

Deloitte.

CMO Insights: **Trend 3**

The path to CMO:

Insights and advice for aspiring marketing leaders

The growth journey to becoming a Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) requires a unique blend of skills, resilience and continuous adaptation. Offering a rare glimpse into the realities of leadership, this research explores the personal journeys of senior marketing leaders Senior Marketing Leaders (SMLs) and CMOs, revealing the challenges they overcame and the valuable lessons learned along the way. Aspiring CMOs must navigate limited connections, conquer self-doubt and cultivate a diverse skillset encompassing both technical knowledge and social skills for communication and collaboration. The increasing need for resilience in leadership and the critical role of continuous learning and building a strong peer-to-peer network are important factors in career success. It's also vital to recognise the significance of work-life balance, particularly for women in leadership roles, as it is crucial for both personal well-being and to attract and retain top talent. While formal qualifications remain beneficial, developing both technical and social skills is crucial for success in today's dynamic marketing landscape.

Competing priorities hinder marketers career growth

There are many challenges that can impact career progression. This study reveals both CMOs and SMLs acknowledge that a key hurdle in their career journeys was establishing the necessary connections and networks. This finding highlights the significance of relationship-building as a critical factor influencing

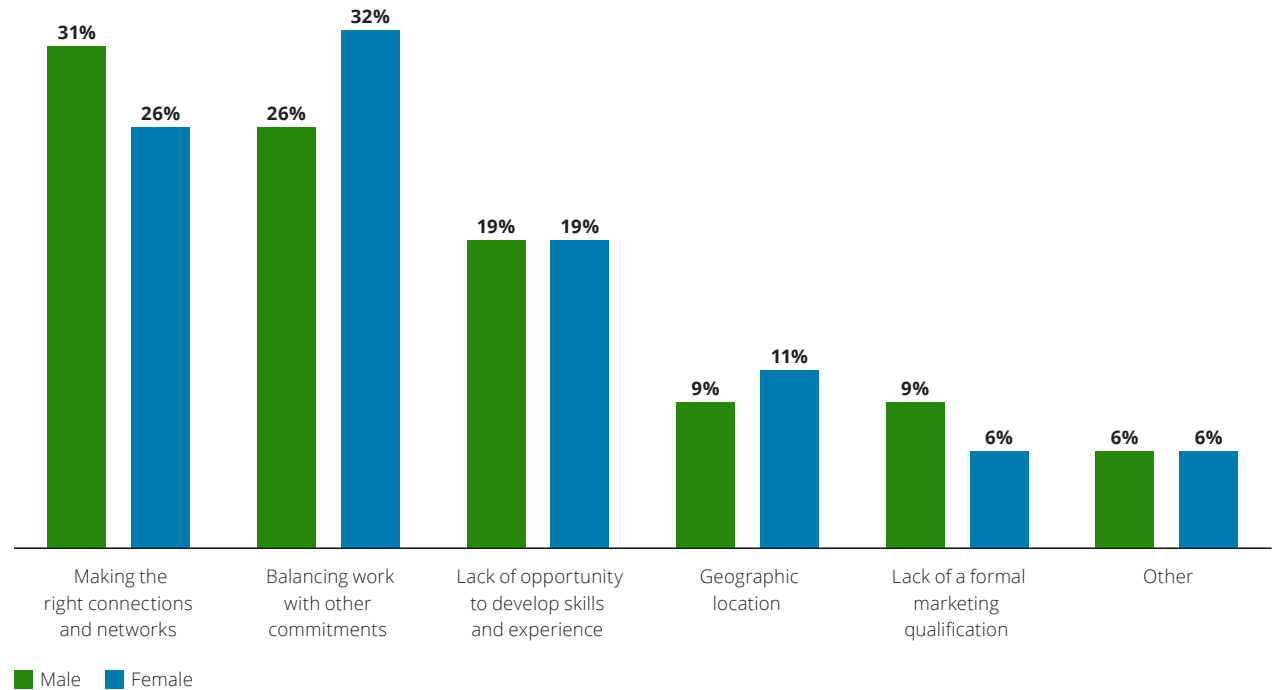
career advancement in the field of marketing, among other potential challenges. The other two obstacles faced by individuals in their career paths to get to their current role was balancing work with other commitments and encountering limited opportunities for skills development and gaining experience.



