that required realignment.

Experiences of Success Sustaining Transitions

The new CIO of a transportation company described how he inherited a successful IT

Case 2: Insider Assigned to Realignment Transition

An insider was appointed as CIO of a company that manufactures premium fastening systems used primarily in commercial construction. He faced a realignment transition situation where there were pockets of broken areas that needed focus. He stated that the application areas were in good shape, but the infrastructure required some attention. One such area was helpdesk services: “the CEO called me and said your first assignment is to fix our helpless desk.”

To improve infrastructure services, he initiated a process improvement program that significantly improved service levels. He assigned IT support staff to work in different parts of the business for short periods so that they built relationships with their internal customers and became more business-savvy. They reduced the number of desktop/laptop images from 37 to four. He implemented more disciplined governance processes for technical change management. He also introduced customer service surveys and benchmarking.

He said that his promotion to the CIO role meant a significant change in his focus. “The best advice I received was from the VP-HR, who told me I was no longer an IT guy, but a business guy.” Even though he had worked in the organization for years prior to his promotion, he visited every top manager to build relationships that didn’t previously exist and to understand their challenges. He had experience with the distribution function in his previous role but had not worked with finance, HR or the sales organization. These were all new relationships he had to build and functions he had to learn about. In addition, he had to win over several former peers in the IT organization who thought they should have become the CIO.

This CIO mentioned that after six months, he was feeling more confident about the role, but that it took him about two years to really be as effective as he could be. He benefited from the CEO’s mentorship. “The CEO really worked with me and for the first year, we had weekly meetings pretty religiously. But after that time, I think the confidence in me grew, and so we had these meetings less and less frequently.”

By all accounts, he was successful in his realignment transition. He was CIO for seven years before leaving the company to do consulting.
organization after working there for several years:

“We are a mature company, and our IT organization reflects that. IT is stable and mature. There had been some heavy investment in technology the previous two years, but as I took on the role, things were stable. The vision was well articulated, a good plan was in place, and I just needed to execute it.”

New CIOs faced with success sustaining transitions reported implementing minor changes, possibly because the majority of them were insiders. As one might expect, the turnover in the IT leadership team in success sustaining transitions was low. A few direct reports were reassigned because of a perceived role mismatch, but otherwise the leadership team was retained. The reputation of a successful IT organization reflected well on the leadership team. IT governance processes were overwhelmingly described as mature and effective in success sustaining transitions. CIOs reported making minor tweaks to IT governance or no changes at all. CIOs taking charge of a successful IT organization did not need to give much attention to building the top management team’s IT-savvy because they generally reported that their top management peers were very knowledgeable about how IT enabled their businesses.

Conclusions from Our Study Findings

The study’s findings lead to four main conclusions. First, CIO background did not influence the taking charge process as much as the literature would suggest. Second, being an insider appointment did not impact the CIO’s taking charge process nor did it compress timelines as one might expect. Third, the taking charge process was different in the supply-side (i.e., in the IT organization) and demand-side (i.e., with the business colleagues and IT governance) domains. Finally, the CIO transition type influenced the taking charge process and the degree of change implemented by new CIOs.

Industry experience and prior role have been identified as characteristics that influence the effectiveness of a CIO and the taking charge process. In our interviews, the taking charge process for those without relevant industry experience was not significantly different from the others. We found that prior experience of the CIO role did not materially affect the taking charge timeline, with all newly appointed CIOs following a similar timeline and carrying out similar activities. Although not specifically evaluated in this study, prior experience may have influenced the “quality” of their decisions.

Our data does not support the contention that being an insider might have impacted the taking charge process. Indeed, being an insider raised some additional issues for the CIO to address, particularly in relation to peers with whom the new CIO previously worked and in striving to be viewed as a senior business executive rather than as a middle manager and “IT person.”

Our findings also indicate that CIOs take charge in several phases. They tend 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 the taking charge process, but it might be 18 to 24 months before they influence demand-side outcomes. Our findings are consistent with research indicating that CIO supply-side leadership influences demand-side leadership.16

Transition type was the most influential factor in how CIOs took charge of their appointments. Transition type directly influenced the degree of change that the CIO was required to implement but did not significantly change the phases or their timelines, although for turnaround transitions, the timeline was on the outermost limits. Moreover, companies requiring a CIO for turnaround or realignment transitions were more likely to hire outsiders into the role. In our study, new CIOs for success sustaining transitions were evenly split between insiders and outsiders. The degree of change implemented by incoming CIOs has been described by Leidner and Mackay17 as “incremental” or “radical,” and evidence from our study suggests similar conclusions.

Guidelines for Newly Appointed CIOs

Based on the findings from our study, we provide 11 guidelines for newly appointed CIOs.

1. Be Prepared for Surprises, Even after Extensive Due-diligence

CIOs report that the situations they encountered when they assumed their roles were generally different from what they expected. Due-diligence does not replace actually being in the new position. The initial information was provided during the recruitment process. A CIO can only fully understand the situation he/she inherits by working within the organization with new colleagues on a daily basis and digging into details difficult to assess during the recruitment process.

2. Recognize that Taking Charge Requires More than a 90-day Plan

A 90-day plan, as advocated in popular books, is all well and good, but a new CIO should recognize that a plan for the next two years and beyond will also be needed. The early weeks and months should primarily be about learning. Don't assume that what happens in the first 90 days is all that matters.

3. Don't Try to Introduce Changes Too Quickly

A new CIO may be eager to make an impact, but the evidence suggests that he or she should not be in too much of a hurry to make changes. Obviously, in a turnaround transition, a new CIO may be forced to take corrective action immediately after taking up the role, often without a rigorous assessment or complete knowledge.

