



CEO

REPORT

2025



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CEO Report: A blueprint for future CEOs

Utilizing first- and third-party data, we've analyzed 25,000 candidates and current CEOs to uncover key insights into the evolving landscape of executive leadership.

These findings offer valuable guidance for organizations selecting their next leader and aspiring executives mapping out their careers.



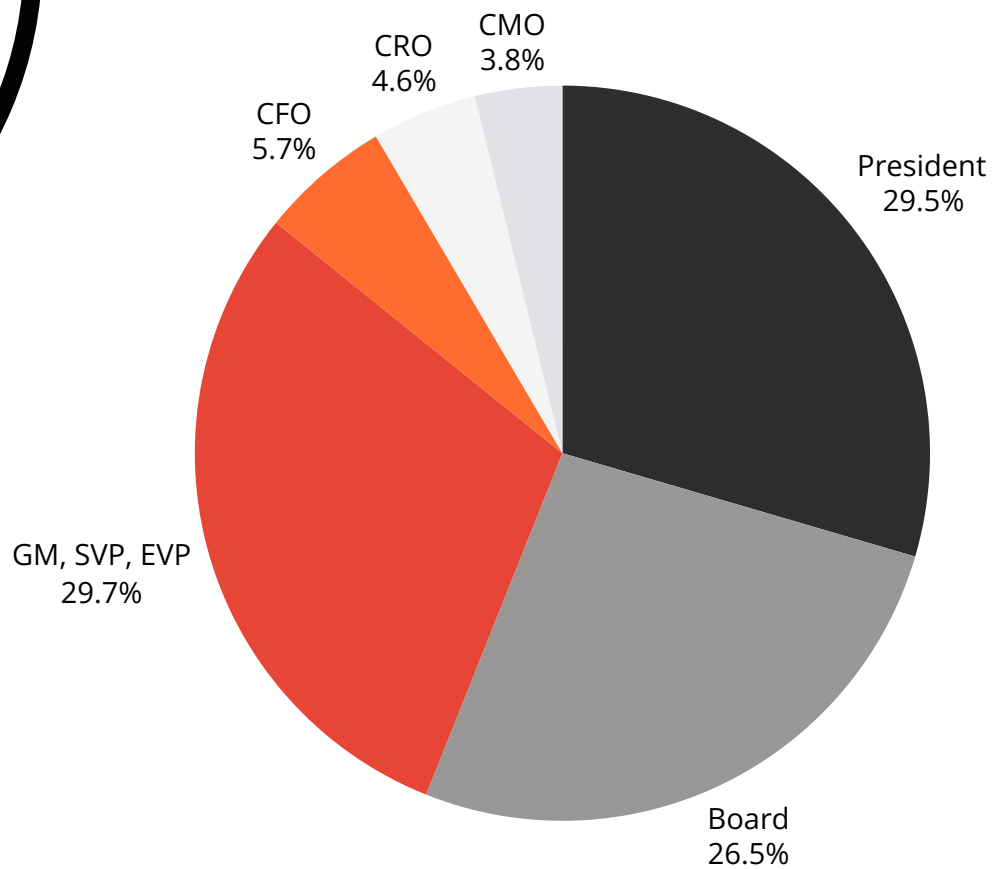
CEO Report: Experience is the defining factor

Organizations are overwhelmingly drawn to candidates who have already navigated the complexities of the top job.

While 40% of CEO candidates boast prior experience in the role, a staggering 69% of those hired have previously served as CEOs.

This emphasis on prior experience reflects a deep organizational need for confidence. Companies are less likely to take risks when selecting their top executives.





Mapping the CEO journey: Key roles that shape leadership

The average CEO holds nine roles across seven different companies throughout their career.

Certain roles stand out as pivotal.

President positions (29.3%) are the most common, both as stepping stones to and from the CEO role. Board memberships and advisory roles (26.3%) also play a significant part in shaping a CEO's broader strategic perspective. Meanwhile, senior leadership positions like General Manager (GM), SVP, or EVP (29.5%) often serve as proving grounds for operational and leadership capabilities.

Roles like CFO (5.7%), CRO (4.6%), and CMO (3.8%)—while less common overall—remain critical in specific industries, reflecting the varied skill sets needed across sectors.

