

INTERVIEW

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Study: Why CEOs Have Become 8 Years Older When Appointed

Interview with Farzad Saidi

- Faced with uncertainty and business complexity, firms seek more experienced generalists
- Research analyzes CEO career paths in the US from 2000 until 2023
- Interview with Farzad Saidi, EPOS Economic Research Center

Bonn, Mannheim, 13.05. 2026 – **In the US, the age at which CEOs are appointed increased by nearly eight years, on average, in the last two and a half decades. This increase is unexpected, as it is more than three times larger than aging in the broader, college-educated workforce. Researchers identify important drivers: Today’s executives build roughly ten years more professional experience and work across more diverse firms, industries, and job functions before becoming CEO. Economic uncertainties and technological disruptions, such as AI, could further reinforce this trend. These are insights of a new study by the EPOS Economic Research Center at the Universities of Bonn and Mannheim, published in the discussion paper “Aging at the Very Top.”**

Mr. Saidi, what do businesses seek in a CEO today, and what has changed over time?

Farzad Saidi: We document a fundamental shift in the age profile of newly appointed CEOs in the US, and this trend also holds true in Europe. Our analysis suggests that the aging trend can be explained by firms increasingly seeking leaders with generalist skills. They want CEOs who are able to navigate rising uncertainty and complex regulations across different geographic regions and business lines. Hence, there is a growing demand for skills that enable coordination, adaptation, and decision-making under heightened risk. Building such diverse capabilities takes years. That is why today’s CEOs have longer career paths and are older at appointment compared to their counterparts in 2000. We analyzed data from business networks from LinkedIn and BoardEx. They lend support to this trend, which is particularly pronounced in smaller, potentially non-listed firms. Unlike large firms that can cultivate their own generalists, smaller firms are forced to hire executives with such broad experience from outside.

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Do executives adapt to the new requirements?

Farzad Saidi: Yes, both sides are adjusting. Today's aspiring CEOs are willing to accept slower career progression and compensation growth in the short run to build the diverse experience profiles boards are looking for. We show that this is often a deliberate choice. Executives increase their job mobility on purpose to accumulate experiences across positions, firms, and sectors.

Could there be a downside of older CEOs?

Farzad Saidi: Generally speaking, older CEOs tend to take less risks. For boards, our findings highlight a potential trade-off between appointing older, more experienced CEOs to build resilience in uncertain environments and the potential cost to growth and innovation. Boards should be aware of this trade-off and adjust their governance structures accordingly. They need to ensure that stability does not come at the expense of a firm's long-term adaptability to modern-day challenges.

What are the effects of technological disruptions, such as AI, on CEO appointments?

As automation takes over routine tasks, the importance of coordination, adaptation, and decision-making may grow. Technological disruptions, such as AI, increase uncertainty, making experienced generalists potentially more valuable and possibly reinforcing the trend of older CEOs.

Our results offer an optimistic perspective on aging workforces in general. The trend toward older leadership is not a problem, but a rational market response to uncertain business environments. In the same vein, demographics can offer opportunities for experienced workers to remain productive and valued in the labor market.

The presented discussion paper is a publication without peer review of the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS. Access the full discussion paper here: <https://www.crctr224.de/research/discussion-papers/archive/dp746>

Find the list of all discussion papers of the CRC here: <https://www.crctr224.de/research/discussion-papers>.

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The Collaborative Research Center (CRC) Transregio 224 EPoS

Established in 2018, [the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS](#), a cooperation of the universities Bonn and Mannheim, is a long-term research institution funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). EPoS addresses three key societal challenges: how to promote equality of opportunity; how to regulate markets in light of the internationalization and digitalization of economic activity; and how to safeguard the stability of the financial system.

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