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2026 Global Chief Strategy
Officer (CSO) Survey report

February 2026

Executive summary: The CSO mandate in an era of persistent disruption

The role of a modern chief strategy officer (CSO) is to impose clarity while disruption constantly works to erode it. Macroeconomic volatility, shifting customer expectations, and fast-moving competitors can reorder priorities overnight. Winning CSOs do not respond by producing more plans. They respond by creating focus: sensing what matters early, forcing the right trade-offs, and translating insight into coordinated action across the enterprise.

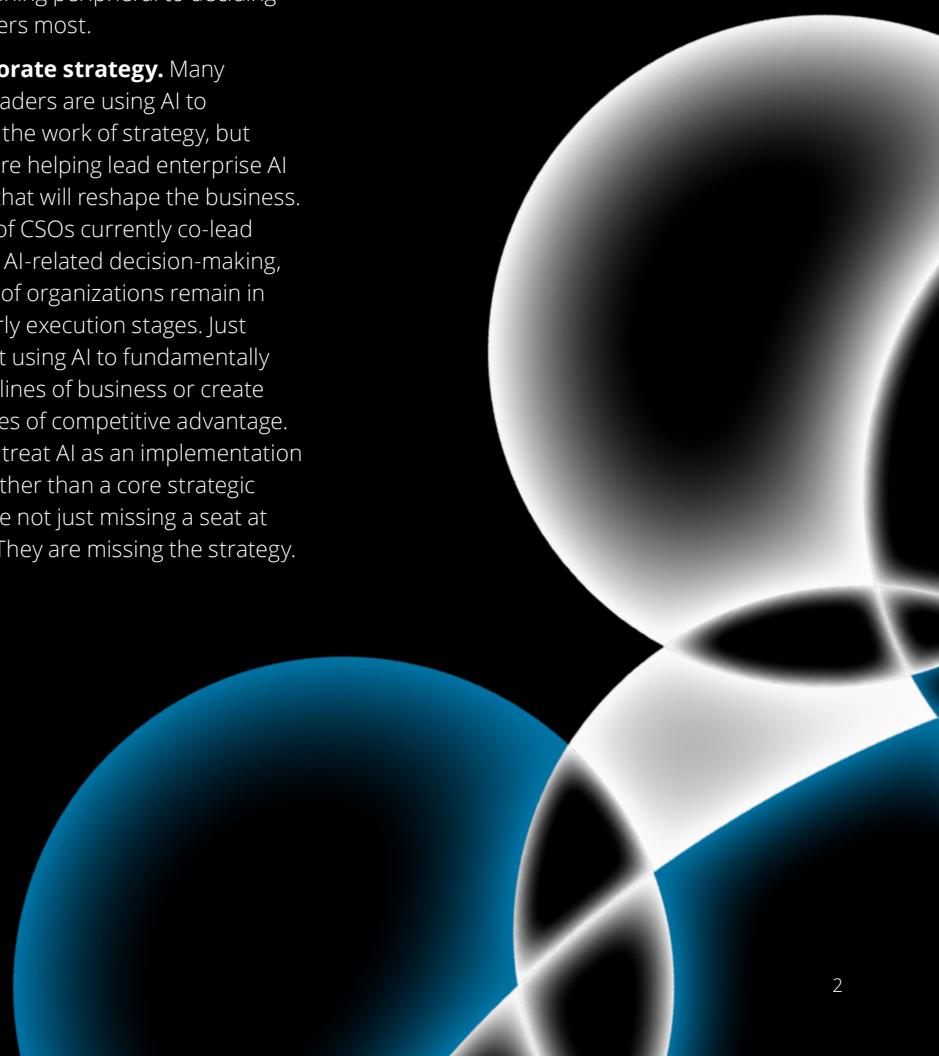
The modern CSO role is still relatively new in many enterprises, yet it is unquestionably time for it to evolve. Planning cycles are compressing. AI adoption is accelerating. Expectations of strategy leaders continue to expand, often faster than the mechanisms required to deliver them. The next generation of strategy leadership will likely be defined less by elegant frameworks and more by the ability to make fewer, sharper calls and turn them into enterprise movement.

