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Enterprise Web 2.0: The Challenge of Executive Sense-Making and Consensus

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Abstract

As the complexity of business ventures increase and the essential roles of IT-alignment processes and service coherency receive increasing attention, managerial exchange and coordination across the executive board become all the more pivotal. Enterprise Web 2.0 is particularly affording in this respect, as the deployment of the involved web-based applications and services in core build on the realization of overarching, holistic business conceptions; i.e., strategic consensus among chief executive (CEO) and chief IT (CIO) must be seen as core prerequisites for successful future corporate IT-development. Based on results from the Enterprise 2.0-Survey FIN08, administered to Finnish enterprise leaders, this paper reports on the contents and degrees of consensus between these two managerial populations regarding the 4 interest areas of familiarity and basic conception, evaluation and attitude, sense-making and deployment objective, as well as deployment manner. Generally we found CIOs and direct IT-managing officers to be more knowledgeable and experienced, as well as more ready to invest than CEOs and officers with mere decision-making competences. However at the same time, CIOs displayed also a higher degree of critical realism and caution about the prospects and enterprise Web 2.0-deployment.

Keywords: Enterprise Web 2.0, Executive Sense-Making, Executive Consensus

Permanent URL: <http://sprouts.aisnet.org/8-7>

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Reference: Helfenstein, S., Penttilä, J. (2008). "Enterprise Web 2.0: The Challenge of Executive Sense-Making and Consensus," University of Jyväskylä, Finland . *Sprouts: Working Papers on Information Systems*, 8(7). <http://sprouts.aisnet.org/8-7>

INTRODUCTION

Key pillars of a successful future business enterprise are *service convergence*, *business process coordination*, *technological consolidation*, and in this vein, *executive consensus*. This is particularly true for strategic planning and alignment efforts in the context of corporate IT development. The primary goal is to attain an integrated and coherent but also flexible functioning and development of business and thereby enhance enterprise navigation through industrial market change and ambiguity. The prerequisite for this is the bringing together and conversing among different divisions, perspectives and realms of business reality.

The newest wave of IT-based industrial promises associated with the marketing term Enterprise Web 2.0 is particularly demanding in this respect, as the deployment of the involved web-based applications and services in core build on the realization of overarching, holistic business conceptions. Besides successful negotiating with customers, strategic partners and suppliers this is essentially affording to collective executive sense-making targeted at the building of internal consensus around a vision or strategy, across business functions.

Strategic consensus among chief executive (CEO) and chief IT (CIO) officers can be seen as an especially vital prerequisite for successful corporate deployment and exploitation of emerging technological opportunities (e.g., McCormack, 2002; Musser, O'Reilly & O'Reilly Radar Team, 2007). There are different explanations to support this stance: (a) the causal explanation concerns the broadly acknowledged need for interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving, which has reached also the executive level of corporate conduct. As most matters become excessively complex to grasp and cope with based on a single perspective and type of expertise alone, integrative views have become mandatory; (b) the effective explanation reflects on the above mentioned fact that IT-alignment and -development in the age of Enterprise 2.0 heads towards coherency and integration of traditionally separated business processes and domains through farsighted system integration and architectural consolidation effort; (c) the pragmatic explanation considers the circumstance that CIOs, while by nature responsible for corporate IT-strategy and -functioning, are still dependent on CEOs to make the ultimate financially relevant decisions with respect to the acquisition and implementation of technology. In summary, all explanation reflect the recognition that IT-business alignment is not simple and affords shared interests, apt understanding, and team effort across the executive board (e.g., Ingevaldson, 2004; Rappert, Velliquette, & Garretson, 2002).

It is further safe to venture that this challenge is not limited to any particular industry segment or organizational form or size; although in substance and effect the matters are undoubtedly in many ways enterprise-specific. Whereas in large corporations executive collaborations may be hampered due to sheer size, structure, and volume, resulting in managerial task segmentation, small enterprises may face the problem of having no dedicated person that is exclusively in charge of business concerns such as IT.

