

# CISO: To Be or Not to Be

## The Cyber Security Recruiting & Authentication Dilemma

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### Executive Summary

Recruiting a Chief Information Security Officer (CISO) is crucial for any organization looking to protect itself from cyber threats. The CISO is responsible for developing and implementing a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy, as well as overseeing a team of security professionals. However, finding the right CISO for your organization can take time and effort as the demand for skilled cybersecurity professionals continues to outpace supply. An experienced cybersecurity professional can also be a valuable asset in your recruiting process to ensure you find the right CISO for your organization. To help you in your search, here are some key and unique factors to consider when recruiting a CISO.

### To be or not to be a CISO?

In today's digital landscape, Cybersecurity is a top concern for organizations of all sizes and industries. A breach in security can result in significant financial losses and damage to a company's reputation, putting sensitive customer and employee information at risk. This is why many organizations are now investing to hire a Chief Information Security Officer (CISO) to lead their cybersecurity efforts.

If you do decide to hire a CISO, here are some key factors to consider during the recruiting process:

1. **Technical expertise:** The CISO must deeply understand cybersecurity technology and best practices. This includes **hands-on** knowledge of network security, data protection, risk management and also software development.
  - **Hiring Tip#1: Check twice if your selected CISO lacks practical, hands-on experience in a similar operating environment to yours. Experience with similar scale and complexity matters.**
2. **Leadership skills:** In addition to technical expertise, the CISO must also be very good to orchestrate the best people, process, products and platform strategy

while managing a team of security and non-security professionals. The CISO must communicate effectively with technical and non-technical stakeholders and be able to inspire and motivate a team of people that are often not direct reports.

- **Hiring Tip#2: Avoid the CISO-nerd, flashing an “old world, long list of Security certifications” badge.**
3. **Industry experience:** Finding a CISO with experience in your industry can be helpful. However, if you really want to push your organization forward and beyond the typical comfort zone, find a CISO from a more complex cybersecurity industry than yours.
    - **Hiring Tip#3: Whenever possible, find a CISO that comes from a more cybersecurity-complex industry.**
  4. **Cultural/expectation fit:** As with any executive-level hire, it's crucial to find a CISO who fits well with your organization's culture and values. This executive will be a key leadership team member, reporting to the CEO and perhaps even to the Board of Directors directly.
    - **Hiring Tip#4: Make sure the CISO can park their ego at the door and focus their confidence and experience on making your organization the priority, not their personal brand.**
  5. **Communication skills:** The CISO is the Company spokesperson regarding the Company's Security credibility and reputation. Clients, Business Partners and regulatory agencies often submit inquiry to the CISO without much notice:
    - **Hiring Tip#5: Make sure the CISO is a good communicator. Test this skill during the hiring process.**

Following are some common mistakes organizations make when hiring a CISO:

- **Focusing solely on technical skills:** While technical expertise is important, it's not the only factor to consider when hiring a CISO. Leadership skills, industry experience, and cultural fit are important qualities for a candidate. (Please refer to [Hiring tip#1](#))
- **Not thoroughly evaluating candidates:** It's crucial to thoroughly evaluate potential CISOs, not only through interviews. Don't just rely on a candidate's resume. Formal and informal, back channel reference checks and role-plays are essential to learn the 'true spirit' and capabilities of the candidates you vet.
  - **Hiring Tip#6: Add at least three reference checks and one role-play in the selection process. Indirect, back channel references can often reveal insights that are far more valuable than the typical prepared references.**
- **Hiring someone without cybersecurity experience:** Yes, it can happen when a company rushes to fill the position to “tick the box” or fulfill a time based objective.
  - **Hiring Tip#7: Don't do it; you will regret it later.**
- **Failing to clearly define the CISO's role and responsibilities:** Before beginning the recruitment process, it's important to define the role and responsibilities of the

CISO clearly. This will help you attract and **retain** the right candidate. Clarity of purpose and objectives is essential.

- **Hiring Tip#8: Build a draft CISO Org chart and discuss it with the candidates. Be open to adapting it. Test how the candidate responds to real-time planning, discussion and priority setting.**
- **Trusting your head-hunter well beyond their limits:** Your trusted head-hunter knows your company inside and out but typically they may not possess the depth of Cybersecurity experience required to effectively deliver the best, most credible candidate. While they might be exceptional in finding sound general-tech executives, they typically cannot spot the important evil in the cyber risk details.
  - **Hiring Tip#9: Support your trusted head-hunter with an additional, cybersecurity-savvy resource to consult during your selection process. Pick a Cyber-specialized recruiter otherwise.**

### **Why a Cybersecurity specialized recruiter is so critical in the process:**

There are several reasons why it's important for a recruiter to have specific cyber skills when hiring a CISO:

- **A deep understanding of the cybersecurity industry:** A recruiter with specific cyber skills will have a thorough understanding of the cybersecurity industry, as well as the ability to evaluate a candidate's technical expertise, leadership skills, industry experience, and cultural fit.
- **Access to a network and the ability to attract cyber talents:** The demand for skilled cybersecurity professionals is high, and the competition for top talent can be fierce. A recruiter with cyber skills will likely have a network of contacts in the cybersecurity industry and the credibility to convince them to join your organization.

### **Conclusions**

There are many recruiters that "specialize" in CISO roles. **However, only true practitioners and subject matter experts** can discern and confirm the specific cyber skills required of an enterprise-level CISO. The subject matter expert's knowledge and expertise can help you go beyond the standard vetting process. The discipline to insist on deep, practical experience as part of your vetting process will ensure you are truly attracting the best talent and evaluating candidates' skills and competencies properly to protect your organization with the leadership it needs to guard against cyber threats. **Who are you trusting with this most important assessment of CISO talent for your business?**

## About the author & advisor

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Andrea Rossi is the Cybersecurity Recruiting Practice Advisor for Corsica Partners, a Senior IT & Cybersecurity expert and a growth consultant providing business advisory services to high growth companies. Mr Rossi is a recognized leader in the Identity & Cybersecurity industries and a subject matter expert. He served 20+ years as a business executive and leader in the software industry. His experience includes start-ups and large, multi-national corporations as a result of successful company exits. As co-founder of CrossIdeas, he led a team that quickly rose to be a recognized industry leader, resulting in a successful acquisition by the IBM Corporation. Andrea is also an active mentor with 'Lead the future', mentoring Italian STEM students to achieve international excellence, and is the Cybersecurity Chapter Lead at the Alma Mater Alumni of the University of Bologna.