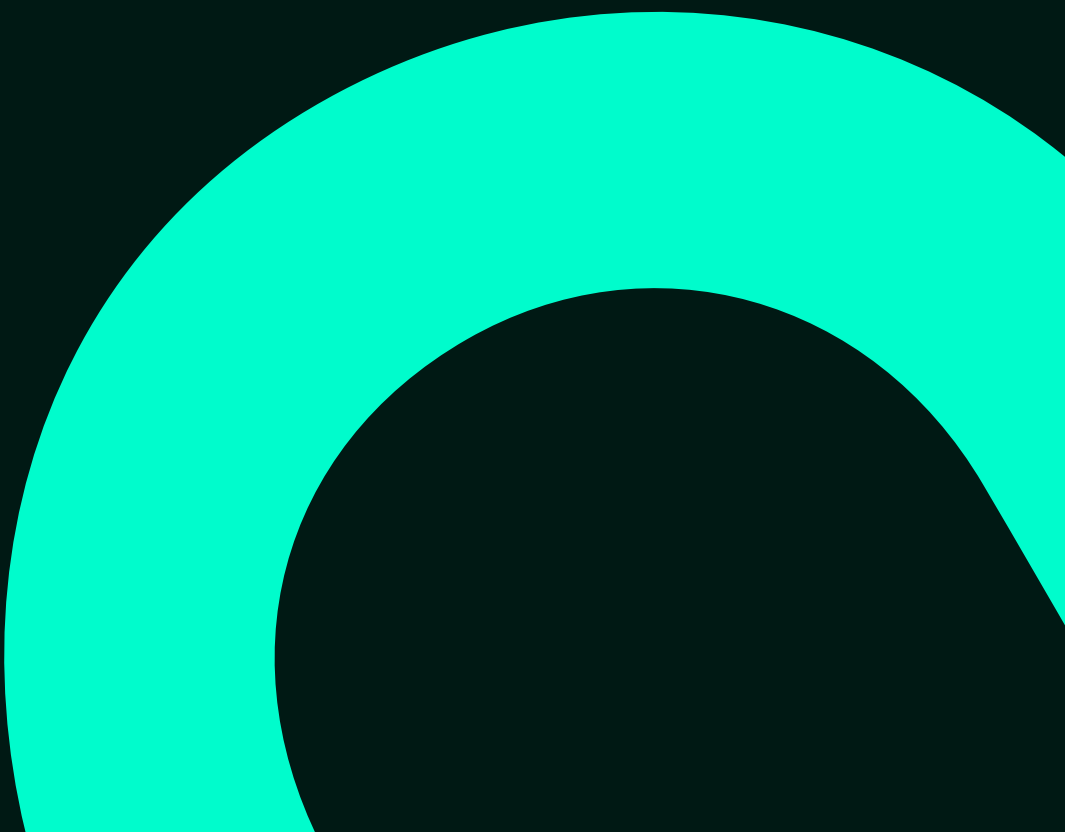


The Modern COO Benchmark 2026

How nearly 300 operations leaders
run the business, and where
they're taking the role next.



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Forewords

Every business has someone who holds the whole thing together, day after day. More often than not, it's the operations leader.

Most didn't found the company, but they act like they own it. When something important has no clear owner, 74% of the ops leaders we surveyed say it lands on their desk. Most grew into the role rather than planning for it, and firefighting eats up more of their week than anything else.

This report looks at what the job really involves, and where AI is starting to change it.

At Vestd, we help companies give their people a real stake in what they're building. When a share scheme goes live, it's usually the ops leader who makes it work. A scheme touches finance, people and legal, and 54% of ops leaders already own two or more of those areas.

The trouble is, their best work often goes unnoticed, because success looks like nothing going wrong. That's hard to set a target for. Time-based vesting rewards exactly this kind of contribution: sticking with it year after year, whether anyone sees the results or not.

Their roles also keep growing beyond the original brief, and a stake in the business recognises what they actually carry, whatever their job title says. With 58% already working somewhere that offers a share scheme, this is a live question for many of them.

We hope this report gives ops leaders a benchmark, and gives everyone else a clearer view of how much they hold together. A big thank you to Operations Nation, and to every operations leader who took the time to answer.



Ifty Nasir OBE
Founder & CEO of [Vestd](#)

Forewords

My first task was to buy laptops for everyone. My second was to file a trademark.

I was an intern at a company just getting started. I didn't know I was beginning a career in operations; I just did what needed doing. Within two years, I was Operations Director with a very broad remit. No map, but I learned as I went, and loved it.

For nearly five years, I never met anyone with the same title. When the company was acquired, I couldn't explain what I did or what an Operations Director role looked like elsewhere. I took a job that seemed right; within a month, I knew it wasn't. For a while, I thought I was bad at operations. It was a bad fit, and I had no one to compare notes with.

