



THE C-SUITE SPAGHETTI OF TODAY

INSIGHTS AS A MICHELIN-STARRED KITCHEN

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LEADER

CHALLENGING EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP THINKING

The modern corporate world is experiencing an explosion in executive roles. Once a small, tightly defined leadership team, the C-suite has expanded dramatically, reflecting the complexities of today's organisations. From the CEO, CFO, and COO to an array of roles like Chief Digital Officer (CDO), Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO), and Chief Customer Officer (CCO), the executive suite now resembles a crowded kitchen in a Michelin-starred restaurant with each leader a specialised chef working on their part of the "menu."

However, as the C-suite grows, so do the overlaps and inefficiencies. Like a chaotic kitchen with poorly defined roles, today's C-suite can struggle with tangled responsibilities, unclear ownership of key strategies, and misaligned priorities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in areas like technology, customer experience, and sustainability, where role boundaries blur, creating confusion and bottlenecks.

This article explores this "C-suite spaghetti," the challenges it creates for organisations, and actionable recommendations to streamline leadership. Along the way, we'll draw lessons from Michelin-starred kitchens, where clear roles and collaborative harmony deliver excellence.

THE EXPLOSION OF C-SUITE ROLES: TOO MANY CHEFS IN THE KITCHEN

The C-suite, once a tightly defined group of senior executives overseeing core business functions, has transformed into an expansive and intricate leadership structure. Traditionally comprising roles like the CEO, CFO, and COO, the executive suite has grown significantly in both size and complexity to address the multifaceted demands of modern businesses. Technological advancements, shifting consumer expectations, regulatory pressures, and evolving societal priorities have all driven the creation of new, specialised roles within the C-suite.

This expansion reflects the growing diversity of challenges organisations face today. From navigating digital transformation and harnessing data analytics to addressing environmental sustainability and fostering diversity, companies are appointing leaders with increasingly specific mandates. Yet, as the number of roles grows, so do the overlaps in responsibilities, leading to confusion, inefficiencies, and a dilution of accountability.

A LOOK AT THE MODERN C-SUITE

Modern organisations can now have 10, 15, or even 20 distinct executive roles, each focused on a specific domain. Here's a view of the most common modern C-suite roles and an indication of core focus points, these are not definitive and every role can have different descriptions, focus and priorities:

CORE LEADERSHIP ROLES

These roles form the backbone of the organisation, ensuring overall alignment, strategic vision, and financial health:

- **Chief Executive Officer (CEO):** The ultimate decision-maker responsible for the organisation's strategy, culture, and long-term success.
- **Chief Operating Officer (COO):** Manages daily operations, ensuring efficiency and the successful execution of strategic goals.
- **Chief Financial Officer (CFO):** Oversees financial planning, budgeting, risk management, and reporting.

TECHNOLOGY-FOCUSED ROLES

The rapid pace of technological innovation has led to the proliferation of tech-centric roles, each addressing different aspects of the digital landscape:

- **Chief Technology Officer (CTO):** Focuses on technology innovation, product development, and R&D.
- **Chief Information Officer (CIO):** Oversees IT infrastructure, digital transformation, and system integration.
- **Chief Digital Officer (CDO):** Drives digital initiatives, from e-commerce to automation, ensuring the organisation remains competitive in a digital-first world.
- **Chief Data Officer (also CDO):** Manages data governance, analytics, and insights, treating data as a strategic asset.
- **Chief Artificial Intelligence Officer (CAIO):** Leads the adoption and implementation of AI technologies, ensuring they align with business objectives.
- **Chief Information Security Officer (CISO):** Protects the organisation from cyber threats and ensures compliance with data protection regulations.
- **Chief Automation Officer (CAO):** Oversees robotic process automation (RPA) and intelligent automation strategies.

CUSTOMER AND EXPERIENCE-CENTRIC ROLES

Modern businesses prioritise customer experience and engagement, reflected in roles dedicated to enhancing interactions and loyalty:

- **Chief Marketing Officer (CMO):** Manages marketing, branding, and customer engagement strategies.
- **Chief Experience Officer (CXO):** Focuses on improving the overall experience of customers, employees, and other stakeholders.
- **Chief Customer Officer (CCO):** Builds long-term customer loyalty by prioritising client needs and feedback.