Deloitte's 2026 Global Chief Strategy Officer Survey captures the tension at the heart of this moment. CSOs are increasingly confident about their own enterprises, even as confidence in the external environment remains limited: 72% report optimism about their organization's prospects, while only 24% are optimistic about the global economy. That gap in sentiment creates a clear test. If CSOs believe their enterprises can win despite external headwinds, this is a period of execution and proof, not explanation.

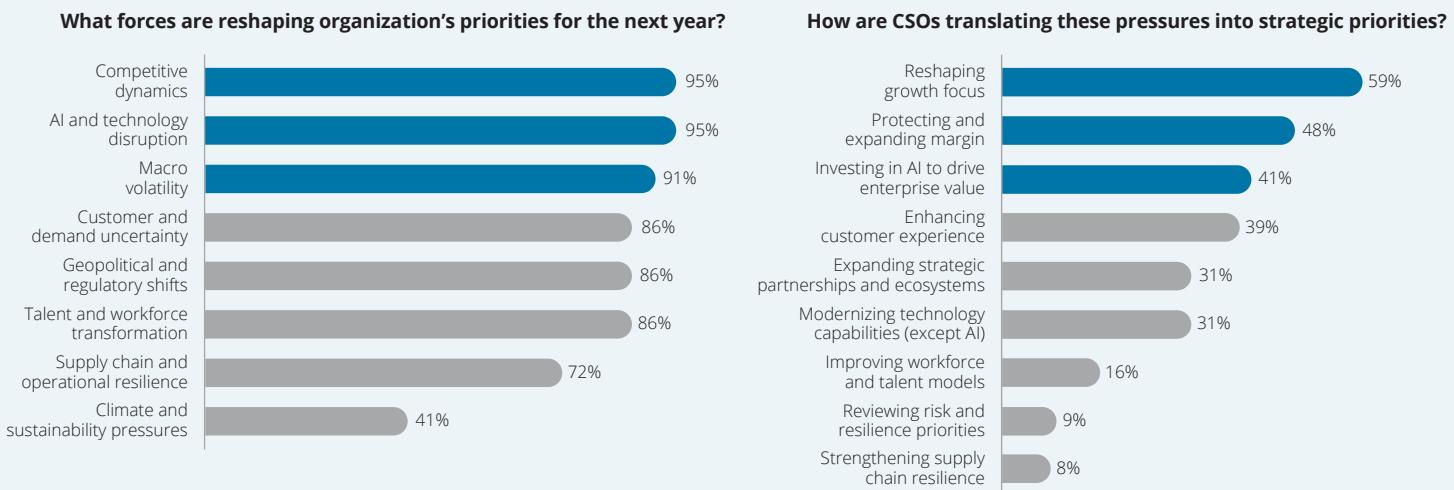
Three insights can help define what it will take to lead strategy in the next era:

1. **From uncertainty to enterprise conviction.** CSOs are betting on their ability to deliver in a difficult environment. The opportunity lies in converting internal confidence into durable advantage through disciplined investment, modernization, and capital efficiency.
2. **The strategy gap is real, and it is operational.** For many CSOs, the limiting factor is not insight; it is capacity and coherence. More than half report managing too many priorities with too little time. Without sharper prioritization, clearer operating models, and better alignment between mandate and decision rights, the strategy function risks remaining peripheral to deciding what matters most.
3. **AI is corporate strategy.** Many strategy leaders are using AI to accelerate the work of strategy, but far fewer are helping lead enterprise AI decisions that will reshape the business. Only 28% of CSOs currently co-lead enterprise AI-related decision-making, while 39% of organizations remain in pilot or early execution stages. Just 16% report using AI to fundamentally reimagine lines of business or create new sources of competitive advantage. CSOs who treat AI as an implementation agenda, rather than a core strategic agenda, are not just missing a seat at the table. They are missing the strategy.