However, there were notable differences between roles and genders. The challenge felt most strongly by SMLs was making the right connections and networks, while for CMOs it was balancing work with other commitments. CMOs also noted that the lack of opportunity to develop skills and experience was also a hurdle on their path to their current role.

Although both genders face challenges in their career progression, this study highlights the important role of gender. Women were more inclined to identify work-life balance as their most significant hurdle, whereas men predominantly cited networking and relationship-building as their biggest obstacle.

Figure 1. What are the biggest challenges on the journey to your current roles?



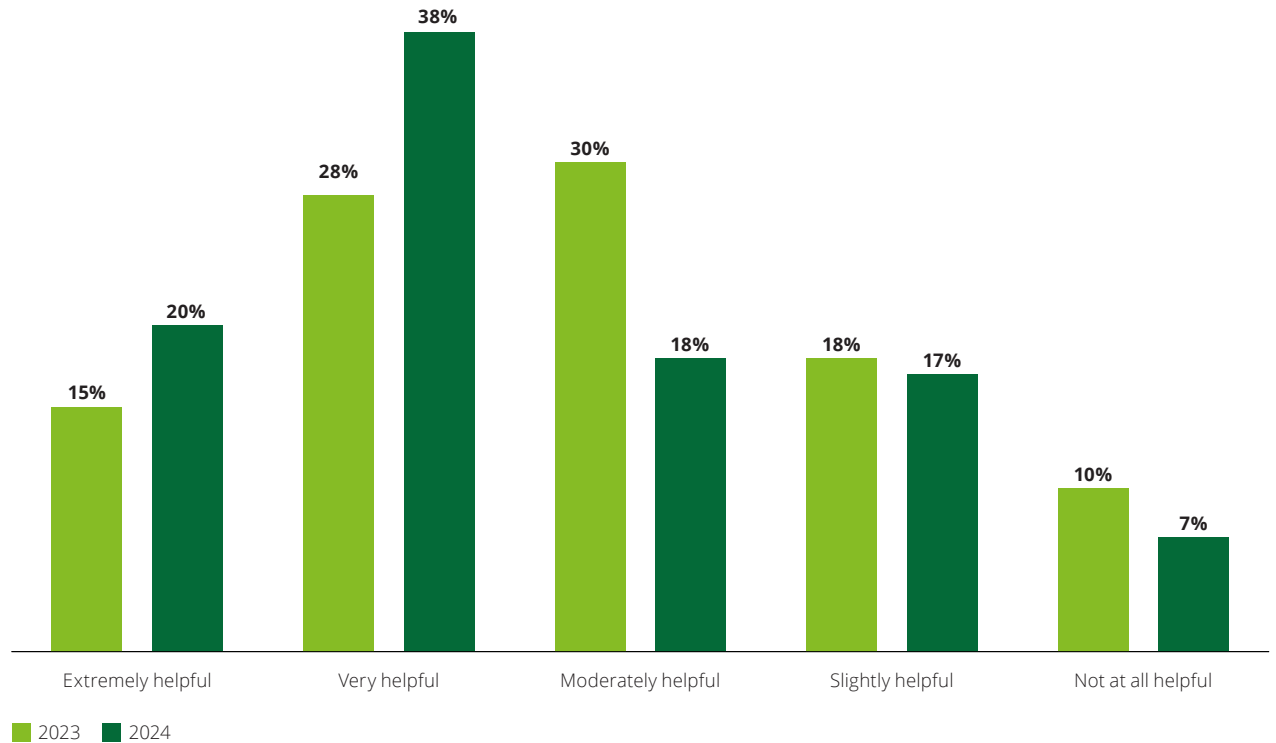
Note: The rank frequency was determined by summing the total ranks for each option. Higher frequencies indicate higher ranking.

Source: Deloitte analysis, 2025

N (Male) = 51, N (Female) = 33

Another point emerged around whether education helped in obtaining their role. While some of the respondents noted that the lack of formal marketing qualification was a challenge to reaching their current role, this was not as significant as the others. Over 70 per cent of CMOs and SMLs have a qualification in marketing. Of those who do have a qualification, 76 per cent found it helpful to reaching their current role. Interestingly, this figure has increased slightly compared to 2023 (+3%). This reflects the increasingly more competitive job environment and potentially the need to offer more value to prospective employers. CMOs found having a qualification extremely helpful. Having a masters or a bachelors degree were the two most common qualifications.

