

# Inside the Role of Chief Digital Officer



Sree Sreenivasan  
Chief Digital Officer  
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Museum of Art  
New York City

IIC Partners interviewed Sree Sreenivasan, Chief Digital Officer of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to gain firsthand insight of the enigmatic role of the CDO.

## What is the most challenging facet of being a Chief Digital Officer?

First of all, most people don't know what a CDO is, so I am explaining it all the time. Now, in addition to the Chief Digital Officer role, there is a Chief Data Officer role, which adds to some of the confusion. This is a very exciting time to be a CDO, because you've got an opportunity to work across the institution to connect with various staff at various levels, and interact with the very top leadership as well, and it's all exciting and all good.

## How does the CDO work with the CMO?

It depends on the institution. At The Met, I have a wonderful colleague who is our Chief Marketing Officer, Cynthia Round. She and I collaborate and share ideas on multiple projects. We are always looking out for and helping each other, because the goal is not to worry about our individual departments but to see how we can help our institution in the best possible way. At The Met, Cynthia handles traditional marketing including advertising, tourism marketing and other projects like that. My team handles social media and email marketing, but we really work together and are in very close touch.

## As "digital" becomes the new normal, does the CDO role replace the CMO role or does the CMO position evolve to more heavily emphasize digital?

Well, I certainly hope (it's the latter) because I love our current CMO! So at least for me – I could see no other way with it working at The Met. Certainly at some other institutions the CDO and CMO will mingle together. Eventually, I think the CEO will be the Chief Digital Officer because he or she will have grown up using digital technology and understanding it, so it's hard to predict which of these roles are going to evolve.

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Some people say that the CDO role is a transitory role in the history of companies. I used to say, when I was CDO at Columbia University, that at one point I'm sure there was a "Chief Telephone Officer" who explained how the telephone worked. Eventually, everyone figured out how to use the telephone, so they didn't need a "Chief Telephone Officer" any longer.

**Many executives leading the function did not grow up in the Internet age. How will the CDO role evolve over time?**

I think it’s perfectly fine that they weren’t born into or grew up in the Internet age. All that matters is your mindset. I always say, when hiring people, that we need people with a digital skill set and a digital mindset. It is far easier to teach the skill set than it is to teach the mindset. One of my favorite digital media co-professors at Columbia University was a gentleman named Sig Gissler. He is in his seventies and not the most tech-heavy user, but he understood exactly how to use it and how it can benefit journalists and media professionals.

**What do you look for when hiring managers?**

I look for domain expertise, openness to new ideas and a great track record of doing new innovative things. I look for someone who has the ability to manage people well, though I’m also willing to give people the chance to be a manager for the first time. I want people with a sense of humor and are active on social media. This doesn’t mean they have to have tens of thousands of followers, but participate and see whether they are using social media as a listening device. I want to see a clean, smart and well-put together LinkedIn profile, not just because of the importance of LinkedIn but to see your tech savvy and your tech understanding.

**What makes a great CDO? What qualities are needed?**

The number one quality is patience and the ability to not lord it over people who you might feel are not as cool, hip or as tech savvy as you. You’ve got to be very patient. The folks who don’t have technology experience but are experts in their field are there for a reason. You need to be able to work with them in a way that makes sense and really works for what you are trying to do.

**How would you describe your leadership style?**

My leadership style is a lot of listening and a lot of wishing we were all in fewer meetings. My style is to be as collaborative and as helpful as possible. I work with a world-class team of folks and my job is to just support them. They do absolutely phenomenal work and I help them break down red tape when they encounter it, give them ideas when they need new ones or act as a sounding board for their existing ideas. It’s such a pleasure working with my team and giving them feedback. Everyone is a specialist and their job is to do what they know really well. They don’t have time to look around and discover new things, new tools and ideas - so I’m always sending them things and say, “Try this if it only makes sense, otherwise please don’t worry about it.” We are able to work together as partners, in what we are trying to do.