The highest-performing CSOs going forward will likely be leaders who make strategy a continuous enterprise discipline, not a periodic exercise. It can start with three moves: make fewer, sharper strategic choices, revisited more often; close the strategy gap by aligning mandate with decision rights and capacity; and elevate AI from a productivity lever to an enterprise strategy agenda that shapes where and how the business will compete.



From uncertainty to conviction: Designing for persistent volatility



CSOs were asked to state the degree to which they expect each item will impact their organization's priorities for the next 12 months. Percentages combine responses for items ranked modest/great/very great extent.

CSOs were asked to state which strategic priorities their organization will focus on over the next 12 months, given today's external pressures. Question allows multiple options, so percentages do not add up to 100%.

After years of sustained disruption, CSOs are no longer treating uncertainty as a temporary shock to manage but as a persistent condition to design for. That means actively tracking the forces reshaping priorities, refreshing direction in shorter cycles, and translating insight into choices the enterprise can execute.

The signal is clear in this year's survey: 95% of CSOs expect intensified competitive dynamics and AI and technology disruption to materially shape their organization's priorities over the next year, alongside macro volatility and uncertain customer demand. These pressures are not distant signals. They are direct catalysts that change how leaders prioritize growth, investment, and transformation.

24% of CSOs are optimistic about the global economy, double last year's level.

72% of CSOs are optimistic about their organization in the next 12 months.

What is most striking is the duality of sentiment. Only 24% of CSOs are optimistic about the global economy. While that is more than double last year's level, it remains low overall. At the same time, 72% are optimistic about their own organization's future. Deloitte's CEO survey showed a similar pattern: renewed confidence in enterprise prospects paired with continued caution about the broader environment.¹ The implication is straightforward. When leaders believe their organizations can win despite external headwinds, the burden shifts from diagnosis to delivery.

That shift shows up in where CSOs are placing their bets. Reshaping growth is the top strategic priority, but protecting and expanding margin is close behind. In other words, growth remains the headline, while margin discipline is the operating principle. This is not a growth-at-any-cost agenda. It is a profitability-led growth agenda. Capital is being reallocated toward modernization, productivity, and transformation initiatives that can scale, while cost control and capital

efficiency become core enablers of growth rather than constraints.

About 9 in 10 reported reinvention is essential for competitiveness, and 4 in 10 say the **need is urgent**.

This growing confidence marks an inflection point, and it comes with urgency. Almost nine in ten CSOs say reinvention is essential to remain competitive, and four in ten say the need is immediate. The winners will likely be those who treat reinvention as a repeatable capability and who turn volatility into an advantage through sharper prioritization and faster follow-through. Confidence is rising, and it will likely be sustained only if strategy becomes a discipline with a tighter cadence, clearer ownership, and faster conversion from insight to execution.

The strategy gap: High expectations, limited capacity

CSOs are central to what gets done but too often are peripheral to deciding what matters most. Many face too much to do and too little capacity to do it with. That paradox is the heart of the strategy gap. Organizations are relying on strategy leaders to drive faster, sharper execution across a widening set of enterprise priorities, yet many CSOs lack the decision rights, capacity, and operational scaffolding to steer those priorities end to end.

The pressures are tangible. More than half of CSOs report managing too many priorities with too little time, often stretched across multiple strategic initiatives simultaneously. Capacity is tightening as well. About half of CSOs report having five or fewer direct reports, a number that has edged up from last year. In practice, lean teams can push CSOs into a cycle of relying on rotating, project-based support to get critical work done. Managing that parade of initiatives and support teams can further erode the time required for the thinking and choices that only strategy can own.

More than half of CSOs cite **too many priorities**; about half have five or **fewer direct reports**

At the same time, expectations continue to expand. Almost two-thirds of CSOs now lead cross-functional transformation efforts, and more than half drive enterprise-wide agendas that extend well beyond traditional advisory roles. In a time when CSOs are increasingly

evaluated on outcomes and hands-on delivery, they often do not have the formal authority, decision rights, or resourcing that typically comes with operational leadership.

Nowhere is the gap more visible than in strategic decision-making for the organization's top priorities. Only 35% of CSOs say they co-lead or own that decision-making.