I went looking for my people: others who understood the work I was doing. That search became Operations Nation. We wanted the peer group we wished we'd had, where we could help each other thrive, not just survive. People still join looking for peers, practical help, examples from others and a sense of what comes next.

Our ambition grew too: to show how central operations is to turning plans into results, bringing teams together and helping companies grow. This benchmark gives us a shared starting point and helps make the work more visible.

Thank you to everyone who completed the survey, my wonderful team, and Vestd for making it possible. To our members, who make this community what it is: this is for you.

I hope readers recognise their own work here and see more clearly what it makes possible.



Aušrinė Keršanskaitė
Co-founder of [Operations Nation](#)

Who took part

271 in-house operations leaders (COOs, Heads of Operations, VPs/Directors of Operations, Chiefs of Staff) plus 22 fractional and portfolio operators, reported separately. Fieldwork ran 16 July to 20 September 2026, plus five roundtables with 24 practitioners in July and September 2026.

63% of organisations are UK-headquartered and 58% have under 51 people. This describes this community of operations leaders well; it isn't a census of the profession.

Why "COO"?

We called this the Modern COO Benchmark because COO is the title everyone recognises. It isn't the title most of our respondents hold. Of the 271 in-house leaders, 104 are COOs. The rest are Heads of Operations (76), VPs and Directors of Operations (60), Chiefs of Staff (22) and nine in other senior operations roles.

We included them all on purpose. What qualified someone was the job, not the title: every respondent is involved in setting operational strategy or priorities for their organisation. The data backs the choice. In companies under 51 people, COOs and Heads of Operations own comparably broad remits (a median of 13 and 11 functions). Where title does make a difference, we say so; the biggest is standing with the CEO (Chapter 4). Everywhere else, "operations leader" means all of them.

Operations Nation

This benchmark is a collaboration between Operations Nation and Vestd. Operations Nation is a global community of 800+ operations leaders across 40+ countries: COOs, Heads of Operations, Chiefs of Staff and everyone doing the job under another title. Founded in 2020, it brought together three earlier communities: Ops Stories, COOhort and COO Stories.

We're not the only community for operations leaders. There are others, and we'd rather compare notes with them than compete: a rising tide lifts all boats, and the more operations leaders compare notes, the better this benchmark (and the whole ops ecosystem) gets. You'll find many of them in "Where to find your peers".



Vestd

This benchmark wouldn't have happened without Vestd, who analysed the data and produced this report. Vestd is the equity management platform that has been helping companies give their people a real stake in what they're building for over a decade. Vestd supports every major tax-efficient share scheme, with Companies House integration and specialist support to make ownership effortless, and helps businesses prepare for and close funding rounds for a fixed fee.

London COO Roundtable

The London COO Roundtable was the UK's first community for COOs. Founded by Divinia Knowles, it now brings together circa 250 C-level executives from London's tech scene to define what it means to be a highly effective startup and scaleup Chief Operating Officer, support those in post to self-actualise as leaders and reach their full potential in their roles and careers. The Roundtable shared this survey with its members, helping us reach more of the operations leaders included in this benchmark.

