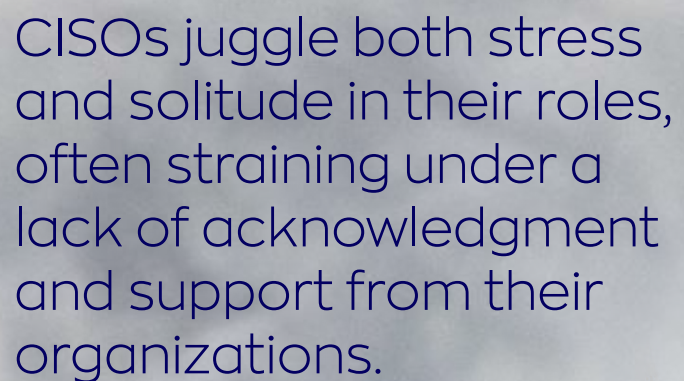# The 2024
CISO Burnout Report

CISOs juggle both stress and solitude in their roles, often straining under a lack of acknowledgment and support from their organizations.

In our 2024 investigation, we had candid chats with CISOs, ranging from buzzing startups to established giants across Europe and the US. Through these conversations, we uncovered a wealth of knowledge about the life of a CISO – unveiling the often underappreciated complexity and pressure of their roles.

First day as a CISO

One year later

With this study, our goal is to kickstart a broader conversation, shining a light on the vital work CISOs perform and making CISOs' wellness and work-life balance a standard practice across all industries.

Takeaways

Our conversations with CISOs revealed a stark reality – over 8 in 10 Chief Information Security Officers are highly stressed, compared to just a quarter of IT leaders.

Work-related stress leads to CISO burnout, compromised decision-making, and increased turnover. This disrupts project continuity and further deepens the cybersecurity talent gap.

Our findings highlight the urgent need to reach out to CEOs and senior HR leaders to redefine the CISO role, improve resources and tools, and bolster support systems. We need creative strategies to improve well-being, such as AwareGo's approach to work-life balance.

5 Key CISO Burnout Stats To Remember

Over 80% of CISOs classified themselves as "highly stressed."

63% of CISOs indicate that they receive little to no formal support in managing their roles, resulting in heightened stress levels.

56% of CISOs believe more personal resources and tools would decrease workload and reduce work-related stress levels.

50% of CISOs said their team members have quit or left their role in the last year due to the effects of workplace stress.

30% of Chief Information Security Officers reported that stress has compromised their ability to perform in their roles.

FIRE ALARM

The Challenges Faced By CISOs

CISOs "have an insurmountable task with unrealistic expectations, and there is a lack of support from their peers and from the leadership of the company," says Shamoun Siddiqui, CISO at Neiman Marcus Group.

According to a recent Marlin Hawk report, this situation often leads to significant stress for CISOs, contributing to the high turnover rate in the role – 46% of global CISOs have only been in their current role for two years or less.

Below, we outline the main stressors and challenges CISOs shared, highlighting what drives their professional strain and operational difficulties. Next, we dive into our findings, dissecting our study's data and offering insights to enhance support and management, with the ultimate goal of lessening CISO stress.

Adequate Budgets
Securing sufficient funding for security initiatives is a common stressor, as CISOs often struggle to obtain the budgets necessary to counter evolving cyber threats effectively. It's like bringing a go-kart to an F1 race – attempting to safeguard sensitive data with outdated software or inadequate cybersecurity measures.

Talent Shortages
Another hurdle is the recruitment of skilled cybersecurity professionals. The existing talent shortage, coupled with the need for specialized skills to combat sophisticated threats, significantly increases the workload and stress for CISOs, making talent acquisition and retention a critical concern.

Communication with the Board of Directors
Effective communication with the board presents another significant challenge. CISOs must navigate the complex task of translating technical risks into business impacts, ensuring that key security issues are understood and prioritized appropriately despite varying levels of cybersecurity knowledge among board members.

