



Rising to the top

How inclusive hiring practices strengthen cybersecurity and resilience


prepared by

Accenture Cybersecurity Forum
Women's Council

About the Women's Council

The Accenture Cybersecurity Forum (ACF) Women's Council is a pioneering community of global cybersecurity leaders that convenes regularly to discuss issues of pressing concern to CISOs. **The mission of the ACF Women's Council is to increase the representation, collaboration, and advancement of women cyber leaders.** Toward those goals, we recently engaged with senior cybersecurity professionals, both men and women, to produce this report.

The ACF Women's Council first set out in 2020 to explore what gets in the way at the mid-point of women's careers in cybersecurity and what has made the difference in continuing to stick with the profession and rise to the top. What we learned about the barriers to getting women to the top positions in cybersecurity and the recommendations for organizations to address them is detailed in the report: [Jumping the Hurdles: Moving Women in Cybersecurity's Top Spots.](#)



An open letter to CEOs and board members:

Rising to the top

Many women bring unique strengths to the CISO position. But in our experience, many enterprises do not benefit from hiring practices and decisions that could otherwise strengthen their cybersecurity posture.

Women held only 17% of Fortune 500 CISOs positions in 2021, according to industry analysis.¹ It is clear that women are underrepresented in the senior ranks and it's not due to lack of attention on the issue or lack of talent. There is something else afoot.

That is why we set out to understand the difference in how women and men go for the top spot. By engaging successful senior cybersecurity executives, we learned some surprising differences and gained valuable advice.

Executives spoke about what it takes to get a woman a seat at the table with other C-level executives; the importance of demonstrating confidence, not just competence; the value of mentors; the power of personal resiliency; and perspectives on the path and pace of their career journeys.

Based on the findings, and our experience interacting with scores of senior cybersecurity professionals through the Accenture Cybersecurity Forum, we highlight three insights that can help enterprises secure diverse talent and help women cyber executives seize the opportunity to be a CISO:

We hope these findings will be useful for women, management teams and board members as they collaborate to enable greater inclusion and make their enterprises more secure and resilient.



Valerie Abend

Senior Managing Director,
Global Cyber Strategy Lead
ACF Women's Council Executive Sponsor



Lisa O'Connor

Managing Director,
Accenture Security, Global Cybersecurity R&D Lead
ACF Women's Council Chair

Cybersecurity is ripe for inclusion and innovation.

Accenture [research](#) found that a culture of equality—a workplace environment that helps everyone advance to higher positions—is a powerful multiplier of innovation and growth. In fact, employees’ innovation mindset is five times higher in the most-equal cultures than in the least equal ones. That finding is particularly important in the field of cybersecurity where innovation is occurring on both sides of the cyber battlefield. Senior cybersecurity executives pointed to the fact that females demonstrate high emotional intelligence and an ability to build relationships and bring people together, creating a culture where much-needed good risk-taking is encouraged. Security professionals and hiring managers should not discount those traits because a culture that encourages the team to be proactive and take good risks positions the enterprise to solve difficult cybersecurity challenges.

Put your hat in the ring, do not wait to be invited.

Women may be reluctant to pursue a position if they do not “check all the boxes.” The public scrutiny CISOs can suffer through during an incident is not for everyone. However, when the women we spoke with decided to pursue the CISO role, they typically succeeded in a matter of months. Successful women aspirants were more likely to be recruited from another company and to apply for a CISO position directly than their male counterparts.

If you want the top job, do not wait to be invited; go get it.

Senior management support is foundational to success.

Being a good CISO is not enough to be successful. Support from the executive suite and the board is foundational when the CISO needs to lead leaders during a cyber incident. Senior management support should be deliberately assessed as a part of the aspirant’s consideration process. But support works both ways. Hiring managers need to be transparent about the hiring process and deliberate about not relying on the network they know. Call on internal recruiters or a hiring firm that can actively source gender diverse talent. There also should be diversity among the people doing the interviewing. Do not take support for granted. Fifty percent of our women colleagues who accepted the CISO/CSO role underestimated the importance of senior management support.



Key insights

Tenure in a tenuous position

Varied career paths

The CISO as mentor

Top spot evaluation criteria

The power of personal resiliency

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43% of all respondents rated professional risk as a “very” or “most important” factor in declining a CISO or CSO role.