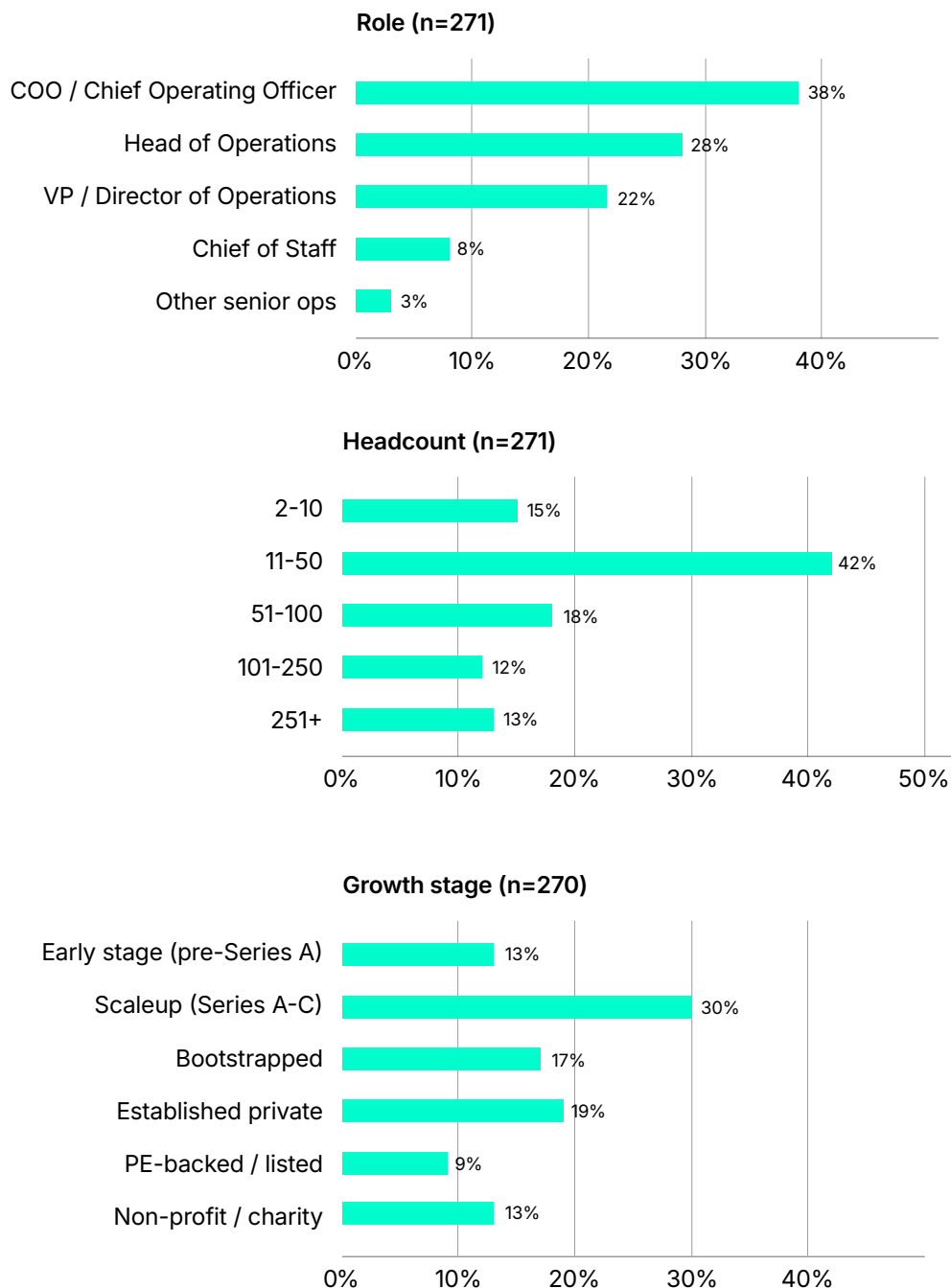
Divinia Knowles



Divinia Knowles has seen this role from both sides of the table. She spent 20 years in the seat, as COO/CFO, CEO and HR director at start-ups including Mind Candy and Pact Coffee. Now, as Managing Partner and Senior Coach at Daijo, she works with aspiring COOs to be successful in their roles and careers, and with COOs and their CEOs on this vital relationship. She founded the London COO Roundtable 15 years ago. Her commentary runs alongside the findings throughout this report.