PEOPLE AND CULTURE ROLES

Employee engagement, diversity, and well-being have become key organisational priorities, leading to new roles focused on workforce strategy:

- **Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO):** Oversees recruitment, talent development, and HR policies.

- **Chief People Officer (CPO):** Focuses on creating a positive workplace culture and employee well-being.
- **Chief Diversity Officer (CDO):** Drives diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.
- **Chief Learning Officer (CLO):** Manages employee training, leadership development, and upskilling programs.

SUSTAINABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY ROLES

As societal and environmental responsibilities grow, companies are appointing leaders to drive sustainable and ethical practices:

- **Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO):** Focuses on environmental initiatives, from carbon neutrality to sustainable supply chains.
- **Chief Corporate Social Responsibility Officer (CCSRO):** Oversees the organisation's ethical and community engagement programs.
- **Chief Impact Officer (CIO):** Measures and enhances the organisation's societal and environmental impact.

STRATEGY AND GROWTH-FOCUSED ROLES

These roles ensure the organisation remains competitive and prepared for long-term success:

- **Chief Strategy Officer (CSO):** Develops and executes the company's strategic roadmap.
- **Chief Growth Officer (CGO):** Focuses on expanding revenue streams, partnerships, and market share.
- **Chief Business Development Officer (CBDO):** Manages alliances, partnerships, and new market opportunities.
- **Chief Product Officer (CPO):** Responsible for the strategic product direction.

GOVERNANCE, RISK, AND COMPLIANCE ROLES

Managing risks and ensuring regulatory compliance has become critical in today's complex business environment:

- **Chief Risk Officer (CRO):** Oversees enterprise risk management, from financial risks to operational challenges.

- **Chief Compliance Officer (CCO):** Ensures adherence to legal and regulatory standards.
- **Chief Legal Officer (CLO):** Manages legal affairs, contracts, and litigation.

EMERGING AND NICHE ROLES

In response to emerging trends, some organisations are appointing highly specialised executives:

- **Chief Blockchain Officer (CBO):** Focuses on blockchain adoption and integration into business models.
- **Chief Visionary Officer (CVO):** Drives future-oriented innovation and long-term thinking.
- **Chief Remote Officer (CRO):** Manages remote work strategies and virtual collaboration tools.

The modern C-suite is a reflection of the complexity and demands of the current business environment. While these roles aim to address diverse priorities, the sheer number of positions can lead to redundancies, overlapping responsibilities, and inefficiencies. In many organisations, this “too many chefs in the kitchen” scenario results in unclear ownership of critical initiatives, particularly in areas like technology strategy and customer experience.

Moving forward, organisations must reconsider how they structure their leadership teams, focusing on clarity, collaboration, and alignment to ensure the C-suite operates as an integrated and effective unit.

OVERLAPPING RESPONSIBILITIES: THE TANGLES OF THE C-SUITE SPAGHETTI

The proliferation of C-suite roles reflects an attempt to address the increasingly specialised demands of modern organisations. Each role is intended to focus on a particular domain, ensuring expert oversight of critical business areas such as technology, customer engagement, sustainability, and employee well-being. This specialisation theoretically enables organisations to tackle challenges with precision and agility.

However, in practice, these roles often overlap significantly in their functions. While their areas of focus may seem distinct on paper, the real-world implementation of their responsibilities frequently intersects. For example, multiple roles may claim ownership of digital transformation, customer experience, or sustainability initiatives, leading to duplication of efforts, misaligned priorities, and confusion over accountability.

Understanding the specific functions of these roles and recognising where overlaps occur is critical to addressing inefficiencies and fostering greater clarity within the C-suite. Examples of Overlap:

- **CTO vs. CIO vs. CDO:** The CTO focuses on product innovation, the CIO on IT systems, and the CDO on digital transformation. These roles often compete for ownership of technology strategy, leading to fragmented efforts.
- **CMO vs. CXO (Chief Experience Officer) vs. CCO:** Marketing, customer experience, and customer engagement frequently overlap. While the CMO focuses on brand building, the CXO ensures seamless customer journeys, and the CCO prioritises loyalty often stepping on each other's toes.
- **CSO vs. CCSRO (Chief Corporate Social Responsibility Officer):** Sustainability and social responsibility are interconnected but distinct. Without clear boundaries, these leaders can duplicate efforts or send mixed messages to stakeholders.