On the other hand, managerial consensus, although in many ways an essential contributor to successful business conduct in general, e.g., by enhancing decision-making quality and as sign of functioning intra-organizational communication (Schwenk & Cosier, 1993; Rappert, Velliquette, & Garretson, 2002), is by no means a sufficient business success factor. One major problem with past research on the matter lies with unresolved interpretations of the effect direction of the relationship between executive consensus and business success. After all, convergent thinking is usually more expectable and appropriate in times of flourishing business,

whereas divergent thinking is a means and a sign of solving problems during difficult periods. Prior research provides also conditional findings with respect to the positive relation between consensus and business performance measures (e.g., Bourgeois, 1980; Ambrosini & Bowman, 2003; Dess & Priem, 1995; Homburg, Krohmer, & Workman, 1999; Stepanovich & Mueller, 2002).

This all means that consensus as such can not be taken as warranty of competitive advantage (see e.g., Dess & Origer, 1987; Dess & Priem, 1995). Of all the possible explanation, probably the most trivial yet very accurate one reflects that agreeing on something is evidently largely independent of what the agreement concerns. Hence, a shared strategic view among managers, per se, is no sufficient testimony of the content quality of the strategy. Therefore, it is valuable to examine exactly *how* executives' views match or mismatch, rather than simply *if* they are in accord.

In the current research, our intention was therefore to compare the viewpoints and assessments of the here selected two corporate executive populations: CEOs and CIOs. This is essential for evaluating the preconditions and prospects of modern industrial IT development. Considering the widely echoed importance, yet relative novel, fast-pace, and complex background of Enterprise Web 2.0 it is easy to conjecture that a high degree of judgment congruence may facilitate managerial consensus-finding and enhance corporate IT-development planning and execution. Areas of view disparity, on the other hand, would indicate themes that may need greater attention during executive exchange and negotiation.

Naturally, there are also other members of the executive board that play important roles in the future development of corporate IT, including the business functions pertaining to operations, communication and marketing, and finance. In their 2007 study the Economist Intelligence Unit about the impact of Web 2.0 on their business, for instance, revealed noteworthy discrepancies between CEOs and CFOs, with the former displaying considerably more sympathy and optimism concerning Enterprise 2.0 ideas (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2007). However, despite the obvious relevancy of the business application viewpoint, as well as the evident delicacy of financial and ROI-related questions in the after-math of the Millennium corporate IT-hype, Enterprise 2.0 remains at its core a managerial responsibility of the CEO and CIO, or respectively any other senior manager filling according functions.

In the current study we use the data of the Enterprise 2.0-Survey FIN'08, administered to top managers of Finnish enterprises in order to assess and compare the executive views on the matter. It must be noted that the comparison was not organization-based but population- or background-based. This means we were interested in regularities and irregularities within and between these two executive "species" (CEOs and CIOs) across enterprises and industrial sectors. Differences or congruencies evident at this level of analysis can then naturally be used as basis to predict and explain intra-organizational consensus finding processes.

STUDY

The Enterprise 2.0-Survey FIN'08 was conducted at the turn to 2008 in order to assess Finnish industrial leaders' appraisal and strategy concerning Enterprise Web 2.0-related topics. The survey's timing was chosen so that insights could be captured at a point in the yearly business calendar when corporate strategic concerns are implicitly and explicitly highest on the corporate agenda. Further, the years 2007 and 2008 were assessed as decisive period in industrial Web 2.0-awareness, both based on media presence of the topic as well as in terms of global

diffusion and impact of technology and associated business principles and practices.

Corporate executive comparisons were performed based on a combination of two distinct characterization approaches: according to a) *function/title* (i.e., CEOs vs. CIOs) and b) *IT role* (i.e., chief decision-maker only vs. chief responsible/active developer).

We compared four distinct areas:

- 1) *familiarity and basic conception*, i.e., how aware and knowledgeable managers are of the Web 2.0/Enterprise 2.0 concepts and what they stand for
- 2) *evaluation and attitude*, i.e., how they overall esteem the business value of Web 2.0
- 3) *sense-making and deployment objective*, i.e., how they reason about promises and application goals
- 4) *deployment manner*, i.e., how they go about initiating Enterprise Web 2.0

In short, these four comparison interest areas address executive account of *substance* (1, 2), *ends* (3), and *means* (4) of Web 2.0-deployment. They also correspond to the broad managerial issues and responsibilities that we identified in another paper as “cornerstones of successful Enterprise Web 2.0-deployment” (Helfenstein & Penttilä, 2008). These issues pertain to value recognition and strategy, deployment preparation, and deployment realization.