Who took part: 271 in-house operations leaders

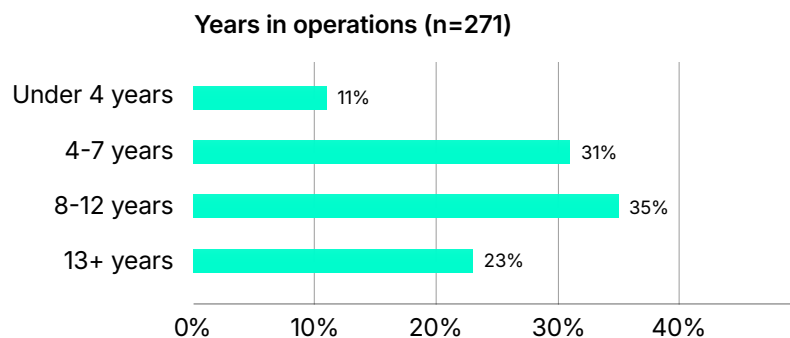
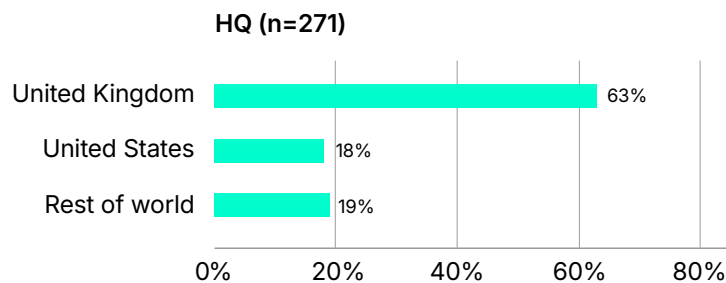
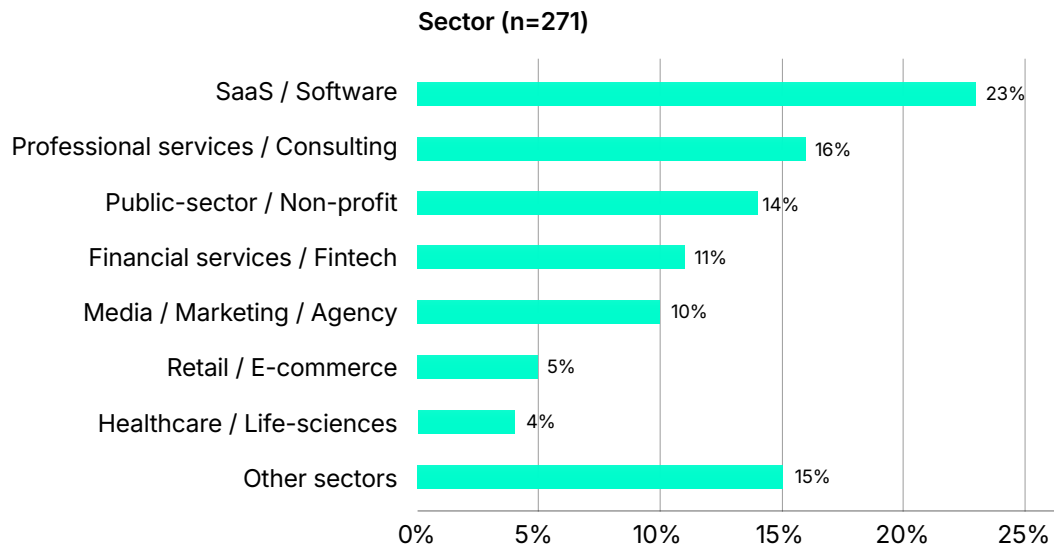
Fieldwork 16 Jul 2026 to 20 Sep 2026. Plus 22 fractional/portfolio operations leaders reported separately.



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Missing values excluded per panel. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

Who took part: 271 in-house operations leaders

Fieldwork 16 Jul 2026 to 20 Sep 2026. Plus 22 fractional/portfolio operations leaders reported separately.



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. HQ = organisation headquarters. Missing values excluded per panel. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

At a glance

When nobody owns it, ops does.

Ask an operations leader what they do and you'll get a pause. Not because the job is small, but because the job is everything that isn't someone else's.

Between July and September 2026 we asked 271 of them: COOs, Heads of Operations, VPs and Directors of Operations, and Chiefs of Staff, plus 22 fractional operations leaders. We also ran five roundtables with 24 operations leaders to find out more about their roles.

- **They carry the business.** The median operations leader has primary responsibility for 10 of the 27 listed business functions. 54% own two or more of Finance, People and Legal. 62% lead their organisation's operational strategy outright.
- **They grew into the role.** Seven in ten grew into it rather than applied for it, most by becoming the person who fixed what nobody else could. 64% have grown it well beyond the original brief. Those who arrived sideways are as likely to be true partners to their CEO as those who planned it (35% vs 38%).
- **Gaps land on them.** When something important falls between teams with no clear owner, 74% say it lands on them. They pick it up because they're the one person who can see the whole of it. The more they already own, the more lands on them.
- **The seat follows the title.** Three quarters report straight to the CEO, but only 36% call it a true partnership. In companies under 51 people, COOs and Heads of Operations carry comparable remits; those with COO titles are nearly twice as likely to be partners (53% vs 28%).
- **The week is upside down.** 67% name firefighting among the three things that take most of their week. Only one in nine names strategic planning, while 72% want more time for it. Firefighting fills the space that strategy should occupy, and the role was never built to protect time for it.
- **AI is on the list, not in the work.** Three in four put AI in their top three priorities or investments. 72% have no part of operations running mostly on it, and those who make it a priority are no more likely to have it running (29% vs 28%).



- **What stays human is people and the final call.** Asked what should never be handed to AI, 64% of those who answered named something about people: leading, hiring and firing, hard conversations, relationships. 43% name decisions and the final call. The job ahead does less and judges more, and that raises a question that came up in four of the five roundtables: if AI takes the junior work, where does the next generation of operations leaders learn that judgement?

Three things to do with this:

- 01.** Find your row on the benchmark page and take it to your next conversation about scope or title.
- 02.** Make prevention visible. The fire gets noticed; the fire that never started doesn't.
- 03.** Decide where the AI day goes before it arrives. The leaders already using AI told us the time went somewhere else.

Part 1: What they own

Operations leaders own more of the business than any single title was built to hold, and most grew into it rather than being hired for it.

Chapter 1: The people companies run on

The median operations leader runs 10 of 27 functions. There's no standard shape.