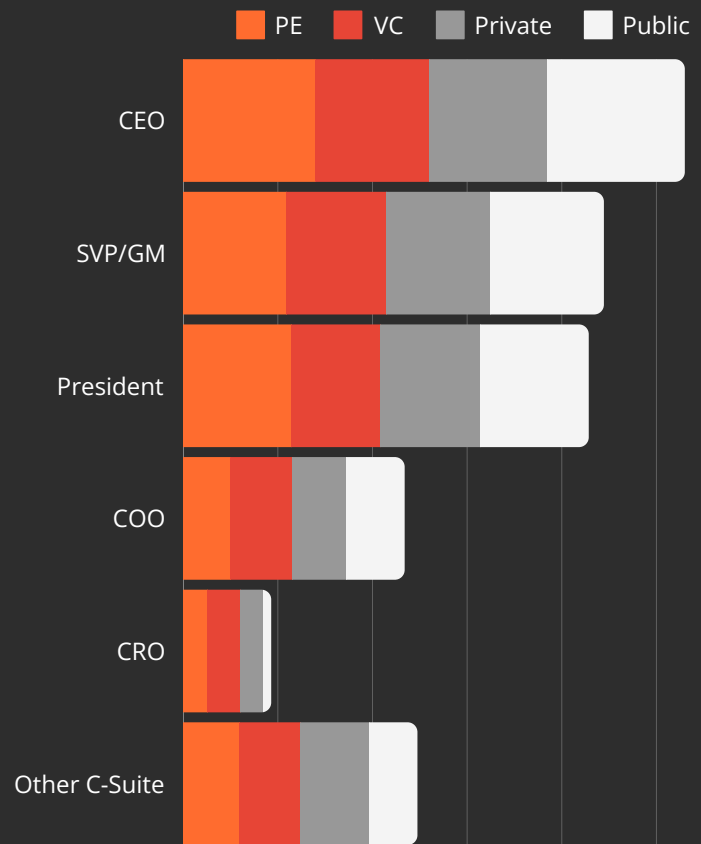


The pathway to CEO hiring varies by asset class

Public companies prioritize candidates with broad leadership experience and an ability to navigate complex stakeholder landscapes. For these organizations, roles like SVP, EVP, GM, and President are often springboards to the CEO position.

In **venture capital-backed companies**, the focus shifts. These fast-paced environments demand operational expertise and growth-oriented leadership, often favoring candidates who have served as COOs or CROs. The emphasis is on leaders who can drive rapid scaling and execution.

Private equity-backed and privately held organizations, on the other hand, strike a balance between operational know-how and strategic vision. They tend to look for candidates who have already demonstrated success as CEOs or Presidents while valuing hands-on leadership experience.



CEO Hiring by Asset Class

The profile of a successful CEO candidate varies significantly depending on the type of organization doing the hiring.



The impact of company size

Beyond industry and ownership structure, company size plays a defining role in shaping leadership requirements for CEO hiring.

1

SMALLER ORGANIZATIONS

Smaller organizations—those with fewer than 100 employees—often seek leaders with deep functional expertise. These CEOs are more likely to come from roles like COO, where hands-on operational experience is a hallmark.

2

MEDIUM-SIZED ORGANIZATIONS

Medium-sized companies, which typically range from 100 to 1,000 employees, require leaders who can bridge scaling and strategy. These organizations tend to favor candidates with a mix of operational experience and prior CEO roles, preparing them to navigate growth challenges while maintaining a strategic outlook.

3

LARGER ORGANIZATIONS

For larger organizations with over 1,000 employees, the stakes—and the expectations—are even higher. These companies often demand seasoned executives with extensive leadership experience, including prior CEO and President roles. The ability to manage complexity and lead at scale becomes paramount.

Navigating the path to CEO - insights from our experts



BRAD WESTVELD, PARTNER AT ON PARTNERS

“Many executives aiming for a CEO role focus on leading a \$500M company or larger, but there’s often a lack of awareness about the value of starting smaller. Securing that *first* CEO role—even at a \$100M company—can be a critical step in building the experience and credibility needed to lead at a larger scale down the road.”

TARA FLICKINGER, PARTNER AT ON PARTNERS

“In niche industries, deep expertise and strong relationships often outweigh prior CEO experience. In two recent PE searches, both hires were first-time CEOs chosen for their intimate industry knowledge—critical for companies late in their hold periods with no time for a learning curve.”



JAKE ESPENLAUB, PARTNER AT ON PARTNERS

“Checking the right boxes for your first CEO opportunity; deep industry expertise, company size, GTM overlap, or successful work history with the Board—is critical. The reality is, if your first CEO opportunity isn’t successful, it can reset your timeline for another shot at a similar role, regardless of the circumstances. Taking the time to align your strengths with the right opportunity can make all the difference in building a lasting CEO trajectory.”



TIM CONTI, PARTNER AT ON PARTNERS

“For those aiming to step into their first CEO role, don’t be discouraged by the preference for prior experience—many first-time CEOs deliver exceptional results. To prepare, focus on owning a true P&L and demonstrating accountability for financial outcomes. Successful P&L leadership is key to earning a Board’s confidence.”





BRYAN BUCK, MANAGING PARTNER

What this means for aspiring CEOs

For those aspiring to the corner office, the message is clear: experience, adaptability, and strategic focus are essential.

While the path to leadership may not be linear, understanding the trends can help you position yourself effectively. Building a career that includes diverse roles, operational expertise, and opportunities to influence strategy at the highest levels is key.

For hiring organizations, these insights offer a blueprint for identifying leaders who align with their specific needs. By understanding how company type, size, and strategic priorities influence leadership profiles, organizations can make more informed choices about who will guide their future.





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Thank you for exploring ON Partners' latest insights into CEO selection and leadership trends {published in **Fast Company**}.

We hope this report has provided valuable perspectives for both hiring organizations and aspiring leaders seeking to navigate the evolving executive landscape.

At ON Partners, we're committed to delivering unparalleled talent intelligence to provide the most comprehensive market insights. Stir up the dialogue with us here:

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