Generally, we could assume that CIOs and chief officers responsible and/or actively developing corporate IT to be more aware, more knowledgeable, more convinced, and more committed to deploy Enterprise Web 2.0. CEOs and chief officers that are in a decision-making position only with regard to corporate IT may on the other hand prove more uninformed, uncertain and cautious.

METHOD

Sample

The total sample comprised 175 upper corporate managers of which 99 characterized themselves as chief IT-decision-making and 76 main IT-responsible managers. Concerning concrete positions in the executive board, the sample featured 43 CEOs and 52 CIOs. The relation between the two classifications was such that among the chief decision-making managers there substantially more CEOs than CIOs, while this proportionality was inverse in the in the manager group with chief IT-responsibility role.

The great majority of the responding managers in both groups had an engineering or comparable technical university background. About 95% were male and dispersed more or less equally across the three age groups 31-40, 41-50, and 51-60.

The included companies could predominantly be classified as *deployers-only* of Web 2.0-applications and –services; 20-30% stated to also provide technology themselves. There was no difference in this respect between the companies represented by CEOs/IT-decision makers and CIOs/IT-responsible in our sample. A comparison of the way Web 2.0 are seen as enhancement to business is therefore legitimate.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was realized as online-survey, accessed through a link that was distributed by e-mail. The complete form comprised 56 questions and afforded about 15 minutes

filling time. Each of the here relevant areas of comparative analysis was represented by a set of questions. However, the items were dispersed and not specially marked or introduced as a thematic group in order to capture more spontaneous assessments.

Familiarity and basic conception: This part of the questionnaire consisted of 7 items that assessed responders familiarity with the concepts Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0, and agreement with statements that characterize Web 2.0 as (a) novel network standard, (b) evolutionary step in Web-conceptualization and usage, (c) concerning the use of the Web as platform, (d) a focus-shift from technology to people, and (e) delimited to leisure applications.

Evaluation and attitude: This part of the questionnaire consisted of 13 items that assessed responders' involvement with Web 2.0-matters, and their judgment of business significance, value, impact, and applicability.

Sense-making and deployment objective: This part of the questionnaire comprised 4 items that assessed managers' opinion about the key strategic objectives and business prospects of investing into Web 2.0-deployment.

Deployment manner: This part of the questionnaire consisted of 7 items that were designed to reveal the managers' views on where, how, and when Web 2.0-technologies shall be deployed, as well as what kind of obstacles they spot.

Results

Familiarity and basic conception

As could be expected CIOs are overall more familiar with the Web 2.0- and Enterprise 2.0-notions compared to CEOs ($Z = 3.36, p < .001^1$). While every fourth CEO could not recollect having ever come across the term Web 2.0, all CIOs report at least some kind of awareness or insight. One fourth of the CIOs considered themselves as being substantially experienced with using Web 2.0-tools. None of the CEOs believed so. Surprisingly, the notion of Enterprise 2.0 (Finnish: Yritys 2.0) is overall much less well-known, rendering this comparison non-significant ($Z = 1.25, p = .11^1$). Almost half of all CEOs and one third of the CIOs could not relate to the term. On the other hand, unlike CEOs (below 3%), 11% of the CIOs consider themselves as concretely experienced in Enterprise 2.0-matters (see Figure 1). The comparison of chief IT-decision-making and IT-responsible officers confirmed these findings.

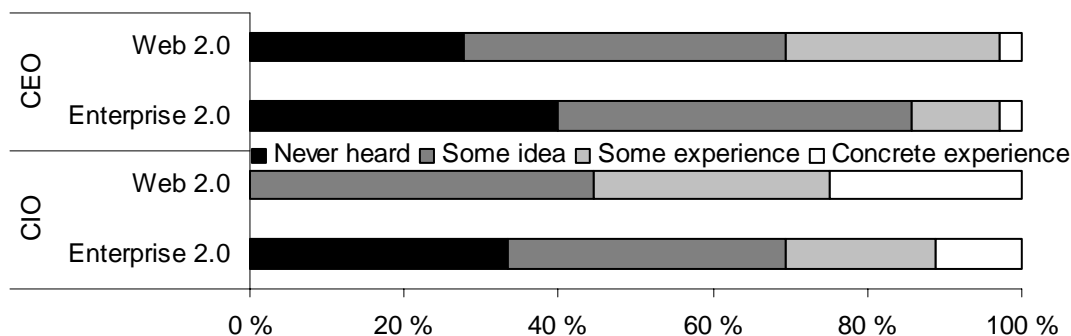


Figure 1: Familiarity with Web 2.0- and Enterprise 2.0-notions

The lower familiarity with Web 2.0-issues was also reflected in clear tendencies for CEOs to display a more undecided and unknowledgeable assessment of key related properties