The typical operations leader carries primary executive responsibility for 10 of 27 listed business functions (n=271), several job descriptions stacked into one title. 89% own five or more. As one COO put it, "operations means nothing and everything."

54% own two or more of Finance, People/HR and Legal, three functions that at a larger company would each report to a different named executive with their own seat at the table. Here, one person often holds all three alongside everything else.

"[In] our business, anyway, [it] is anything that sits outside of tech and commercial that enables those two things to work. So it's everything else, basically: people, legal, finance, anything you [can] think of will sit under me."

Sarah Holt, VP of Operations, Fintech & SaaS Scaleup (roundtable participant)

The middle half own somewhere between 7 and 14 functions, and the full range runs from 1 to 23, wide enough that the term COO, let alone "operations leader", barely describes a single job. Every operations leader has effectively been benchmarking themselves against nothing but their own experience, with no reference point to check it against. That's part of what this report is for.

A COO at one company might spend their week on financial controls and compliance. A COO at another might spend it on hiring and internal comms. Both hold the same title, and both would struggle to describe their job to the other in a way that made sense.

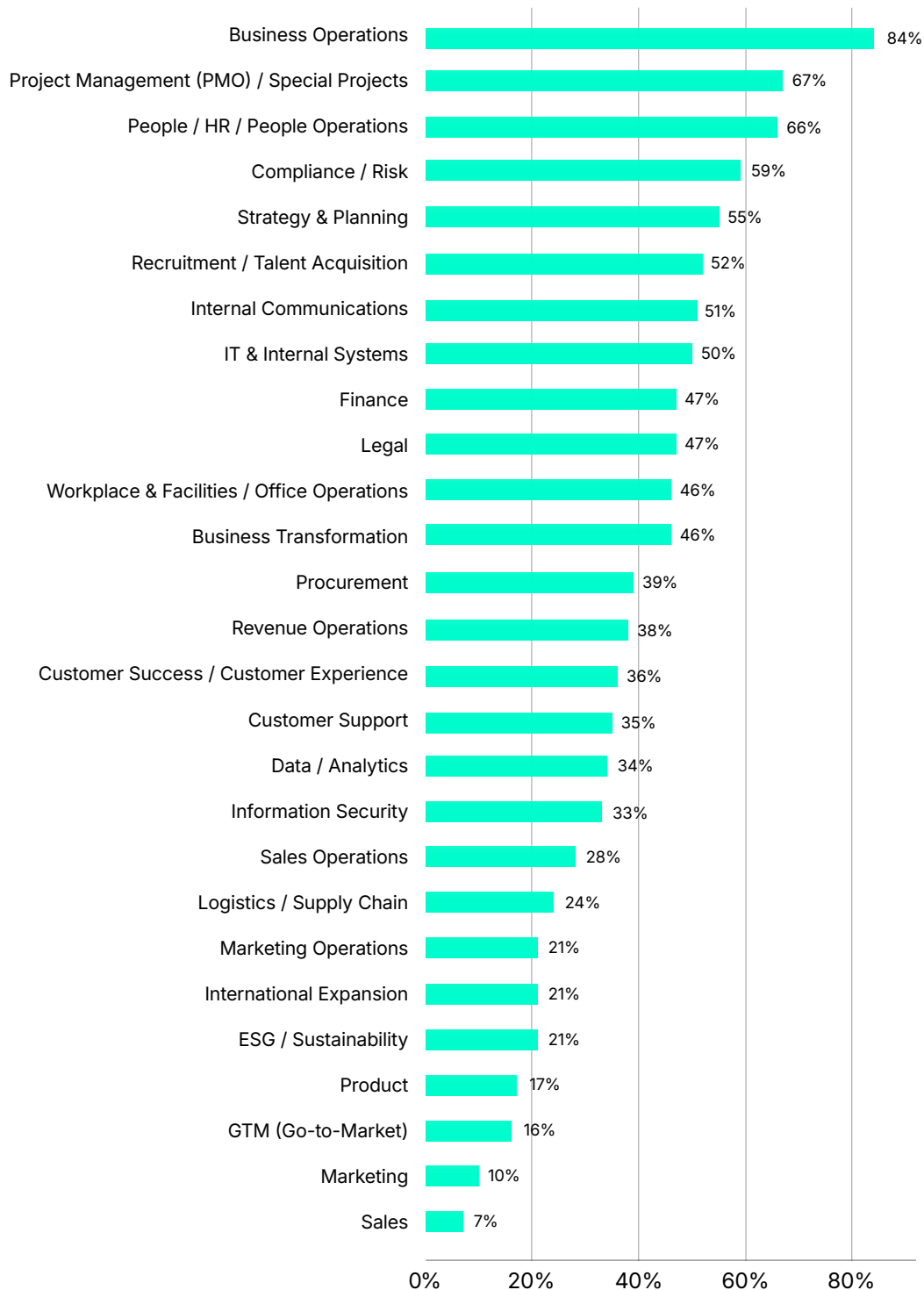
As Alex Catalán Flores (roundtable participant; Operations leader, non-profit sector) put it, businesses "decided that there is everything else that they don't want to work on, which is HR, finance, etc. And they call it operations. They just stuck a label on it." There's no standard job to benchmark against, because the role isn't standard. It's whatever this person stepped up to fill.