Figure 2. Does having a formal marketing qualification help to get to your current role?



Source: Deloitte analysis, 2025

N (2023 Total) = 40, N (2024 Total) = 60; Excluding those who said 'None' when asked for Qualification

Both CMOs and SMLs feel the pressure to lead

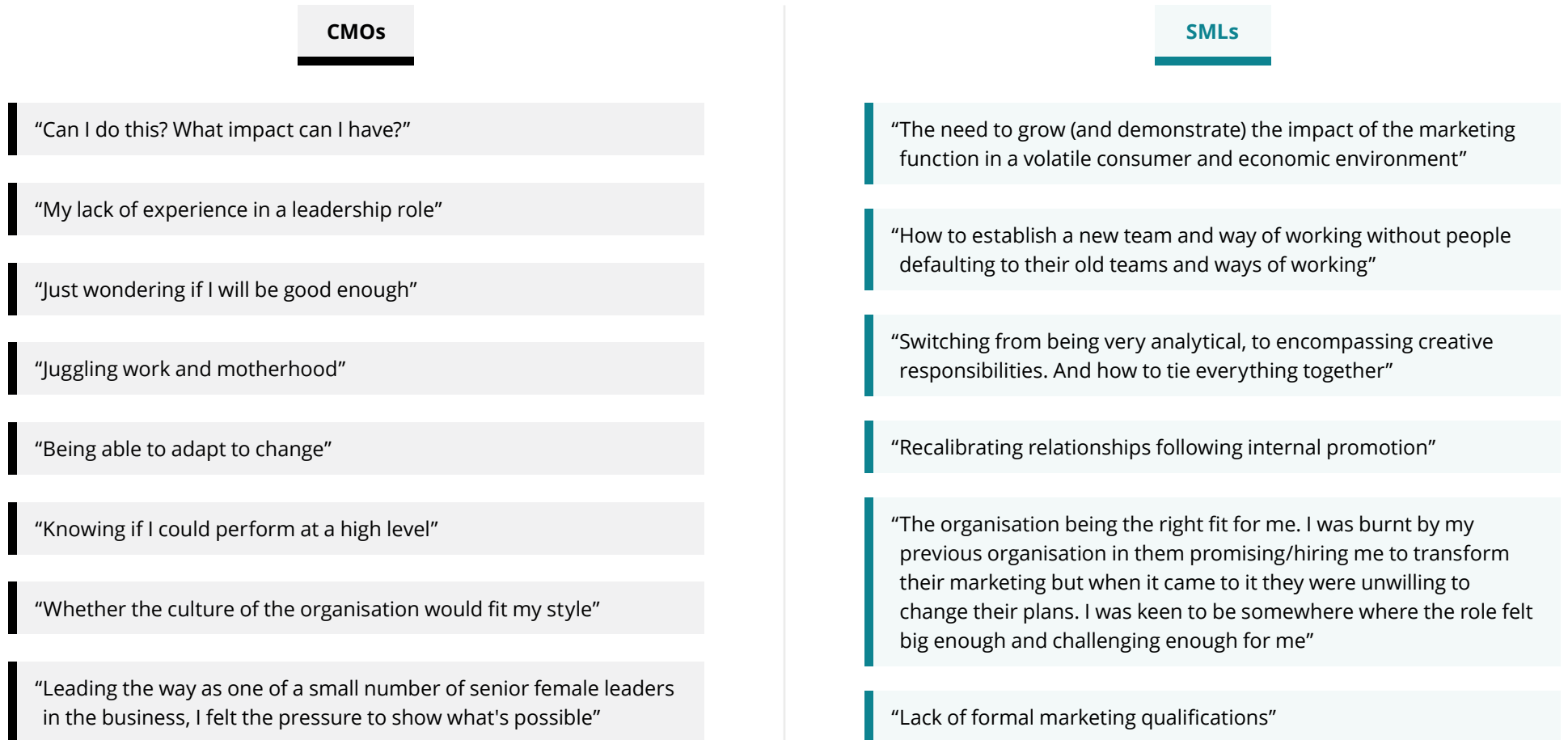
To better understand the journey to CMO, we asked about the concerns they had before starting their current role. This revealed startling differences between CMOs and SMLs and the impact of gender.