**What goals and benchmarks reflect a successful CDO?**

I call a successful CDO a CLO as well, Chief Listening Officer. A CDO serves as a way to bring about new ideas, new initiatives and new technologies that can help people across an institution. I tell folks that my job is to make everyone else’s work easier by using digital in smart effective ways. It doesn’t mean that everyone in the organization has to use digital. There might be one or two parts of the museum or more, where I would say, “You know what, you would be better off not using technology. Try something else.” Just the fact that I save them that time is itself a victory. You want to be real partners with people at various levels across the institution and serve as a resource for everybody. I work very closely with our CTO, where we are sharing ideas and collaborating in smart ways.

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**How can digital media drive profits, revenue, etc. for an organization? Since it is a cost center for many organizations and uncharted territory, how does it add value to the bottom line?**

At The Met, it's absolutely clear that our job is to connect the physical and the digital, the in-person and the online. We have a physical venue that is visited by six million people and a digital space that is visited by 30 - 40 million people. We need to connect the value behind digital media and how it drives people here and raises their awareness. Part of our mission is to get more people from around the world to appreciate and enjoy the art at The Met and art in general. With some wonderful funding that we have received from places like Bloomberg Philanthropies, we are able to achieve this and reach the world.

**How does the CDO fit into the organizational structure?**

In my mind, the CDO is a peer of the CTO. They work together, as the CTO does a lot of the infrastructure work and the CDO provides advice and counsel to make sure that everything is fitting with the CEOs strategy and overall vision. The CDO's role is to help with the strategy and think about how to use technology in smarter ways within the organization.

**How do you monitor and stay on top of digital trends?**

This is something that we all have to work on. I read a lot of blogs, spend a lot of time on twitter and follow interesting people who I know will always be giving me useful information. I keep trying new things and continue to be willing and open. A new community I really like is producthunt.com. It gives you direct access to founders of brand new companies and start-ups in all kinds of fields. I get at least three new ideas that are worth looking at every day, so that's 1,000 new ideas a year just from one site. You have to cull all of those resources and pick the ones that make the most sense to you and work on them.

**What is your perspective on the current state of the digital industry?**

I think we're going to see as much change in the next five years as we saw in the previous ten, and you know how much we saw in the previous ten. I am very optimistic about the digital industry and how it's going to help people in fields like nonprofits, etc. I remain concerned about big issues like privacy, how people use technology and how much information is being collected. But the CDO's role is to help advise companies and staff on how to use those tools.



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### What is the one piece of advice you would give an aspiring CDO?

Understand digital trends and how to use data, and be really good at the industry you want to be in. I didn't get my two CDO positions because I was good at digital, I got them because I was good at education and they thought I had a role to play in the digital media part of the museum. That knowledge comes first, and everything else follows.

Be familiar with the industry and have lots of ideas about how to use technology within the industry to make peoples' lives easier. I read a lot of different blogs and sites, for example CDOSummit.com. It lists job openings for CDOs, digital trends and recent candidate placements. When you find someone who was appointed a CEO or CDO, simply reverse engineer their resume and understand as much as you can about them. My CDO mentor Perry Hewitt, Chief Digital Officer of Harvard University, is also fantastic and can be found on twitter, @perryhewitt.

### Digital media has evolved so rapidly over the last few years, and trickled into every industry. What do you foresee as the next evolution for digital media?

I always tell people I am terrible at predicting because if I was good at predicting I wouldn't be working anymore because I would have made a lot of money having seen all the great changes happening in our digital world. The fact is that it's very hard to predict and I have been wrong on multiple occasions and I've been right on some. Digital is going to continue to be even more important than it is now and certain aspects of it are going to get more important. For example, things like geolocation.

We already talk about how great mobile is and how big mobile is, but it's going to be even bigger than that. Trying to figure out how that fits into your strategy and your workflow will be something we have to look at. We are going to see the democratization of digital media and digital access, as more people around the world are able to afford smartphones. Right now there are 900 million people with cell phones but they are not smartphones. Only about 100 million people have Internet access on their mobile device. Imagine what will happen when the rest of the 900 million users come online. We are already using texting and other features in ways that we could not have imagined. These are just some of the things that we're going to see in the weeks, months and years ahead.

*This interview was conducted by IIC Partners with special thanks to [Chadick Ellig](#). For more insights, you may follow Sree Sreenivasan on Twitter ([@sree](#)). Questions or comments can be directed to Thaddeus Andres, Senior Marketing & Communications Manager of IIC Partners, at [tandres@iicpartners.com](mailto:tandres@iicpartners.com).*