The CISO role is often held accountable for breaches, even though they are rarely responsible for the vulnerability that is exposed and exploited by cyber attackers. Cybersecurity and resiliency are a function of multiple factors beyond the CISO’s control, including business transformations that do not consider cyber risks, innovative threat actors, extended supply chains and management inattention. Nonetheless, CISOs are defending against persistent threats and high-profile incidents that regularly capture national headlines and put their professional reputations on the line. Concerns about professional risk certainly factor into decisions about accepting a leadership position. However, successful women CISOs encourage other women to accept the risks.

“The CISO has a very visible role. Everyone knows something is going to go wrong; it’s not if, but when. You’re under enormous pressure from the board and leadership to resolve issues quickly. There is a fear factor that you might say the wrong thing. People can overcome this by understanding the legal requirements; be sure you’re operating off the facts.”

“As a CISO you’re in the spotlight. You have to be willing to take on high risk and visibility. You have to feel confident in your abilities and your team and be able to stand up in front of your board and speak to the risks and decisions that need to be made. That can be a scary thing to step into for some people. As a woman in a male-dominated workforce, you will need mentors to bounce ideas off of and to provide career development support.”

“Women often don’t want to be in the spotlight but once they build confidence, the magic happens.”

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There are many very strong and qualified women candidates and when they throw their hat into the ring, the market responds positively. But they have to be proactive. More than half of all respondents (54%) have applied for or been offered the CISO position three times or more. However, the difference in frequency between males and females is significant. For example, 53% of male respondents said they had applied for or been offered the CISO four times or more compared to only 7% of female respondents. Women should feel comfortable being more aggressive in pursuing their career aspirations.

One noticeable difference in the responses of males and females is the time it took to become a CISO after starting their search. Seventy-six percent of females said their search took six months or less. Only 30% of males said the same. This does not mean that women have an advantage over men but that the difference in pace does suggest that women who seek out the role typically bring strong qualifications to the table.

Respondents share a variety of candid perspectives on attaining the CISO position:

“It is not uncommon to think you are in over your head, but you worked to get this role. You should feel worthy. Imposter syndrome is self-inflicted. You should take on this role with confidence even if you don’t know everything.”

“Get over the fear that it might not work out. Don’t let that hold you back. Some CISOs move on because they want a better fit with the culture, etc. Plenty of CISOs who have been fired (and other C-level executives, too) continued on to successful careers.”

“Be bold. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. If you’re not uncomfortable, you’re not growing, you’re not learning new things.”



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85% of all respondents have directly encouraged people they mention or coach to apply for a CISO role.

Leading security executives take mentorship seriously: just as leaders work on their professional development, they need to ensure that they are fostering leadership growth within their high performing teams. Strong leadership skills are essential during a cybersecurity event. Leadership weaknesses can undermine incident response.

During in-depth conversations, respondents spoke about the value of mentor relationships in helping their own careers and the careers of their team members.

“Find role models to teach you the skills you need. Don’t be afraid to ask others for their time and advice and don’t focus on just women as mentors. You need just many men as women to be your mentors. And don’t tie your career success to one leader—when that leader leaves, you have to wait for them to bring you on board at their new company or you’re forced to find a new champion.”

“You need to identify the characteristics that will hamper your team’s ability to lead and develop a plan to address and improve. Provide them with mentoring, support, training and resources they need to advance. You can teach the technical skills, but it’s tougher to teach how to lead senior leaders.”

“A good CISO is a coach, cheerleader, a CEO of their team. You need the ability to delegate, to lead, not do.”

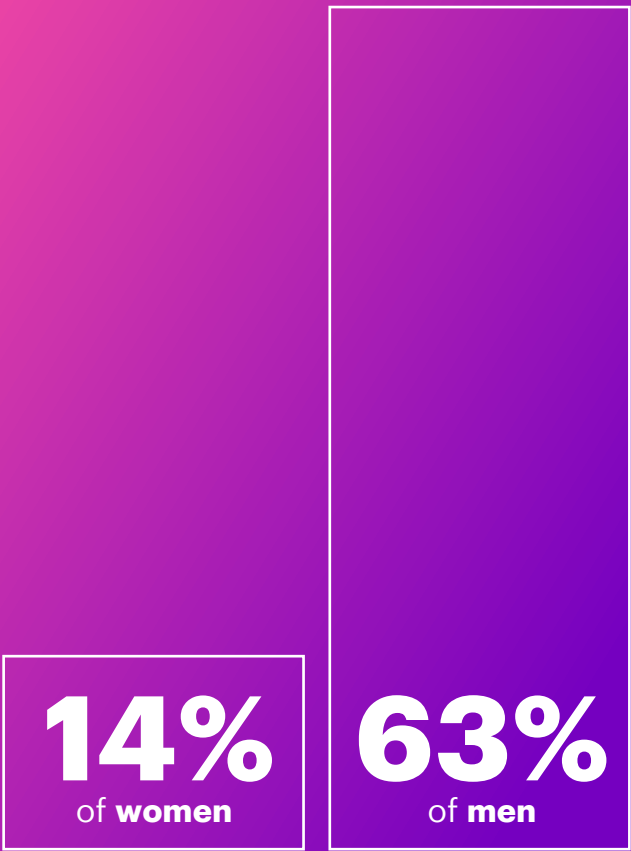
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reported they have declined a CISO opportunity