If CISOs can't thread this needle, it compounds existing challenges, like securing adequate budgets or training new security professionals.

Disproportional Investments
The alignment of security spending with broader IT investments is also a point of contention. Balancing these expenditures requires CISOs to constantly justify the value of security measures in terms of their financial and strategic importance, adding to the role's stress levels.

Multilayered Role

CISOs have a multilayered role that encompasses legal compliance, data protection, technology oversight, and leadership responsibilities. This broad scope of duties demands exceptional decision-making and prioritization skills, further complicated by the fast-paced nature of business and technology changes (like AI's transformative impact on the CISO position).

Risk Prioritization

Lastly, CISOs must identify the most critical threats and allocate resources efficiently to mitigate them. Deciding how to balance the focus between various types of risks, such as ransomware attacks and insider threats, requires careful consideration and can be a source of stress.

Our Research Findings

For our study, we spoke with CISOs and cybersecurity experts from across the US and Europe about crucial work-related stress issues that contribute to burnout.

Our goal was to understand the lives of cybersecurity leaders today, looking closely at the stress they deal with and how it affects them and their work across organizations and industries.

Each respondent was asked the same series of ten questions related to the current stress levels, role-related challenges, employee turnover, and the amount of support they received from organizations to manage stress.

Finally, we conducted qualitative interviews with two CISOs, one experiencing higher stress levels and the other lower.

## Respondents' Occupation, Location, and Organization

Below is a summary of the job titles, locations, and industries of our respondents.

Job Title	CISO: **88%** Vice CISO: **6%** Senior Cyber Security Analyst: **6%**
Location	Western Europe: **50%** Eastern Europe: **37%** USA: **13%**
Industry	IT and Technology: **31%** Finance: **19%** Media: **19%** Telecommunications: **13%** Public Sector: **6%** Manufacturing: **6%** Food and Beverage: **6%**

Tenure in Current Position

Below is a summary of respondents' tenures in their current roles, with half having served at least five years in their current position.

How long have you been in your current role?
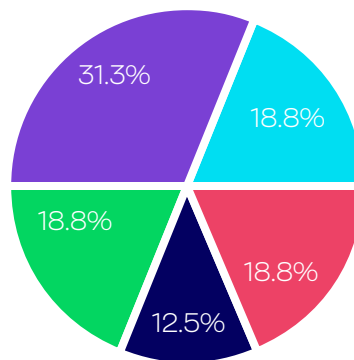
- Less yhan a year
- 1-2 years
- 2-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10 years +

31.3%
18.8%
18.8%
18.8%
12.5%

Current Stress Levels
To see how stressed out CISOs were at work, we asked them to score their stress from 1 to 10. **81.3% of respondents said their stress levels were at or between 7 and 10.**

On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your current levels of stress in your role?

| Score	Percentage
1	0%
2	0%
3	0%
4	6.3%
5	0%
6	12.5%
7	25%
8	18.3%
9	25%
10	12.5%
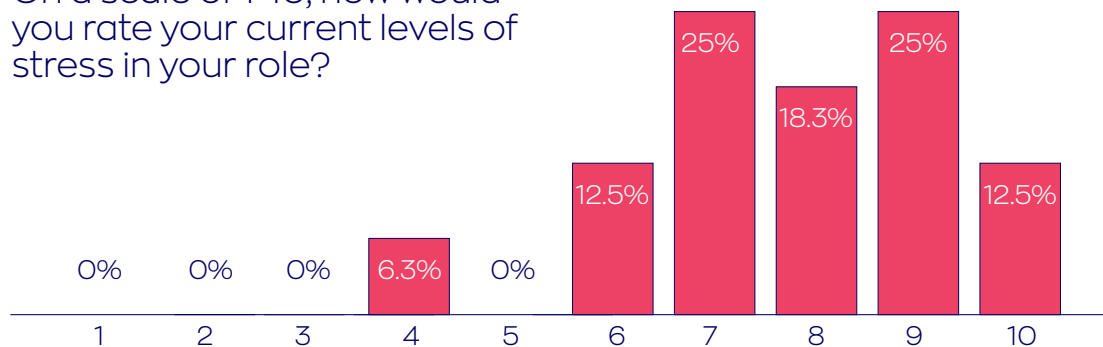
It's important to note that not all CISOs are experiencing unmanageable levels of stress. For example, in our interview with Ragnar Sigurdsson, CISSP and CISO at AwareGo in Reykjavik, Iceland, he explained that in his organization: "There's less stress because everyone is thinking about [cybersecurity]. That's probably not the case in any other company."