CMOs expressed the most apprehension about their ability to lead and succeed in their roles, particularly within a large, diverse and demanding environment. Some CMOs were concerned about navigating a new company culture and industry-specific challenges. Notably, female respondents mentioned worries around juggling family life with work, whereas no male respondent mentioned this. This speaks to the 'second shift' at home women often are expected to do and the expectations around women balancing careers with families.¹

SMLs were most apprehensive about navigating a new role and company environment, often with concerns about their ability to adapt, learn quickly and make a meaningful impact. Some expressed anxieties about team dynamics, strategic influence and demonstrating marketing's value within the organisation. One SML said they were worried about "Switching from being very analytical to encompassing creative responsibilities and how to tie everything together". This points to the need for marketers to be able to use a breadth of skills and how important creativity is.

More CMOs than SMLs mentioned concerns related to imposter syndrome. The term refers to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt despite one's achievements and success.² The self-doubt and disbelief in belonging were mentioned across all roles and genders, but notably the CMOs seemed to feel it more strongly. Several CMOs described their apprehension before starting their role as "Will I be good enough?" and "Can I do this?". Although some SMLs also felt this, they spoke more about it in terms of fears about failing.

Figure 3. Before starting your role, what were you most apprehensive about?



Communication and collaboration deemed essential for C-suite success

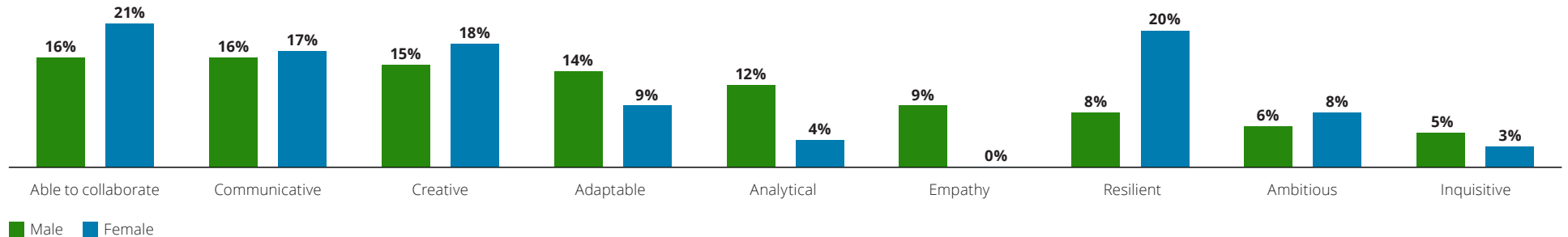
The skills needed to succeed in C-suite roles have evolved with more attention and need for a diverse range of skills. This is especially true for CMOs, who need not only traditional C-suite skills of managing finance and operations but also need strong ‘social skills’.³ Social skills refer to specific capabilities including a high level of self-awareness, the ability to listen and communicate well, a facility for working with different types of people and groups, and what psychologists call ‘theory of mind’—the capacity to infer how others are thinking and feeling.⁴

Our survey found the personality trait deemed most important by CMOs is being communicative compared to SMLs who chose being collaborative. Being an effective communicator is crucial for productivity and being able to convey information. Similarly, SMLs rank collaboration highest. This is important for exchanging ideas and building successful terms.

Although both genders ranked the ability to collaborate as the highest personality trait overall, the genders differed significantly for what was the second most important trait. Men ranked creativity equally with collaboration as a highly desirable trait compared to women who ranked resilience 2nd

highest. Resilience is perceived by men as much less important for their role (ranked 5th). Resilience is a critical characteristic of high-performing leaders because of the ability to handle adverse events, overcome setbacks and cope with disruption.⁵ It may be that the women in this study rate resilience higher for the same reasons they consider themselves to have a poorer work-life balance and experience challenges related to managing responsibilities on the journey to the C-suite. While gender continues to be a factor in leadership dynamics, the increasing number of women recognising resilience as an important trait underscores the value of diverse perspectives in the workplace – and perhaps why women outperform men on key leadership traits.⁶

Figure 4. What personality traits are important for your role?



Note: The rank frequency was determined by summing the total ranks for each option. Higher frequencies indicate higher ranking.