35%
of CSOs currently co-lead or own strategic decision-making for these top priorities

The implication is not that CSOs lack insight. It is that their influence is being applied downstream, after critical choices are already set. As a result, CSOs report spending the least time on sensing market shifts, interpreting competitive dynamics, and driving deals, partnerships, and ecosystem alliances, the very activities that differentiate strategy from execution.

Closing this gap is not a matter of doing more or simply adding more external capacity. It means doing less execution by default and protecting time for the thinking and choices that only strategy can own. The takeaway is not to add activity, but to institutionalize strategy as a discipline and turn choices into enterprise movement. In practice, that means sharpening enterprise priorities, aligning the CSO mandate with decision rights instead of relying on informal influence, and building the mechanisms that turn strategy into coordinated action. Without those shifts, enterprise ambition will likely keep outrunning strategic capacity.

The faces of the CSO framework helps explain why the strategy gap persists. While CSOs are expected to operate across six distinct roles, survey findings show their time is disproportionately consumed by execution-heavy demands, including running processes and managing special projects. CSOs report wishing they could spend less time on these activities and more time sensing market shifts, interpreting competitive dynamics, and shaping enterprise choices. The result is a paradox: CSOs are central to what gets done, but too often peripheral to deciding what matters most.

*Deloitte, *The Making of a Successful Chief Strategy Officer*, 2019.*

Average CSO time allocation across six faces in 2026



AI as strategy: Beyond the toolkit

AI is not a technology side agenda that can be managed by CIOs in isolation. It is reshaping how companies compete, allocate capital, and make decisions at speed. That makes AI a corporate strategy issue. The question for CSOs is whether they will step into the center of enterprise decision-making to shape AI's strategic impact or treat AI primarily as a toolkit to speed up today's work.

The survey suggests many organizations remain on the wrong side of this, still treating AI as adjacent to strategy rather than embedded within it. Only 28% of CSOs currently co-lead enterprise AI-related decision-making.

28% of CSOs currently co-lead enterprise AI-related decision-making

While strategy leaders stay on the sidelines, 39% of organizations remain in pilot or early execution stages, and just 16% report using AI to fundamentally reimagine lines

of business or create new sources of competitive advantage. The pattern is not inactivity, it is fragmentation. AI is moving faster than the strategic frameworks, investment processes, and governance models needed to absorb it.

The good news is that many CSOs are making progress on AI for strategy. They are embedding AI into planning, insight generation, and performance analysis to increase speed and throughput without proportionally increasing headcount. Most are also investing in AI literacy (61%), and many already view AI as a strategic partner that expands their ability to surface signals and pressure-test assumptions.

But strategy for AI is where the stakes are higher, and the underperformance is clear. If CSOs are not at the center of enterprise AI decisions, AI becomes a set of disconnected initiatives: productivity pilots in one corner, model experimentation in another, and uneven value realization across business lines. The data also suggests a bias toward

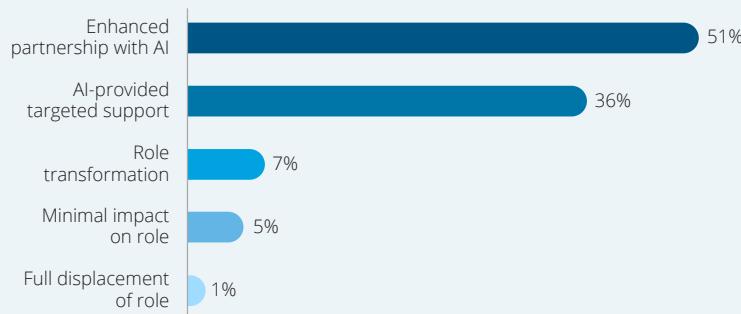
near-term efficiency gains over bolder enterprise reinvention.

The opportunity is not to write a better AI strategy in isolation. It is to make enterprise strategy fully account for AI. That means integrating AI implications into annual and multi-year planning, capital allocation and portfolio reviews, operating model choices, and talent strategy. But it cannot live only in formal planning moments.