Though Ragnar's role is not entirely without stress, he said this was more related to the "business side and reporting to the board, not so much the nuts and bolts of security."

Employee Turnover Rates

While workplace stress can make CISOs' jobs more difficult, it can also cause them to leave their roles. 50% of our respondents said members of their team have quit or left their role in the last year due to workplace stress, with nearly 44% having multiple members leave and one respondent even seeing four team members walk away.

In the past year, how many members of your team left their roles due to work-related stress?

Value	Percentage
0	50%
1	6.3%
2	37.5%
3	
4	6.3%
5	
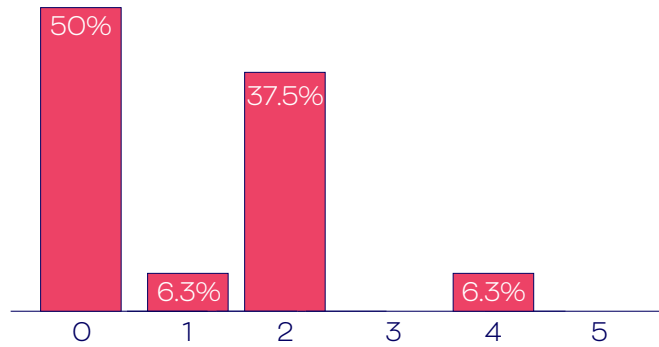
Recommendations for Lowering Stress

Our conversations also revealed that CISOs hold distinct views on strategies to reduce the stress associated with their roles.

Nearly 45% of our respondents said boosting their personal resources, including development resources and mental health resources, could alleviate stress. Additionally, a quarter believe more budget for their roles could ease stress, and just over 12% say more cybersecurity tools would help. We cover these points in more detail below.

Which of the following options do you believe would most effectively help in significantly reducing your stress and the risk of burnout?

- ● Additional budget allocation
- ● Enhanced personal resources
- ● Additional tools and solutions
- ● All of the above
- ● More communication and interest in cyber activities
- ● Further standardization of processes

12.5% 6.2% 6.2% 6.2% 43.8% 25%

In our conversation with Malcolm Portelli, CISO at Andaria, Malta, he mentioned that while additional resources are helpful, they're not the only strategy to reduce stress.

Malcolm doesn't "believe it's always a matter of throwing people and money at a problem. It's being given the license to go and look for a solution that works for you. It might be free; it might be expensive; it might not be a solution that someone would think of at first glance. It might be a SOC or outsourcing those capabilities to another company, which these days is not that expensive."

The Impact of Work-Related Stress on CISOs and Organizations

The complex web of cybersecurity significantly raises CISOs' stress, affecting their work and personal lives, with over 30% of those we spoke to saying stress compromised their ability to perform in their roles.

Let's explore these negative impacts.

Work Relationships
One CISO noted that their relationship with other colleagues is affected by stress. Specifically, they are "less likely to let arguments blow by."

Research shows that when employees are under significant stress, they may find it challenging to engage positively with colleagues, leading to reduced collaboration and potential conflict.

Motivation
Another CISO stated that their stress level is starting to affect their motivation. This can damage individual performance by reducing focus and increasing error rates and harm organizations by lowering overall productivity.