4. Recognize that Transition Type Influences Intensity of Change, not Timing

Turnaround transitions certainly require more intensive and immediate actions than success sustaining transitions (e.g., major changes in the IT leadership team vs. very minor changes). However, regardless of transition type, a new CIO will likely experience the three phases and timelines discussed earlier. Taking charge, even in a success sustaining transition, can still take two years or more; there is still the need to build confidence, credibility and legitimacy. There are no short cuts to effective leadership in a CIO role.

5. Understand the Entry Phase is about Learning

Use the early weeks and months to learn about the organization. This goes beyond simply diagnosing IT service problems or assessing the project portfolio. It includes understanding the political environment, company culture and strategy, as well as identifying the key influencers and power brokers. New CIOs also need to assess their IT leadership team's ability to lead in the future. Even insiders need to focus on this learning.

6. Proactively Seek Information and Build Relationships

As part of our research, we interviewed the top management peers of newly appointed CIOs, which confirmed that many top managers expect CIOs to come to them; it is unlikely that all will come to the new CIO. As well as doing the normal tour of stakeholders in the first few months, new CIOs must carry out a detailed stakeholder analysis. They need to identify who are IT advocates and who are adversaries or, at best, skeptics. They should ask direct questions that elicit information about the decision-making culture and priority-setting. And they should identify and understand the executives with the strategic business initiatives.

7. Be Clear as to What Constitutes Success

The notion of success can be very subjective; what the CIO interprets as success might be at odds with that of the CEO and the C-suite. The new CIO needs to identify the definition of success early on and then manage expectations accordingly.

8. Earn the Right to Influence Business Strategy

A new CIO needs to build credibility as an effective leader of the IT organization before he or she can influence top management peers.

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18 This research will be reported in a future article.
and the business strategy. Many business executives are likely to withhold support until the CIO’s credibility has been established. Remember, credibility has to be earned by effectively delivering and improving IT services, by successfully completing in-flight projects and demonstrating business benefits, and by building an IT leadership team that evokes confidence in their peers. Only then will the CIO gain the legitimacy needed to influence more strategic business decisions.

9. Build a Shared Vision for the Role and Contribution of IT

CIO success will ultimately be determined by the extent to which the direction for IT is set by the business and a shared vision for IT in the organization is built. 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.

10. Realize What Worked in the Past Might not be Successful Again

Successful transitions were described by our interviewees as “doing the right things [i.e., getting results] the right way [i.e., fitting the culture].” A new CIO cannot assume that what worked in a 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. The go-forward action plan should include a “culturally appropriate” pace of change.

11. Build the Level of Top Management’s IT-savvy by Delivering Demonstrable Value

Brown bag lunches, seminars and workshops can be worthwhile in educating top management in the potential of IT, but don’t expect these activities alone to increase the IT-savvy of executive stakeholders. The best way to achieve this is to demonstrate that IT can generate value and enable key business strategies. This requires setting realistic expectations before commencing any project, getting stakeholder buy-in and commitment for required organizational changes, ensuring effective delivery of the project and expected benefits, and measuring and communicating results post-implementation. Success can be used as an example to others in the organization and can build momentum for change.

Remember, not all executives will 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. Seek out executives “who get IT” and look to them to provide strong IT advocacy.

Concluding Comments

Our research has provided a better understanding of how newly appointed CIOs take charge. Our three-phase model enhances understanding of the process CIOs use to take charge and extends previous research into new CIOs. Successful CIO transitions require significant time, and a newly appointed CIO should plan on a 24- to 36-month transition that starts with building confidence and credibility as an IT leader and moves toward achieving legitimacy as a business leader. In a similar vein, the CEO and top management team must recognize what can realistically be achieved by a newly appointed CIO and give him or her time to have an impact.

Appendix: Research Methodology

The research reported in this article sought to address the question: How do CIOs take charge in a new assignment? Given the exploratory nature of the research, we sought “understanding” rather than “explanation.”

We conducted in-depth interviews with CIOs 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’ experiences 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 they were not asked to answer the questions but rather to focus on the clarity
How Newly Appointed CIOs Take Charge

of the questions. They were also asked if there were questions they felt were missing. These reviews prompted 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 the interviews would generate the data needed to answer the research question.

The interviewee sample was chosen by a combination of convenience and “snowballing.” The convenience sample came from contacting CIOs personally known to us. We also contacted people in our professional network who work with CIOs and asked for referrals and introductions. This resulted in the snowballing sample. All interviewees were either a current or past CIO. Because we were interested in understanding what factors influence the taking charge process, we did not restrict the selection of CIOs to those 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 open-ended questions and focused on three main areas: The first area was background information related to the CIO’s time in present role, previous experience of the CIO role, reporting relationship, and prior experience in IT and the organization’s industry. The second area asked interviewees to describe the situation that existed when they took over their appointments. 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. After we had completed 21 interviews, the data had reached a point of theoretical saturation in that no new categories were emerging for coding. Therefore sampling was stopped at 21 interviews in the main study.

Participants were primarily male; only three of the 21 were female CIOs. Although this proportion is consistent with the general gender distribution of CIOs, it is purely coincidental because no sampling strategy was used to achieve a representative sample by gender.

Time in the current role varied across a broad range as shown in Table A1. 71% had been in their current role for three years or less.

Table A2 shows the number of new CIOs by whether they were appointed from inside or outside and by whether they had prior CIO experience.

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

About the Authors

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Table A1: Distribution of Participants’ Tenure in Current Appointment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenure in current role (years)</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.1-2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Over 5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
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Table A2: Distribution of Participants by Prior CIO Experience and by Appointment Source

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<th>Prior CIO Experience</th>
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<th>Outsider</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>10</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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</table>
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