That shape narrows with scale. At companies of 251 or more employees (n=34), ownership of Finance, People and Legal drops to 18%, 24% and 12% respectively. These become other people's jobs once a company is large enough to afford them.



The median operations leader owns 10 business functions

Q11. Which of the following functions do you have primary executive responsibility for? (select all)



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Median 10 functions owned; 264 of 271 have a combination no one else has.
The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.



The smaller the company, the bigger the remit

% owning each function (Q11), by organisation headcount (Q2). Darker = more common.

	2-10 (n=42)	11-50 (n=115)	51-100 (n=48)	101-250 (n=32)	251+ (n=34)
Business Operations	88	90	85	72	68
Project Management (PMO) / Special Projects	64	68	60	75	71
People / HR / People Operations	67	82	54	69	24
Compliance / Risk	81	69	52	38	32
Strategy & Planning	45	62	52	59	47
Recruitment / Talent Acquisition	50	69	52	41	12
Internal Communications	52	61	44	44	29
IT & Internal Systems	62	57	58	28	21
Finance	74	60	29	25	18
Legal	55	60	40	38	12
Workplace & Facilities / Office Operations	36	58	50	41	21
Business Transformation	36	46	42	63	50
Procurement	43	44	42	38	18
Revenue Operations	62	35	33	38	24
Customer Success / Customer Experience	45	33	35	47	24
Customer Support	36	37	27	44	32
Data / Analytics	48	32	29	34	26
Information Security	38	37	46	19	9
Sales Operations	45	31	19	25	12
Logistics / Supply Chain	17	27	33	16	18
Marketing Operations	29	27	15	22	0
International Expansion	24	25	13	28	6
ESG / Sustainability	17	23	27	22	9
Product	29	19	8	16	9
GTM (Go-to-Market)	24	17	15	13	12
Marketing	10	10	15	9	0
Sales	17	5	4	9	3

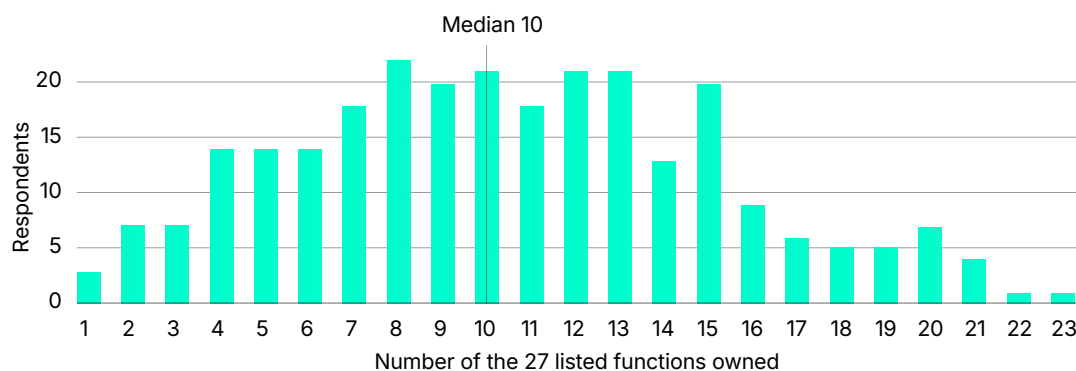
Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Cells are % of each headcount band. Bands with n<10 would be suppressed.
The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.



One VP of Operations at a B2B SaaS company described having no Head of Legal since the last one left: AI prompts and external counsel now cover the gap instead. This is largely a small and mid-size company pattern. At scale, the role starts to look more like a defined job again.