Research from 2022 shows high levels of stress and burnout can markedly affect an individual's motivation. According to the authors, those suffering from burnout may struggle with work-related duties and lack the drive for various interactions and pursuits.

Extended Recovery Time
A Spanish CISO noted the impact of work-related stress, stating they need "a day (or some hours) off to try to clear [their] mind and get back to the routine."

This recovery time can impact individual CISOs by diminishing their immediate availability and potentially affecting their mental well-being and organizations by reducing operational efficiency and

increasing the burden (and stress levels) on other team members during the CISO's absence, creating a vicious cycle.

Delaying Delivery Times

One respondent, a CISO in financial services, clarified that while stress itself does not affect their performance, the "changing needs of the business and the associated workload tend to have an effect on the perceived delivery timelines of different projects."

This can lead to extended project timelines, putting additional pressure on teams and potentially straining client relationships due to shifting expectations and delayed outcomes.

Decreased Bandwidth

A Finnish software company's CISO highlighted the role's demands, often sidelining key tasks during critical incidents. This juggling act is common, with 61% of CISOs feeling overwhelmed by high expectations. Such pressures can delay projects and disrupt operations.

Similarly, a Latvian public radio CISO noted that stress-induced procrastination exacerbates security backlogs, undermining effectiveness and exposing the organization to risks.

Overlooking Responsibilities

One CISO mentioned that their increased stress level resulted in "letting things slide." When CISOs experience high levels of stress, they may find it challenging to maintain their usual attention to detail and prioritize effectively.

This can result in missed deadlines, unaddressed security vulnerabilities, or overlooked compliance issues. In fact, one study found that people under a lot of stress had more trouble focusing and were slower and less accurate on tasks that needed attention.

Rising Employee Turnover
Half of the CISOs we talked to acknowledged a link between stress and increased turnover, with over 40% saying they lost two or more employees in the past year due to the stressful nature of their roles.

CISOs might resign due to the overwhelming demands of their roles, often finding themselves engrossed in work-related tasks and concerns most of the time.

The pressure to justify their strategies also increases CISOs' stress, often leading them to consider leaving. Gartner's report forecasts that by 2025, nearly half of cybersecurity leaders will switch jobs, with 25% moving to entirely different roles because of workplace stress.

CISO Care: 4 Suggestions for CEOs and HR Professionals

While cybersecurity roles inherently come with stress, there are effective ways to mitigate it. **We've compiled four strategies based on the feedback we received through our research and our in-depth interviews.**

These approaches aim to reduce CISOs' stress and enhance well-being in high-pressure cybersecurity environments.

1. Support CISOs with Wellness Policies and Personal Resources
To improve CISOs' well-being, HR should broaden mental health support, incorporating counseling, stress relief, and wellness programs. Enhancing career development and supporting flexible work is also vital. This comprehensive strategy highlights HR's crucial role in building a healthy work environment.

In our interview with Ragnar Sigurdsson, he highlighted the company's implementation of employee-driven work-life balance policies:

"A few years ago, we did a workshop with our employees, and we wrote these policies ourselves. We had 16 people, four groups, and each group wrote two policies. Then, in tandem, we discussed what we wanted this policy to look like. And this was a major hit. I was so proud that people were really thinking about what would be best for the company. Not just, 'I want unlimited free time."

This initiative resulted in a sense of pride and ownership among employees as well, who actively contributed to well-being-centric policies. For instance, one outcome was gender-neutral employee contracts, a testament to the inclusive culture cultivated by employee involvement.

Using strategies similar to AwareGo's in bigger companies may need extra organization, but it creates an environment where everyone feels appreciated and allows businesses to improve well-being and work-life harmony.