Source: Deloitte analysis, 2025

N (Male) = 51, N (Female) = 33

Work-life balance improving slowly

CMOs are under pressure to achieve better growth and increase revenue, while being more resourceful and adaptable due to limited resources. Marketing budgets are still significantly below pre-pandemic levels, yet CEOs have placed growth as a top business priority for 2024-2025.⁷ CMOs feel this especially so with the increased demands placed on them and the weight of leadership. CMOs must decide what to invest in now for short-term growth as well as for long-term strategic growth. With the

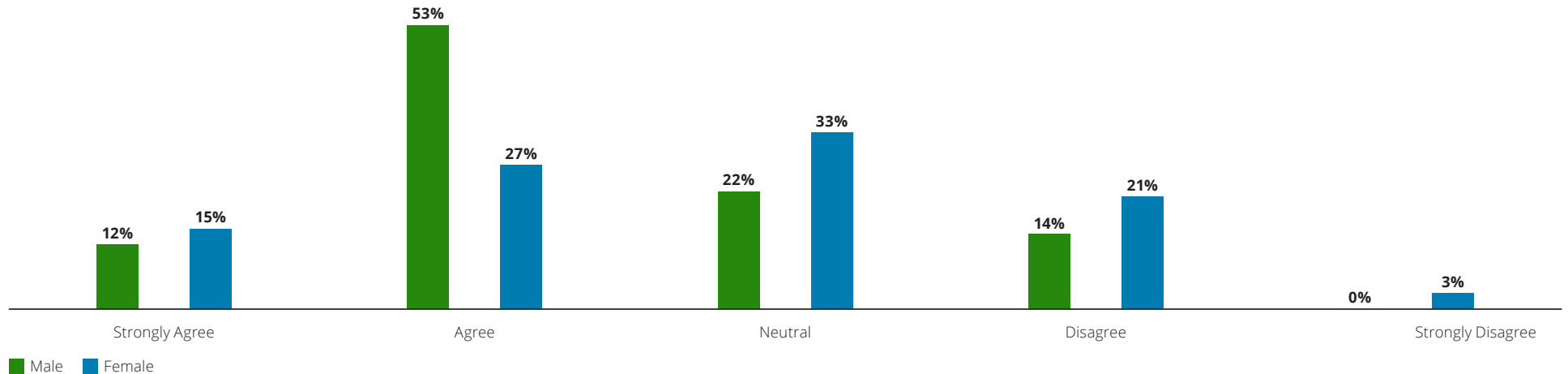
struggle to prioritise well-being, a staggering 70 per cent of the C-suite are seriously considering quitting for a better job which supports well-being and 81 per cent say that improving their well-being is more important than advancing their career.⁸

Our research found that CMOs were more likely to report an unhealthy work-life balance (27%) than SMLs (12%). Interestingly, the year-on-year change suggests that work-life balance is improving overall for both groups. Those that disagree they have a

work-life balance decreased by 11 per cent. Slightly more agree overall this year that they have a healthy balance (up 5% from 2023).

Gender is also a significant factor in having a healthy work-life balance. While 65 per cent of men report a healthy work-life balance, only 42 per cent of women feel the same. This might refer to that second shift women often do at home and the difficulties of managing a successful career while balancing family and health.

Figure 5. Do you feel like you have a healthy work-life balance?