The Challenges of Overlap:

- **Redundancy:** Duplicated work wastes time and resources.
- **Conflicts:** Competing priorities create internal friction.
- **Accountability Gaps:** When no one has clear ownership, critical initiatives fall through the cracks.

The functions of modern C-suite roles highlight the need for specialisation in today's complex business environment. However, the overlap in responsibilities can create significant challenges, including redundancy, inefficiency, and diluted accountability. While each role is critical, organisations must carefully delineate functions and foster collaboration to ensure the C-suite operates as an integrated team.

By clarifying boundaries and encouraging alignment, businesses can harness the strengths of their executive leaders while avoiding the pitfalls of fragmented decision-making.

THE C-SUITE AS A MICHELIN-STARRED KITCHEN

Imagine the C-suite of an organisation as the leadership team in a Michelin-starred restaurant. Each executive is akin to a chef, with a distinct specialty, yet all working in harmony to deliver an exceptional dining experience. When the kitchen operates seamlessly, the restaurant excels. However, when roles overlap or communication breaks down, chaos ensues, and the quality suffers.

Here's how the ideal C-suite model mirrors the operations of a world-class kitchen:

THE EXECUTIVE CHEF (CEO): THE VISIONARY LEADER

The CEO is like the Executive Chef in a Michelin-starred kitchen a visionary who sets the tone, defines the strategy, and ensures all team members are aligned with the overarching goals. They determine the menu (company strategy), uphold the restaurant's reputation (brand vision), and oversee the execution of every dish (operations).

Key Responsibilities:

- Setting the strategic direction and ensuring all other chefs (executives) are aligned.
- Making key decisions about resources, partnerships, and growth opportunities.
- Inspiring the team and maintaining accountability for the overall performance

THE SOUS CHEFS: KEY C-SUITE EXECUTIVES SUPPORTING THE VISION

In the kitchen, Sous Chefs are specialists who oversee critical areas. Similarly, the C-suite is made up of leaders who manage specific aspects of the organisation:

● **CTO (Chief Technology Officer): The Pastry Chef**

The CTO, like the Pastry Chef, is responsible for innovation, precision, and delivering technological excellence. Pastry requires experimentation and exactness traits that mirror the CTO's role in crafting innovative products and systems.

Focus: Creating transformative, scalable solutions.

● **CFO (Chief Financial Officer): The Purchasing Manager**

The CFO ensures that resources are allocated wisely, much like the Purchasing Manager who controls costs, negotiates with suppliers, and keeps the kitchen running within budget.

Focus: Financial planning, risk management, and profitability.

- **CMO (Chief Marketing Officer): The Sommelier**

The CMO curates the story behind the brand, much like a Sommelier pairs wines to complement dishes and elevate the dining experience.

Focus: Enhancing customer engagement and building a compelling brand.

- **CHRO (Chief Human Resources Officer): The Head of Staff Training**

The CHRO nurtures talent and fosters a positive workplace culture, akin to a Head Trainer in the kitchen who ensures every chef and waiter is skilled and aligned with the restaurant's standards.

Focus: Recruitment, employee engagement, and workforce development.

COLLABORATION: THE BRIGADE SYSTEM IN THE KITCHEN

A Michelin-starred kitchen operates on the brigade system, a highly structured approach where every chef knows their role, responsibilities, and handoffs. Similarly, the C-suite should function as an integrated team with well-defined boundaries and coordinated efforts.

- **Defined Roles:** Each chef (executive) has a specific specialty, and they avoid duplicating efforts.
- **Clear Communication:** The Executive Chef (CEO) communicates the vision, while the Sous Chefs (executives) ensure their teams deliver.
- **Collaboration:** Chefs may cross-train or support one another during peak times, just as C-suite leaders must collaborate on cross-functional initiatives.