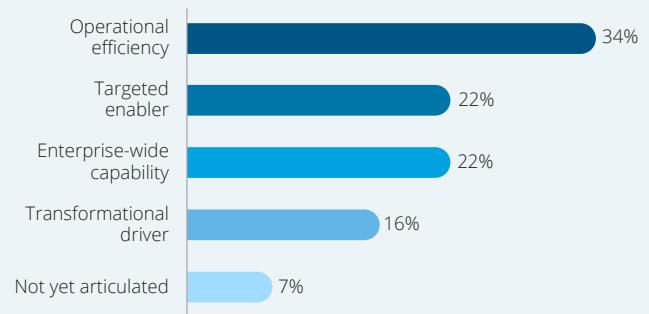
It needs an always-on cadence of governance and portfolio review that keeps strategic choices current as technology and the business evolve. It also means moving beyond pilots toward scaled adoption with clear ownership and measurable value.

Over the months and years ahead, strategy leaders who treat AI as a living, constant part of corporate strategy can help their organizations convert experimentation into coordinated advantage.

As AI reshapes strategy and decision-making, how do you see the CSO role evolving?



What is your organization's primary ambition for AI?



The next move: Strategic choices that define the CSO role

CSO confidence is rising, but so are expectations and speed. Volatility is persistent, capacity is constrained, and AI is reshaping the fundamentals of competition. Across all three core findings from the CSO survey, one thread is consistent: Strategy should be an always-on discipline, not a periodic planning exercise.

That shift is not about doing strategy more often for its own sake. It is about making real choices and standing behind them. Strategy only earns its name when it forces decisions about what the enterprise will do and what it will not do. The window is narrow, but the prescription is not panic. It is cadence: fewer, sharper choices that are revisited more often, with clear ownership and fast conversion from insight to action.

Four strategic choices flow directly from what the survey surfaces across confidence, capacity, and AI; each reflecting how CSOs allocate resources, run the system, claim authority, and shape enterprise bets. These are not check-the-box best practices. Each forces a real choice, and each choice creates a tension that needs to be managed. The right answer will vary by organization. What should not vary is the need to make the choice deliberately.

1. Reallocate for reinvention, not incremental resilience. Margin discipline and capital efficiency are not a retreat from growth; they are a means to achieve it. They are the funding model for it. CSOs should decide what to protect, what to deprioritize, and where capital and talent are deliberately reallocated to fuel reinvention. The tension is real: protect performance today while investing in the capabilities that will win tomorrow.
2. Design the system that gets the work done, instead of managing more of the work. When priorities sprawl and teams are lean, the answer is not a larger portfolio of projects or a bigger parade of external support. CSOs should sharpen enterprise priorities, clarify decision rights, and build operating mechanisms that translate strategy into repeatable execution at speed. The tension is between speed and coherence: moving faster without multiplying priorities and noise.
3. Formalize authority to sustain the discipline. Continuous strategy refresh cannot depend on personal relationships alone. CSOs should define which enterprise decisions they own, co-lead, or orchestrate, so strategic priorities do not drift as conditions change and

strategy remains anchored in governance and accountability rather than personality. The tension is moving from informal influence to clearer governance, even when it feels uncomfortable.

4. Shape enterprise bets in fast-moving domains, not just functional initiatives. In fast-moving domains, most visibly AI, the strategic risk is not inaction but fragmentation. CSOs create value by shaping enterprise bets: setting direction, sequencing investments, and resolving trade-offs so experimentation reinforces, rather than dilutes, strategic intent. This requires stepping into decisions that cut across functions and time horizons, ensuring that speed does not come at the expense of coherence. The tension is pace versus alignment: moving fast enough to learn while maintaining a clear enterprise point of view.

CSOs who want to be defined by clarity must claim the role that creates it. Make the choices. Set the cadence that keeps them current. Protect time for the work that only strategy can do. Step into the enterprise decisions, especially on AI, that will define what winning looks like next.