Source: Deloitte analysis, 2025

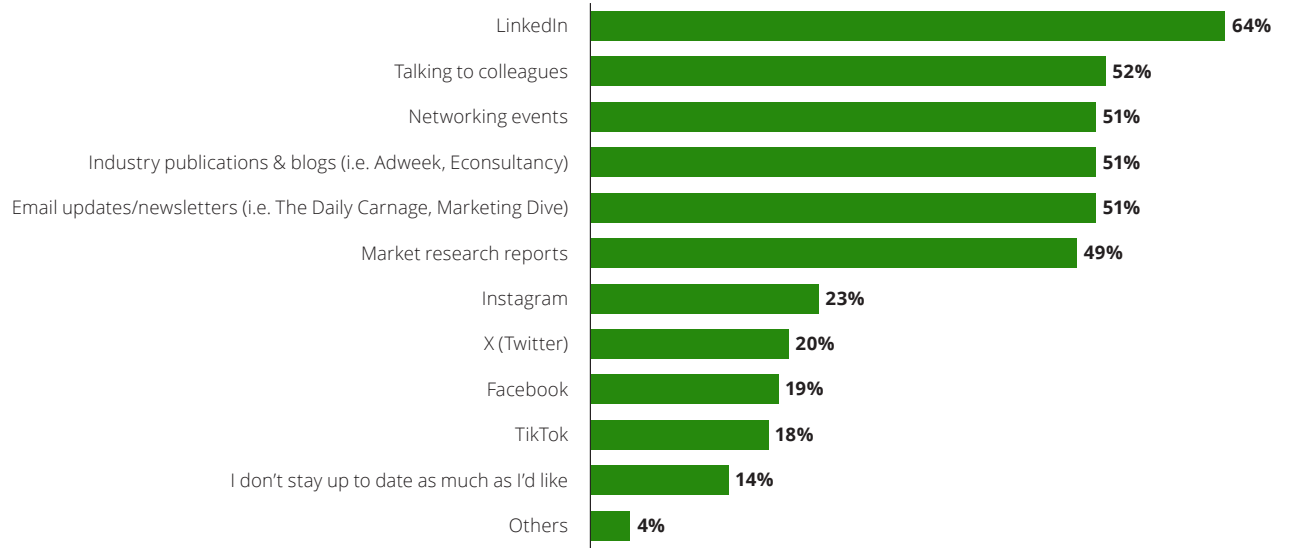
N (Male) = 51, N (Female) = 33

Staying ahead: How marketing leaders stay informed

As leaders in a highly competitive field like marketing, it can be challenging but crucial to keep on top of emerging trends. Our survey found that across both CMOs and SMLs, LinkedIn was the most popular platform for staying informed. Other popular methods were networking and speaking with colleagues to share knowledge and trends which points to the need for maintaining relationships and developing contacts. One CMO said they felt “Networking is part of your job” and an SML said “Make more connections across verticals amongst your peers.” The group also identified reading industry publications and blogs (e.g. Adweek, Econsultancy) and email newsletters (e.g. The Daily Carnage, Marketing Dive) as being helpful to stay up-to-date on the latest marketing trends.

For the first time we asked if the respondents felt they were able to stay up-to-date on the latest marketing trends as much as they wanted to. Within those that responded they were unable to stay up-to-date, we asked the reasons why not. The biggest reasons given why both CMOs and SMLs find it challenging is not enough time (75%), too much information (42%) and not sure which sources to trust (33%).

Figure 6. How do you stay up-to-date on the latest marketing trends?



Source: Deloitte analysis, 2025

N = 84 (CMO+SML)

Self-belief, resilience and continuous learning are key drivers of career growth

Both CMOs and SMLs emphasise the importance of self-belief and resilience as well as continuous learning for career progression. Both groups spoke about believing in yourself and trusting in your abilities. Both also noted the need to keep learning and seeking out new experiences to develop skills while being open to change. There were also several comments about being decisive, and to trust instincts. Many suggested to put in place structures for effective decision-making while also building strong relationships both within and outside your organisation, seek out mentors and actively build networks.

CMOs placed a greater focus on building high-performing teams, fostering collaboration, and demonstrating decisive leadership. Their focus gravitates towards navigating internal dynamics and aligning diverse stakeholders around a cohesive vision. CMOs need to be able to build and lead a strong team with a clear vision.⁹

In contrast, SMLs highlighted the significance of proactive networking, relationship building and effectively managing stakeholders within their organisations. SMLs highlight how critical it is to network and build relationships. Success hinges on cultivating strong external relationships, nurturing key partnerships, and adeptly managing stakeholders within their often-limited sphere of influence. SMLs also said to ask for more feedback and guidance from others.



Figure 7. What advice would you have given to yourself prior to being promoted to your current position, to help your career development?

CMOs

“Believe in yourself more”

“Work hard and listen carefully”

“Create a growth mindset culture in the team”

“Be an expert in your craft - quality always wins”

“Find your superpower - a CMO with great knowledge of Digital”

“Trust yourself - you have built your own career, no one else, you made the various decisions that got you here and others have appointed you to this position which should validate you being in this role - your view/decision you make, the way you manage people and resources through to an ability to apply critical thinking, inspire and lead has got you here... Trust this all counts”

SMLs

“Master the 90-day impact plan. Communicate successes, learn quickly from failures, invest in people and engagement”

“Be more positive, don't be critical of old policies and procedures/ ways of how things have been done”

“To believe in my capabilities, strengths and talents as a marketer and to look for my next opportunity rather than hoping it will appear. You need to own your career progression”

“#1. Laser focus on the customer (directly and via sales leaders)
#2. Be ruthless about recruiting the right talent into your team”

“Just focus on working with the best/smartest people you can find. The rest will follow”

“Don't panic! You can do this!”