This discrepancy may be explained by a variety of reasons: the frequency that offers are presented; differences in how each group pursues their search, how they conduct due diligence about an opportunity and the length of time they engage in the interviewing and hiring process.

We asked respondents why they might turn down a CISO offer. Respondents said a variety of factors play in the decision to decline an opportunity.

“You don’t want to be a CISO at a company where you’re not making a difference. If you’re not happy it shows in your work.”

“You’re taking on very high risk, particularly in the financial sector where regulators can go after you and have you fired. This is a personal decision: Is the reward worth the risk?”

Among female respondents, the most frequently cited “very important” or “most important” factors included “affinity or satisfaction with current role” and “professional goal other than CISO.”

Among male respondents the “very important” or “most important” factors that influenced the decision to decline an opportunity were “senior management sponsorship of support” and “corporate culture.”

Respondents also were provided a list of factors and asked which they overestimated the importance of and which they underestimated in their journey to the CISO role.

Commentary from respondents typically focused on the importance of capabilities beyond technology.

“Technology acumen ascends you to CISO role, but now you have to look broader at the business threats, the culture of your organization, your ability to engage with the business. Your success as a CISO now has nothing to do with your technology capabilities.”

“As a leader you need to demonstrate an ability to interact with various business groups, maintain a client service mentality and build trust if you expect to engage them around the importance of security. For a pure technologist, these skills may be a struggle.”

“You need to be an empathetic leader and have strong relationship skills to rally the organization around security since security is everyone’s responsibility.”

“As women, we solve tactical problems every day, but the role needs the ability to see the big picture and be able to present a picture of the overall risk posture of the enterprise. Understand the business strategy of your organization and how your executive leadership looks at security and the value they place on it.”

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Thirty percent of female respondents said they overestimated the importance of work-life balance. Only 14% of males said the same.

Very few respondents (8%) of either gender overestimated the importance of senior management sponsorship or support, or communication skills, confirming management sponsorship as a key success factor. Similarly, only about one in five respondents of either gender overestimated the importance of business operator skills.

In terms of underestimating the importance of several factors that are important to professional success and personal satisfaction, there were also some notable differences in the responses across gender.

The importance of senior management sponsorship and support is rarely overestimated, but 50% of female respondents and 21% of male respondents said that they underestimated its importance.

Similar differences emerged in underestimating the importance of corporate culture: 50% of female respondents; 29% of male respondents. Female respondents (30%) were also more likely than their male peers (7%) to underestimate the importance of communication skills. Both men (80%) and women (90%) and said they did not underestimate the importance of family. In a demanding field like cybersecurity, that perspective is admirable.

“Strong technical acumen is important, but you don’t need to be a subject matter expert.”



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21%

of respondents overestimated the importance of work-life balance

Security leaders find the right balance of personal and professional responsibilities. Only 4% of respondents said they overestimated the importance of family in weighing a decision to accept a CISO/CSO role.

Respondents offered some specific advice for accomplishing the career balancing act.

“This is an intense and time-consuming job, so you need to have strong relationships (partner, spouse, kids) and establish a healthy balance with work/family/health. If these things are out of balance, your career will suffer.”

“Maintain a resilient mind-set. You are going to have challenges and failures and need to get back up and move forward.”

“Feel comfortable relying on others to provide the expertise. Build a good team of people you can trust and delegate to. Have peers who are the SMEs on the various domains like cyber, governance and compliance.”