and statements. On average 43% of the CEOs remained undecided on each of the statements provided (CIOs: 26%). CEOs greater degree of uncertainty was best reflected in those statements that concern the core definitional pillars of Web 2.0 as a paradigm (i.e., evolutionary step in web conception and usage [$\chi^2(1, N = 67) = .41; p = .36$] rather than mere new “network version” [$\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 5.83; p < .05$], holistic impact on daily life [$\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 4.42; p < .05$], shift from technology- to human-orientation [$\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 3.36; p = .06$], and use of Web as technical and operational platform [$\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 8.62; p < .01$]). Assessed on a aggregated Web 2.0-conception scale comprising the aforementioned aspects (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .72$), the understanding of CEOs was as expected less in line with the general definition of Web 2.0, when compared to the one of CIOs ($t(65) = 1.79, p < .05$, one-tailed).

Evaluation and attitude

Only a minority (below 10%, both groups) clearly rejects the industrial significance of Web 2.0. Interestingly, however, top IT decision-makers, and thereby especially CEOs, appear to display a more optimistic attitude concerning Web 2.0-business value and its applicability, $Z = 1.76, p < .05$ and $Z = 1.96, p < .05$, respectively. This means in turn, that CIOs and generally those that are responsible for a company’s IT environment, appeared somewhat more cautious and, for instance, tend also to recognize more readily the potential risks involved, $Z = 1.42, p = .08$ (see Figure 2). Consistent with this finding about CIOs’ skepticism were also their somewhat more frequent ratings of Web 2.0 as marketing gag (CEO 13%; CIO: 23%), and IT-hype or immanent IT-bubble (CEO: 10%; CIO: 17%).

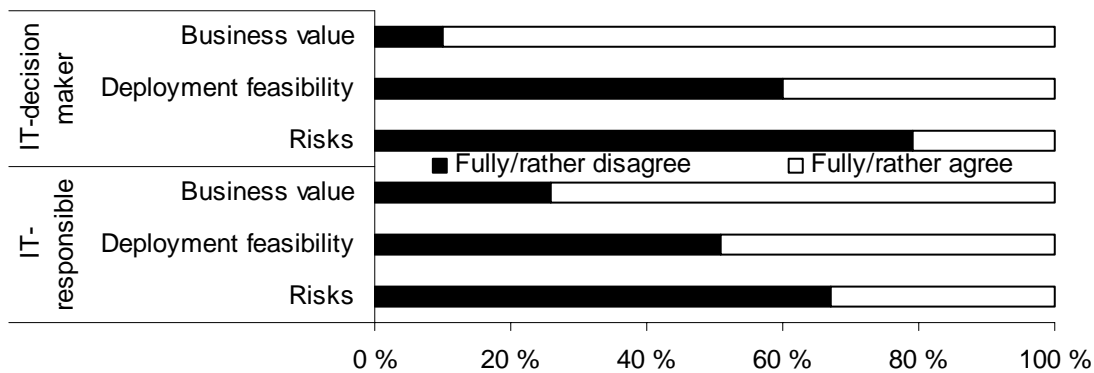


Figure 2: Evaluation of Web 2.0-business value, deployment feasibility, and risks involved

Sense-making

Communicative/social networking value and information dissemination clearly dominate both managerial groups’ perspectives on Web 2.0-deployment benefits, in general as well as regarding their own organization. There are however two categories where the views of IT-decision makers (i.e., majority CEOs), and IT-responsible managers (i.e., majority CIOs) in tendency departed: 1) the general value of Web 2.0-tools for facilitating participative work practices (IT-decision makers: 8%; IT-responsible managers: 21%; Fisher’s Exact test $p = .14$) and 2) the value of Web 2.0-practices for enriching the organization’s product and service portfolio (IT-decision makers: 13%; IT-responsible managers: 0%, Fisher’s Exact test: $p < .05$). This means the CEOs organization-specific strategic perspective appeared to be more business and customer-oriented than the one of CIOs. On the other hand CIOs better recognize the general value of Web 2.0-tools for enhancing organizationally-internal work practices.