“Be prepared to work harder than you've ever worked before”

Summary

This research illuminates the evolving landscape for marketing leaders, highlighting the critical need for a multifaceted, mindful approach to career progression. While formal qualifications remain beneficial, cultivating a diverse skillset encompassing both technological and social skills is crucial for success in today's dynamic marketing landscape. Building strong networks, embracing continuous learning, and prioritising well-being are essential, with a particular emphasis on supporting women in navigating work-life balance. Ultimately, fostering self-belief, resilience and a collaborative spirit are paramount for both CMOs and SMLs striving to thrive in the ever-evolving world of marketing.

Key Recommendations

- **Purposefully cultivate a diverse skillset**

Don't solely rely on formal qualifications. While valuable, they are not enough. Aspiring CMOs need a blend of marketing expertise, strong social skills (communication, collaboration, empathy) and leadership qualities (resilience, decisiveness, team-building).

- **Prioritise networking and relationship building**

Both CMOs and SMLs emphasised the importance of strong networks. Actively seek opportunities to connect with peers, mentors, and industry leaders. This can provide valuable insights, support and open doors to new opportunities.

- **Embrace continuous learning and adaptation**

The marketing landscape is constantly evolving. Stay ahead of the curve by dedicating time to professional development, exploring new technologies and staying informed about industry trends.

- **Prioritise work-life balance**

The research highlights the significant gender gap in perceived work-life balance. Organisations and individuals should prioritise well-being initiatives and flexible work arrangements to attract and retain top talent, particularly women.

Endnotes

1. **The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home, Hochschild, A.** | Penguin Books, 2012.
2. **Imposter Syndrome** | Psychology Today, 2024.
3. **Why Social Skills Are So Important for C-suite Executives—And How To Measure Them** | Russell Reynolds Associates, 2022.
4. **The C-Suite Skills That Matter Most** | Harvard Business Review, 2022.
5. **Resilient leadership: Easy steps to navigate the working life pressure** | International Institute for Management Development, 2015.
6. **Five Reasons Why Women Belong In The C-Suite** | Forbes, 2022.
7. **Gartner CMO Survey Reveals Marketing Budgets Have Dropped to 7.7% of Overall Company Revenue in 2024** | Gartner, 2024.
8. **The C-suite and workplace wellness** | Deloitte Insights, 2022.
9. **CMOs will need three 'super-powers' to remain relevant** | DecisionMarketing, 2024.

Recognition and appreciation

Special thanks to the Deloitte CMO Programme team for their insight and supporting the research.



William Grobel

Director
Technology & Transformation
wgrobel@deloitte.co.uk



Fiona Elkins

Senior Manager
Brand & Marketing
felkins@deloitte.co.uk



Jennifer Holland

Insight Manager
Technology & Transformation
jd holland@deloitte.co.uk



Douglas Gunn

Assistant Insight Manager
Technology & Transformation
dgunn@deloitte.co.uk



Shubham Gupta

Research Analyst
Technology & Transformation
shubhgupta@deloitte.co.uk

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Mark Beavers



This publication has been written in general terms and we recommend that you obtain professional advice before acting or refraining from action on any of the contents of this publication. Deloitte LLP accepts no liability for any loss occasioned to any person acting or refraining from action as a result of any material in this publication.

Deloitte LLP is a limited liability partnership registered in England and Wales with registered number OC303675 and its registered office at 1 New Street Square, London EC4A 3HQ, United Kingdom.

In this publication, references to Deloitte are references to Deloitte LLP. Deloitte LLP is the United Kingdom affiliate of Deloitte NSE LLP, a member firm of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, a UK private company limited by guarantee ("DTTL"). DTTL and each of its member firms are legally separate and independent entities. DTTL and Deloitte NSE LLP do not provide services to clients. Please see www.deloitte.com/about to learn more about our global network of member firms.

© 2025 Deloitte LLP. All rights reserved.

Designed by CoRe Creative Services. RITM1892592