THE MENU: ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY

The restaurant's menu is akin to the organisational strategy a carefully curated selection of offerings designed to satisfy customer needs and differentiate the brand. The Executive Chef (CEO) oversees the creation of this menu, while Sous Chefs (executives) contribute their expertise to refine each element.

- **Innovation:** Regular updates to keep the menu fresh (evolving products and services).
- **Customer-Centricity:** Ensuring that every dish aligns with what diners (customers) desire.

CHALLENGES IN THE KITCHEN: MISALIGNED ROLES AND OVERLAP

In a kitchen where roles are unclear or overlapping, chaos quickly ensues. If two chefs try to plate the same dish or compete over ingredients, service is delayed, and the quality diminishes. Similarly, in the C-suite, overlapping responsibilities lead to inefficiencies, confusion, and missed opportunities.

Example of Misalignment:

If the CTO, CIO, and CDO (Chief Digital Officer) each own different aspects of the company's digital strategy without coordination, efforts become fragmented, and the organisation loses its technological edge.

A WELL-OILED MACHINE: THE IDEAL C-SUITE MODEL

In a Michelin-starred kitchen, every team member operates with precision, mutual respect, and a shared understanding of the ultimate goal: delivering an extraordinary dining experience. The ideal C-suite mirrors this:

- **Defined Roles:** Each executive has a clear area of ownership, reducing overlap.
- **Shared Vision:** All leaders are aligned with the overarching strategy, ensuring cohesion.
- **Coordination:** Regular communication and collaboration ensure seamless handoffs and joint accountability.

INNOVATION: EXPERIMENTING WITH NEW RECIPES

The kitchen's success depends on innovation experimenting with new recipes, techniques, and presentation styles. Similarly, the C-suite must foster a culture of innovation, encouraging leaders to explore emerging trends, adopt new technologies, and refine strategies.

Example:

- The CTO could lead pilots for cutting-edge technologies, while the CFO ensures these innovations are financially sustainable.

THE OUTCOME: A MICHELIN-STARRED ORGANISATION

When the C-suite operates like a well-coordinated kitchen, the results are extraordinary. The organisation delivers:

- **Consistent Quality:** Seamless execution of strategies and initiatives.
- **Customer Delight:** Experiences that exceed expectations.
- **Sustainability:** Long-term success through efficient use of resources and a clear vision.

A Michelin-starred restaurant thrives on clarity, collaboration, and innovation. Every chef has a role to play, but they must work together to create an exceptional dining experience. Similarly, the future C-suite should focus on well-defined roles, aligned strategies, and a culture of collaboration. By untangling the spaghetti of overlapping responsibilities and embracing a clear, cohesive model, organisations can achieve Michelin-starred success in their industries.

UNTANGLING THE SPAGHETTI - THE FUTURE C-SUITE: A PREDICTION FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

As organisations navigate the complexities of a rapidly evolving technological, economic, and societal landscape, the C-suite must adapt to ensure efficiency, clarity, and strategic alignment. Future organisations will likely move away from sprawling, overlapping executive roles toward a streamlined, collaborative, and adaptive model that balances specialisation with integrated decision-making. Here's what an effective future C-suite might look like:

CORE LEADERSHIP ROLES: FEWER BUT BROADER RESPONSIBILITIES

The core of the future C-suite will focus on holistic roles that encapsulate multiple interconnected domains, reducing redundancy and fostering clearer accountability.

- **Chief Executive Officer (CEO):** Still the ultimate decision-maker, but with a greater emphasis on collaborative leadership and stakeholder engagement. Acts as the unifying force across specialised roles to align the organisation's vision, mission, and culture.
- **Chief Operating and Transformation Officer (COTO):** Combines the traditional COO role with responsibility for leading transformation initiatives. Oversees not only operational efficiency but also change management, ensuring agility and adaptability in response to market shifts.
- **Chief Financial and Sustainability Officer (CFSO):** Integrates financial strategy with sustainability goals, recognising the growing importance of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles. Manages financial health while embedding sustainable practices into all aspects of the business.

TECHNOLOGY-CENTRIC ROLES: UNIFIED DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

Technology will remain a critical enabler of future organisations, but leadership in this domain will evolve to reduce fragmentation and improve coordination.