There is no standard remit: from 1 function to 23

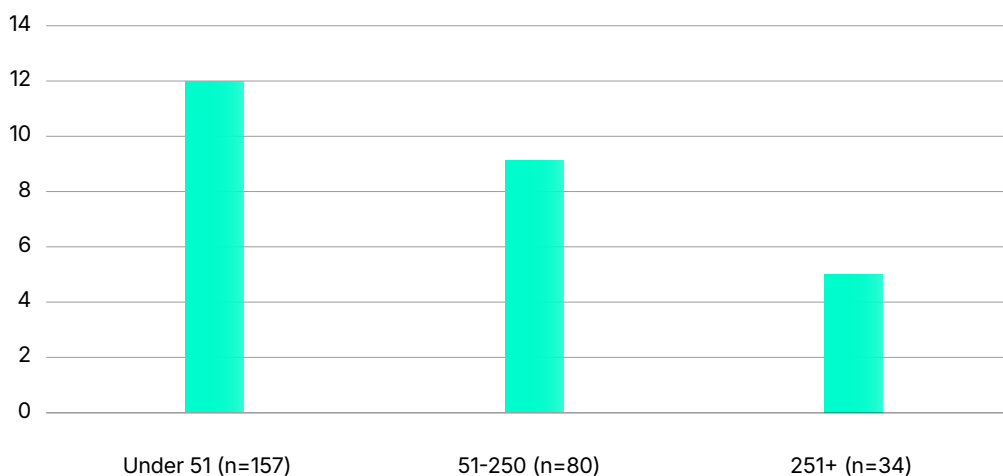
Q11. Count of functions each respondent has primary executive responsibility for.



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Middle half own 7-14. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

Median functions owned falls from 12 to 5 as companies grow

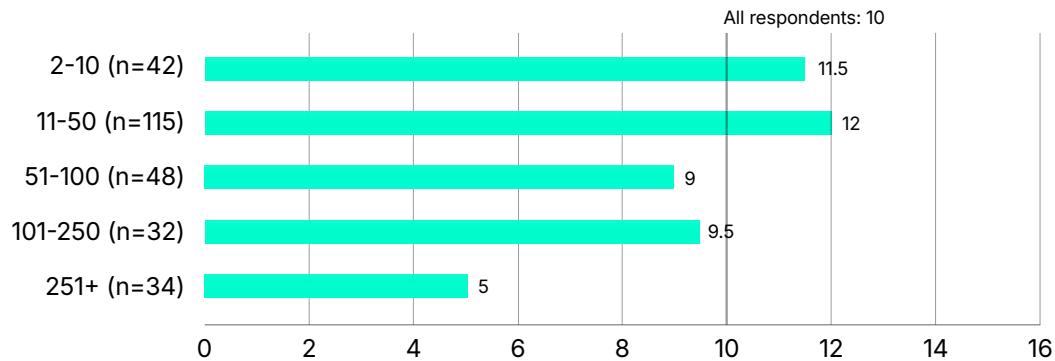
Median number of the 27 listed functions owned (Q11)



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

The remit narrows sharply above 250 people

Median number of the 27 listed functions owned (Q11), by headcount



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

That undefined remit has a cost most reward systems can't see.

"I sometimes say a good operation is a boring operation. If there are no issues, it means you as an operations person are doing a good job. And that's exactly why you get forgotten, because everything is working, so people start asking what you actually do."

COO, E-commerce (roundtable participant)

"I laid the topsoil; someone else is gardening."

Operations Lead, Education (roundtable participant)

The wider the remit, the harder it is to point at any single thing and say "this is what I do", and the easier it becomes for the work to go unnoticed precisely because it's being done well.

Success looks like nothing happened. Hold that thought: it explains where the week goes (Chapter 5).

Use this → count your functions against the 27. 14 or more puts you in the broadest quarter. Bring that to your next conversation about scope.

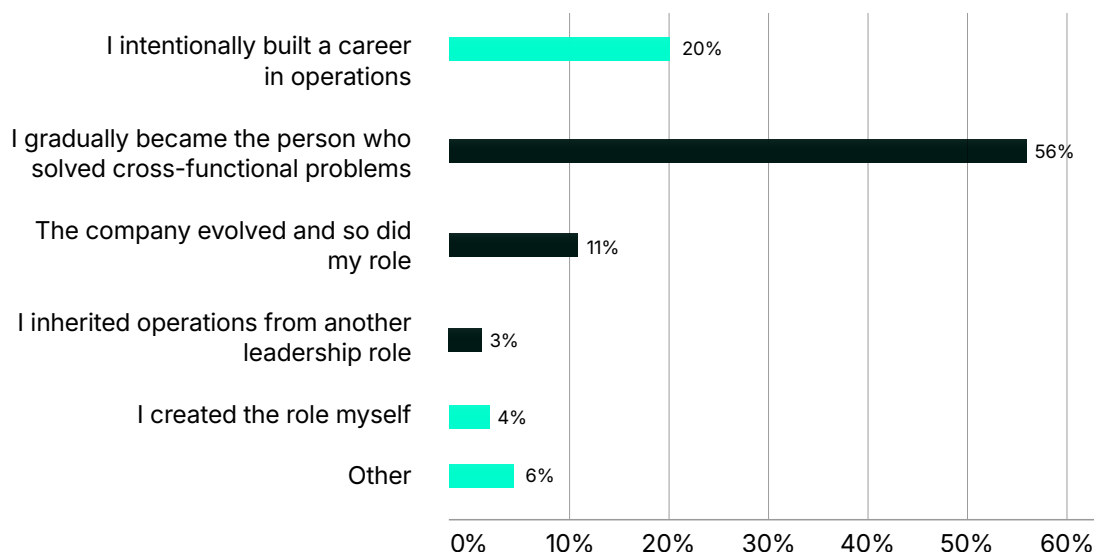
Chapter 2: Grown into, not hired into

Seven in ten grew into the role.