The role of the CSO 2022–2026

The past Global CSO Surveys show that the CSO's core mandate of integrating strategy across the enterprise has remained stable. What has changed is the context in which that mandate must be delivered. Volatility has persisted, complexity has compounded, and expectations for speed and measurable outcomes have intensified, often without proportional increases in time, authority, or capacity. Across the period, CSOs have consistently operated as:

- **Enterprise integrators:** Connective tissue across functions, aligning long-term strategic priorities with near-term operational realities.
- **Stewards of growth and resilience:** Shaping growth agendas, navigating uncertainty, and supporting leadership teams through sustained disruption.
- **Bridges between strategy and execution:** Converting strategic intent into actionable direction, even as operating conditions shift.

While these foundations endure, the role has been stretched in three important ways:

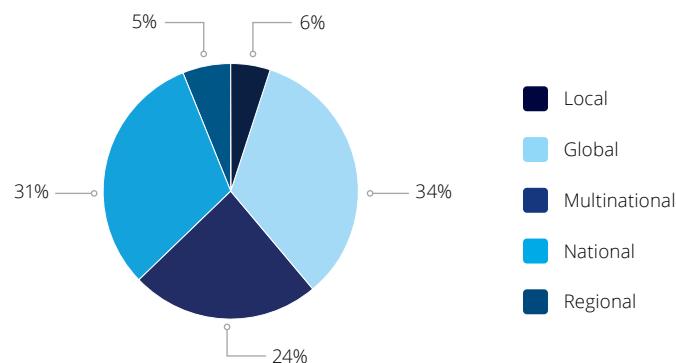
- **From guidance to orchestration:** Moving from advising on strategy to actively coordinating enterprise-wide transformation, reinvention, and cross-functional change.
- **Rising execution expectations under constraint:** Increasing accountability for delivery, coordination, and ROI even as organizational complexity rises and team capacity remains limited.
- **AI as a core strategic input to reinvention:** Shifting from a peripheral technology topic to a material factor in insight generation, strategic decision-making, and execution velocity.

What will the next five years bring? The CSO role is not being reinvented from scratch; it is being tested at its limits. The role is being asked to carry more weight, more often, under tighter constraints. The opportunity lies in protecting the role's strategic center of gravity while meeting expanding demands: clarify where CSOs own decisions, where they co-lead, and where they orchestrate; build mechanisms that turn strategy into coordinated action; and reinforce strategy as a continuous discipline rather than a periodic exercise.

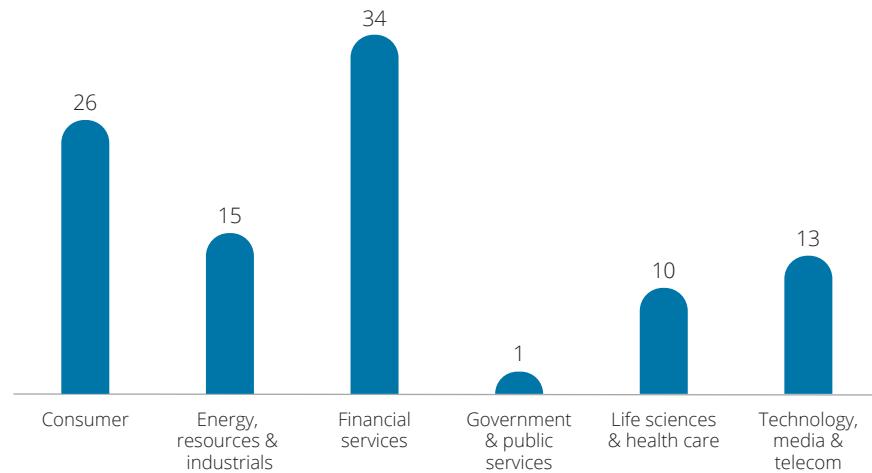
Survey methodology

The findings in this report are based on our survey fielded from September to November 2025 with 148 strategy leaders globally, who hold primary or significant responsibility for enterprise-level strategy. While titles vary from Chief Strategy Officer, Executive Vice President of Strategy, and Global Head of Strategy to Head of Corporate Strategy and Senior Vice President of Strategy, the common thread is ownership of the strategic agenda. Survey respondents were geographically diverse, with representation across North America; Europe, Middle East, and Africa; and other major regions. Organizational footprints range from global, multi-country enterprises to national, regional, and local organizations. Industry coverage spans financial services; consumer; energy, resources and industrials; technology, media and telecom; and other key industries. Together, this mix provides a multidimensional view of how strategy is evolving across markets and business models.