“Take time to manage your mental health/stress – personal resilience is important. Have a peer to complain to and/or bounce ideas off of; someone you implicitly trust (a “leadership buddy” or career coach) as it’s lonely at the top.”

Rising to the top



More women will rise to the role of CISO when we see changes in attitude, hiring and career development practices among hiring managers and influencers.

The CEO, CIO, CFO, Chief Risk Officer, and board members must be intentional because diversity and inclusion fuel innovative problem solving. **Accenture's Getting to Equal 2019 research found that in the most-equal and diverse cultures, an innovation mindset is 11 times greater than in the least-equal and diverse cultures.**

Because an innovative mindset is essential in cybersecurity, where new threats are constant, innovation and diversity are particularly important. Women CISOs bring unique skillsets to this incredibly challenging discipline. They prioritize relationships and communication. They understand the importance of authenticity and being emotionally vulnerable with those around them. They encourage a stronger sense of belonging and well-being within their organizations, resulting in better retention, stronger security team performance and better company outcomes in a competitive talent market and challenging threat landscape.

But women cybersecurity executives may have to change, too, if they want to rise to the top. Women can learn from successful male and female CISOs to broaden their thinking and assumptions about the journey to CISO.

Next steps towards greater inclusion that strengthens cybersecurity and resilience

The following outlines a set of specific steps each group should consider to achieve greater inclusion in hiring practices and decisions:

C-suite executives, board of directors

- ❑ Have an open talent scouting and recruiting process with board oversight and engagement.
- ❑ Help others recognize that inclusion and diversity empower the innovation and creative problem-solving needed for security.
- ❑ Make hiring practices more transparent.
- ❑ Implement more inclusive hiring and promotion policies and practices. Keep inclusion and diversity intentional, ensure this is an ongoing corporate and board priority.
- ❑ Hold hiring managers accountable for supporting women in their careers.
- ❑ Mentor high-potential women candidates for the CISO role.
- ❑ Include women in C-level cybersecurity exercises.
- ❑ Provide aspirants opportunities to develop the suite of skills required of a CISO.
- ❑ Create a culture that is psychologically safe, where CISOs and their teams can take the professional risks needed to be successful defending the enterprise.
- ❑ Drive home the point that cyber resilience is a company-wide responsibility.
- ❑ Actively support, collaborate and, during an incident, follow the CISO's lead to make the business resilient.

Women cybersecurity executives

- ❑ Pursue a position even if you may not meet all the stated requirements.
- ❑ Have confidence in all of your skills that have gotten you to your current position. Leadership skills will be more important than technical skills going forward.
- ❑ Let others know you are ready, interested and looking for the right role at the right organization.
- ❑ Network with executive placement services that focus on filling CISO positions.
- ❑ Ask to participate in C-Suite events such as quarterly board meetings and leadership tabletop exercises.
- ❑ Engage with senior management to build relationships and be recognized as a business operator and leader.
- ❑ Get experience managing teams during a cyber attack.
- ❑ Get comfortable in the spotlight during high-visibility incidents.
- ❑ Actively learn from the journey of predecessors and other successful CISOs, expand your thinking on the paths to CISO.
- ❑ Ask managers and mentors for candid feedback on your opportunities for improvement as a leader, listen with an open mind.
- ❑ Build your personal board of advisors with leaders who can challenge you and advise you in your journey.
- ❑ Be a mentor to others. Sharing what you have learned enables the next generation of leaders.
- ❑ Sharpen your executive communications skills.
- ❑ Build your business acumen as successful CISOs communicate cybersecurity through a business lens.



What steps will you take?

For all leaders, executives and board members, we encourage you to consider the recommendations and commentary in this report to find the two or three that would be most transformative to your organization. What practices could your organization adopt and what practices could you personally adopt to make the journey to leadership more inclusive?

And for our women aspirants, build the recommendations into your professional development plan. We could say pick 4-5, but we know you will consider all of them.

If we all take these steps, we have the ability to move the needle on bringing more diversity and inclusion to the role of CISO, further ensuring the resilience of our companies and economies.

References:

¹ <https://cybersecurityventures.com/women-hold-17-percent-of-fortune-500-ciso-positions-in-2021/>

² https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/thought-leadership-assets/pdf/accenture-equality-equals-innovation-gender-equality-research-report-iwd-2019.pdf

³ All quotations within this report have been transcribed accurately from conversations during the course of our research with senior cybersecurity executives. To protect the anonymity of these executives, their comments are presented without attribution.

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