2. Provide Greater Executive Backing for Cybersecurity Concerns
When CISOs receive trust and support from HR and senior leadership, their decisions and insights are valued and respected. This positive environment not only reduces stress but also instills greater confidence and security in their positions.
CEOs should initiate regular communication and alignment meetings with CISOs and other cybersecurity leaders to discuss cybersecurity strategies, risk assessments, and resource needs.

They must also champion cybersecurity awareness and training across all organizational levels, providing CISOs with the visibility and backing needed to drive these initiatives to success.

Creating cross-functional cybersecurity teams is key to reducing CISO burnout. CEOs should enable CISOs to form these groups, ensuring executive leadership is represented to foster collaboration and department-wide support.

Dr. Rebecca Wynn suggests CISOs "reach out to human resources (HR), the CEO, or a different C-level executive whom you trust to discuss your issue." These approaches are similar to traditional risk analyses, helping cybersecurity leaders recognize hazards early and make action plans, enabling CISOs to dodge burnout by addressing risks before they materialize.

CEOs and HR departments must actively engage and implement tangible measures to address burnout rather than merely paying lip service to the issue. Consistently offering empty promises without enacting substantive changes can escalate the risk of overworked CISOs choosing to leave their roles.

3. Revamp Internal Resources to Address Talent Shortage

Implementing burnout prevention training alongside wellness initiatives equips employees with crucial stress management skills essential for thriving in demanding roles like CISO.

When CEOs and executive leadership address stress and burnout, organizations create a positive environment that contributes to a healthier workforce. At the same time, this reduces the turnover of talented workers and boosts business growth.

Leo Cunningham, CISO at Owkin, highlights that training courses or certifications can build new skills and knowledge for security personnel. This builds confidence, reduces stress, and supports long-term development. By investing in ongoing learning, organizations retain skilled professionals, addressing the talent shortage effectively.

During our interview with Malcom Portelli, he emphasizes the option of hiring talented individuals from outside the cybersecurity realm and training them to become experts.

This method eases CISO stress by sharing the load across a wider team, not just cybersecurity pros. But it works well only if the CEO builds a culture of training and upskilling initiatives.

4. Enhance Efficiency Through Strategic Investment in Tools and Solutions

Portelli also emphasizes the importance of additional tools and solutions for reducing stress within his team. Why? Because he believes that rather than solely focusing on hiring, leveraging tools and automation is the key to efficiency within his budget.

"AI is perfect for security because a huge amount of security work, you could call it the grunt work in security, is log analysis, anomalous behavior detection, this kind of stuff. AI does all of that perfectly."

This alleviates stress for cybersecurity teams by minimizing interruptions from issues, error logs, and system failures, allowing them to focus on higher-value, deadline-sensitive tasks.

More than 12% of respondents agreed that additional tools and solutions would effectively lower their stress levels.

These resources, like automated security questionnaires, integrated management platforms, and real-time threat intelligence, streamline security workflows and enhance threat detection, thereby reducing the manual workload and the time required to respond to threats.

When executive leadership invests in these tools, they not only increase efficiency but also take the pressure off CISOs to monitor and mitigate security risks manually, greatly reducing stress.

Elevate CISO Well-being and Security Team Performance

Our chats with CISOs highlight a critical need for action against stress, with over 80% feeling the heat. This stress isn't just personal; it affects organizational security, too.

Strong executive support, smart well-being policies like AwareGo's, and more tools to ease CISO burdens. By valuing well-being and empowering cybersecurity leaders, we can reduce stress and boost defense against threats.

If stress impacts your work as a CISO, join the conversation. Your insights can help us overcome the challenges and create secure, supportive workplaces for cybersecurity experts.

About Vendict

Vendict combines cutting-edge AI technologies with industry-leading expertise to provide a simple yet powerful automated security compliance solution that ensures high response rates and unmatched accuracy. With our custom-built Generative AI solution, Vendict empowers security teams to reduce risk, accelerate the sales cycle, and gain a competitive advantage by efficiently and accurately managing security questionnaires at scale in a matter of hours, instead of weeks.

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