- **Chief Technology and Innovation Officer (CTIO):** Merges the CTO, CIO, and Chief Innovation Officer roles into a single, unified position. Responsible for overarching technology strategy, digital transformation, innovation, and IT infrastructure. Ensures that technology investments align with both immediate operational needs and long-term strategic goals.

- **Chief Data and AI Officer (CDAO):** Focuses on managing data as a strategic asset, overseeing data governance, analytics, and the ethical deployment of AI. Bridges the gap between data-driven insights and decision-making, ensuring that AI tools are leveraged responsibly and effectively.
- **Chief Information Security and Risk Officer (CISRO):** Integrates cybersecurity with enterprise risk management. Oversees the organisation's security posture, ensuring resilience against emerging threats while managing broader operational risks.

CUSTOMER AND CULTURE LEADERSHIP: HOLISTIC HUMAN-CENTRIC ROLES

The future organisation will place equal importance on the external customer experience and the internal employee culture, consolidating leadership to reflect this interconnected priority.

- **Chief Experience and Engagement Officer (CXEO):** Unifies customer experience (CX), employee experience (EX), and brand engagement under one role. Ensures that external and internal stakeholders have seamless, positive interactions with the organisation.
- **Chief People and Inclusion Officer (CPIO):** Combines traditional HR functions with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Focuses on creating a supportive, inclusive workplace culture that attracts, retains, and develops talent.

STRATEGIC AND EXTERNAL ROLES: FUTURE-READY ADAPTABILITY

Future organisations will need executives who can anticipate change, forge partnerships, and ensure alignment with evolving market demands.

- **Chief Strategy and Ecosystems Officer (CSEO):** Oversees long-term strategy development and manages the organisation's ecosystem of partners, suppliers, and alliances. Ensures adaptability by building networks that enable collaborative innovation and growth.
- **Chief Impact and Responsibility Officer (CIRO):** Combines corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability, and stakeholder impact initiatives. Focuses on ensuring that the organisation meets its ESG goals and aligns with societal expectations.

OPERATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FUTURE C-SUITE

- **Cross-Functional Collaboration:** Future executives will operate as a tightly integrated team, breaking down silos to enable seamless communication and

shared accountability. A unified leadership platform, such as a digital decision-making hub, will facilitate collaboration.

- **AI-Enhanced Decision-Making:** Executives will rely heavily on AI-driven insights to make data-informed decisions. Tools like predictive analytics and digital twins will provide real-time scenarios for planning and execution.
- **Adaptive Roles:** C-suite positions will no longer be rigidly defined. Executives will be expected to evolve their responsibilities as market conditions and organisational priorities shift.

THE BENEFITS OF A STREAMLINED FUTURE C-SUITE

- **Clarity and Accountability:** Consolidating overlapping roles ensures clear ownership of strategic priorities, reducing confusion and inefficiencies.
- **Agility and Resilience:** Fewer, broader roles enable faster decision-making and greater adaptability in responding to change.
- **Sustainability and Responsibility:** Integrated roles, such as the CFSO and CIRO, align financial, environmental, and social goals, ensuring the organisation thrives in the long term.
- **Technology-Driven Growth:** A unified CTIO ensures that technology remains a central enabler of innovation, operational excellence, and customer satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The C-suite of the future will prioritise simplicity, integration, and adaptability. By streamlining roles and fostering collaboration, organisations can better align leadership with their strategic goals, ensuring they remain competitive and resilient in an ever-changing world. This new model will not only eliminate the inefficiencies of the current “C-suite spaghetti” but also empower leaders to focus on creating meaningful value for customers, employees, and society at large.

Future organisations must embrace this streamlined model to ensure clarity in leadership, alignment of priorities, and the ability to thrive in a complex, dynamic environment.

Consider this, you can combine spaghetti carbonara with bolognese with meatballs with puttanesca - it's edible (just), enjoyable. No. Each of these dishes excels by themselves and should be treated as such, but when combined with a matched full menu and wine the meal becomes something different.

Neil Catton is an experienced strategist and recognised thought leader on the ethical and structural implications of emerging technologies. Through his *Next Evolution* series, Neil explores how legacy institutions must adapt to remain relevant in an era shaped by AI, spatial computing, quantum systems, and digital transformation.

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