Consistent with this finding the data also revealed that regarding major application realms for Web 2.0-technology, CEOs 2 top out of 5 instantiated choices concerned more classic issues such as updating the companies www-presence (58%) and CRM (46%). In turn, the primary choices CIOs fell on content management (50%), and organizational culture (47%) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Chief executives assessment of major and minor Web 2.0-application realms

	CEO	CIO
Top 4	Update www-presence	Content management
	CRM	Org. culture
	Org. culture	Update www-presence
	Marketing	Project management

Bottom 2	Supply chain management	Org. administration
	R & D	Sales

Finally, and also consistent with the above findings, CEOs two choices concerning the key promise of Enterprise Web 2.0 indicated that they esteem the opportunity to generate growth and revenue (31%) mainly through increase of efficiency (73%), with quality (15%) being clearly less important. While CIOs are not indifferent to the efficiency objective (52%), they seem to value, in contrast to CEOs, quality (30%) over growth and revenue (18%).

Deployment manner

Merely, 24% of CEOs and only 15% of CIOs inform that active deployment and use has actually already begun within their organization. Interestingly, and in spite of their general positive evaluation of Enterprise Web 2.0, CEOs further predominantly prefer to “sit out and wait”, without developing concrete plans (59%). Only 17% are currently really interested and believe that Web 2.0-deployment will be a near-future project within their organization. CIOs, despite their more critical stance, seem substantially more interested and ready to move towards deployment (44%). Nevertheless, surprisingly many CIOs believe as well that waiting is currently the best option (41%).

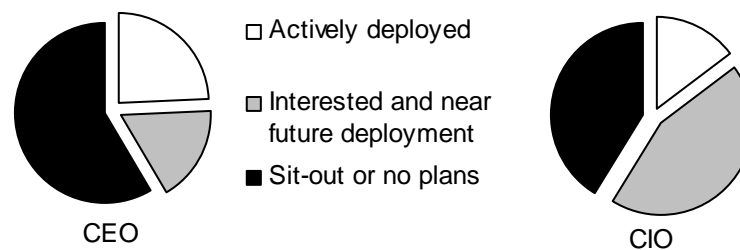


Figure 3: Organizational Web 2.0-deployment status in chief executives view

The executives assessment are strikingly congruent with respect to (a) where implementation impulses are coming from (i.e., *inside the organization, business partners, market*), (b) through what channels these impulses are carried into and spread inside the organization in the form of discussions about Enterprise Web 2.0 (i.e., *managerial levels only, certain organizational circles only, all levels of the organization, informally*), (c) where Web 2.0-deployment should be foremost promoted (i.e., *intra-organizationally, business partner network, B2C*), and d) how deployment is best managed (i.e., *formal pan-organizational roll-out, delimited singular projects, bottom-up/informal roll-out*).

Adoption impulses are seen to emerge equally from inside the organization (ca. 40%, both groups) as well as from the market/client side (ca. 40%, both groups). Business partners are not seen as important in this respect. Even so, according to roughly half of the top managers, Web 2.0 is currently a no real topic or only informally so. About 40% in either group believe that it has actuality only in singular circles within their organizations. No CEO or CIO assesses Enterprise Web 2.0 as of now to be a predominant topic on managerial levels. Similar to the source of deployment impulses also the targets are prioritized with intra-organizational needs (ca. 50%, both groups) followed by B2C (ca. 30%, both groups), and business partner network (ca. 20%, both groups). Nearly two out of three executives in either group favor further an overarching corporate strategic initiative as main deployment policy. However, compared to IT-decision makers, more IT-responsible managers appear to opt more frequently for the focusing of deployment efforts on singular organizational units or projects (8% and 20%, respectively). Informal spreading of technology is an acceptable deployment approach for roughly every 4th executive.

Finally, considering that the status of Finnish industrial Web 2.0-deployment is to date still largely insignificant and overshadowed by hesitance, it is valuable to consider the main barriers and obstacles in the minds of the key executives. More than half of the CEOs and CIOs are in agreement about the opinion that lack of know-how and expertise is currently the main deployment inhibitor (see Table 5). As far as CIOs are concerned, however, this deficiency seems to reflect also the present immaturity of technology rather than incapacity of the IT-deploying organizations (39%). CEOs and CIOs further agree that ROI is another great concern with future IT-investments, 37% and 45%.