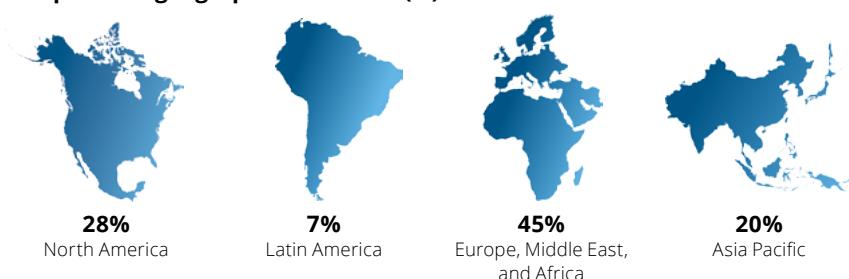
Respondent organizational scope



Respondent industry breakdown (%)



Respondent geographical location (%)



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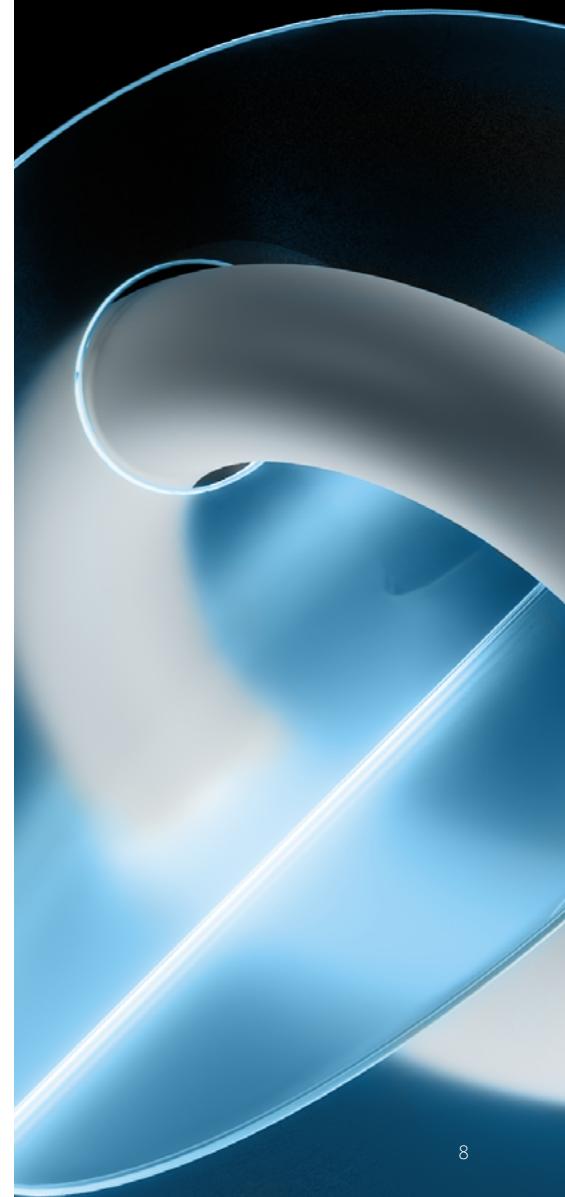
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About Deloitte's Chief Strategy and Transformation Officer Program

The role of the CSO and the role of strategy as a corporate function continues to evolve, as CSOs are playing an increasingly important role in the C-suite and are expected to set the short- and long-term direction for the business. Whether you seek to build your strategy function, enhance your organization's strategic planning capability, or pursue a specific growth mandate, we can leverage our long heritage in strategy and a range of proprietary tools to help you succeed.

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