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Fewer CIOs On Boards Than Two Years Ago - Are IT Leaders Losing Their Influence?

**Sooraj Shah** Contributor ⓘ

Enterprise & Cloud

Technology Journalist

Are CIOs losing their way? GETTY

Fewer chief information officers (CIOs) sit on the board now than two years ago, suggesting that businesses do not value the position of IT leaders as much as they did a few years ago, a survey by recruiters Harvey Nash and consultancy KPMG has found.

In the 21st annual version of the 2019 Harvey Nash/KPMG CIO Survey, 3,645 CIOs and technology leaders from 108 countries were asked questions around their roles and the wider technology industry. Harvey Nash claims that this is the largest IT leadership survey in the world in terms of respondents.

The organization found that although the influence of the CIO remains intact – with two thirds (66%) of IT leaders believing the role has gained influence in 2019 compared to 65% in 2018, there are fewer CIOs sitting on the board, dropping from 71% to 58% in just two years.

There is an argument that CIOs may wrongly believe that their influence remains the same as it has been in the years gone by, and that CEOs and other board members may no longer feel that the CIO holds as much influence.

However, Natalie Whittlesey, director of the CIO practice at Harvey Nash suggests that IT leaders do still exert a strong degree of influence, and that a shift in the number of CIOs on boards can be linked to the type of business in question.

“For companies who are leaders or fast-followers in technology innovation, and who are highly reliant on technology, for example tech businesses, multi-channel retailers, or data-rich engineering businesses focusing on IoT, we’re still seeing the role of the technology leader at board level,” she says.

Whittlesey says that her clients have given several other reasons for why there has been such a significant drop in the last two years.

One of these reasons is that other board members are becoming more technology savvy.

“Some non-technology board members have made it their business to upskill and expand their knowledge as technology leads not only to

efficiencies and cost-mitigation, but also new products, markets and revenues – and the board has realized its importance,” she explains.

This has led to many job titles slipping from CIO to IT/technology director and from being a member of the board to reporting into another board member.

Another reason Harvey Nash’s clients cited for the drop in CIOs on boards is that some larger traditional businesses may feel that major tech transformation projects are now completed.

“Now that the major period of transformation is over they wonder if there’s a need to retain the CIO on the board. Of course, the technology leader can argue that there will be further major programs around the corner, but the board hope that the worst is over and they can get back to their core area of focus – whether that is engineering or manufacturing – until next time,” she states.

But many digital business leaders will believe that this is the wrong approach altogether, as the term ‘digital transformation’ isn’t meant to mean a one-off project, but a continued development of technology, processes and people within a business.

Whittlesey says that a final reason why there may have been a drop in the number of CIOs on boards is that CIOs themselves are moving into broader roles.

“As technology leaders have had to adapt to survive, becoming commercially aware, innovative, and transformative, they’ve realized their careers do not have to reach a pinnacle with the role of ‘CIO’ or ‘IT/Technology Director’. We’re seeing our technology leaders expand or move their remit into operational, facilities management and procurement posts. The title of CEO, particularly in highly tech-

centric businesses, is no longer beyond reach,” she states

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Sooraj Shah

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