Table 2: Chief executives assessment of major and minor deployment hurdles

	CEO	CIO
Top 4	Know-how	Know-how
	Enterprise architecture integration	ROI
	ROI	Immature technology
	Time Resources	Adoption process

Bottom 2	External System Compatibility	External System Compatibility
	Adoption process	Financial Resources

Secondary concerns in both executive's assessments are security issues, but also manpower, time, financial resources. In average, only every sixth leader selected these barriers. External system compatibility seems to of minor concern only.

Differences in opinion became apparent with regard to the concern about how to manage sustainable and effective organizational adoption of Web 2.0-principles and practices. In line with the earlier documented tendency to be more organizationally- than business-oriented, a third of CIOs believe adoption processes to be a critical hurdle. This view is shared by only one out of seven CEOs. Another clear difference in obstacle assessment emerged from the concern about enterprise architecture integration (EAI), which was the second biggest worry among CEOs, yet not seen as a primary problem by CIOs. This is naturally interesting, as CIOs, assumably have a better appreciation of the demands and prospects of EAI.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Overall, Enterprise Web 2.0 does not seem to have yet widely caught on with Finnish companies at the time of our survey. This situation, although, or rather, due to its dependency on what executive officers think Web 2.0-deployment comprises underscores the significance of the current barometer-type investigation. This is because managerial opinions about the practices and principles involved, and thereby IT-strategies, are still very much in the making, largely intuition-based, and not yet fully explicit on the executives negotiation agenda.

Generally we found CIOs and direct IT-managing officers to be more knowledgeable and experienced, as well as more ready to invest than CEOs and officers with mere decision-making competences. However at the same time, CIOs displayed also a higher degree of critical realism and caution about the prospects and enterprise Web 2.0-deployment.

When asked specifically about deployment manners, CEOs and CIOs visions are very much alike. However, an important subtle difference emerges about the underlying dimensions of IT-deployment. CIOs appear to have a better appreciation of the critical human and social dimension of Enterprise Web 2.0, compared to CEOs, whose assessments root in more classic business model- and technologically-oriented conceptions of IT. I.e., many CIOs believe that the organization is technically ready for Web 2.0-deployment but not socially/culturally; a finding that tends to be inverse in CEO circles.

The difference in the understanding of the psychological prerequisites of Enterprise Web 2.0 is also reflected in a greater caution concerning adoption process challenges. And essentially, it means, that CIOs reveal a more realistic and less naïve conception and strategy of corporate Web 2.0-issues. This insight, taken together with the fact that the CIOs are clearly underrepresented in the IT-decision making group raises the importance of active negotiations between the two executive managers; a discourse, which according to their own assessment, has not really been initiated so far. And it also emphasizes the delicacy inherent to the enterprise IT-developments to come, as exactly the bottom-up, social, and informal processes form the backbone of the participative culture and its inherent collaborative capital of Enterprise Web 2.0 (Helfenstein, 2008; Helfenstein & Penttilä, 2008).

Overall, we believe that true innovation and change value is increasingly generated only at domain boundaries. This insight, while already well documented for the cases of interdisciplinary scientific approaches and the bridging needs between basic and applied research based on industrial and public interests, has also growing industrial validity with respect to the fusion of corporate and customer worlds and the active exchange between managerial realms.

Future efforts in this area that will not only explore managerial assessments, but also models and exchange channels for consensus establishment in practice are naturally essential. The type of research presented here must obviously also be followed up by a deeper, more organization-based comparative approach, as one may argue that the current results do not so much reflect the differences and similarities between the two executive populations than the contrasts between the companies they represent. Hence, we like to remind that the comparisons performed here are on aggregate (industry) levels, not within single companies, and CEOs stemmed over these more frequently from smaller IT firms, whereas CIOs more typically represented large enterprises from the timber, financial services industrial sectors.

On the other hand, considering that Web 2.0-implementation is still largely in conceptual phase, it may be ventured that the manager's views have not been made explicit yet within organizations, and therefore they may indeed root in the different perspectives these two executive groups have as a principle due to background disparities.

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FOOTNOTES

¹Mann-Whitney U-test, one-tailed

²Exact Fisher test, one-tailed

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