For most operations leaders, the role formed around them rather than the other way round. 56% gradually became the person who solved cross-functional problems, the one who kept saying yes until the job was theirs. Add those whose company evolved around them (11%) and those who inherited operations from another leadership role (3%), and 71% grew into the role. Only 20% set out to build a career in operations from the start.

71% grew into the role rather than setting out for it

Q9. Which best describes how you became an operations leader?



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Highlighted the three routes where the role grew around the person.
The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

The route makes no difference to standing with the CEO. Those who grew into the role are as likely to be true partners to their CEO (35%) as those who planned it (38%). 70% grew into it in the UK, 71% in the US and 73% in the rest of the world, and between 69% and 82% at every company size.



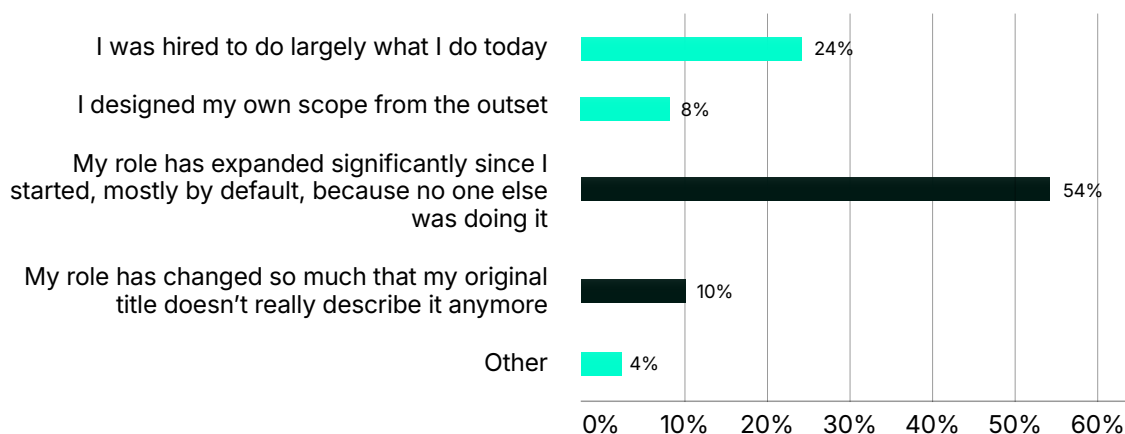
"It wasn't by design. I think it's [the] nature of [it]: you end up doing a lot of stuff that, not that nobody else wants to do, but you're just naturally like, 'Oh well, I'll figure that out, or I'll pick that up.' It doesn't matter that that's not really in my job description. I'll just do it. I think that often seems to be how people end up [in the role]."

Sarah Holt, VP of Operations, Fintech & SaaS Scaleup (roundtable participant)

The same pattern shows up in scope. 54% say their role expanded significantly, mostly by default, because no one else was doing it. Combined with those whose title no longer describes the job (10%), 64% have grown their scope well beyond the original brief. Half (50%) both grew into the role and grew it beyond the brief, meaning for most of this group, no line was ever drawn, not at entry, and not since.

64% have grown the role well beyond the original brief

Q10. Thinking about how your current scope came about, which is closest to the truth?



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Highlighted: expanded by default / outgrew the title. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

Experience changes that. Among those with 13 or more years in operations, 53% say the scope grew beyond the brief, against 75% of those with under eight years. The experienced ones draw more lines.

Only 11% name "my role now covers more than I was hired to do" as a top challenge. It was one of the 15 options in a pick-three list of operational challenges. Far more name too many competing priorities (54%, Chapter 5).



But that's not the same as the role being fine as it stands. In the roundtables, the more common complaint was that nothing gets swapped out as new work lands, not the scope itself. Everything is added on top, and the role expands because there's no mechanism to trade one thing for another.

Not everyone wants it tighter:

"Personally, I think this kind of role, if it was too defined, would be boring and it would attract the same kind of people. [...] The role will always have to evolve. If the role isn't evolving, the company isn't evolving."

COO, B2B Software (roundtable participant)

Use this → if you didn't take the direct path in, that's nothing to apologise for. On standing with the CEO, it makes no difference.

Chapter 3:

The default owner

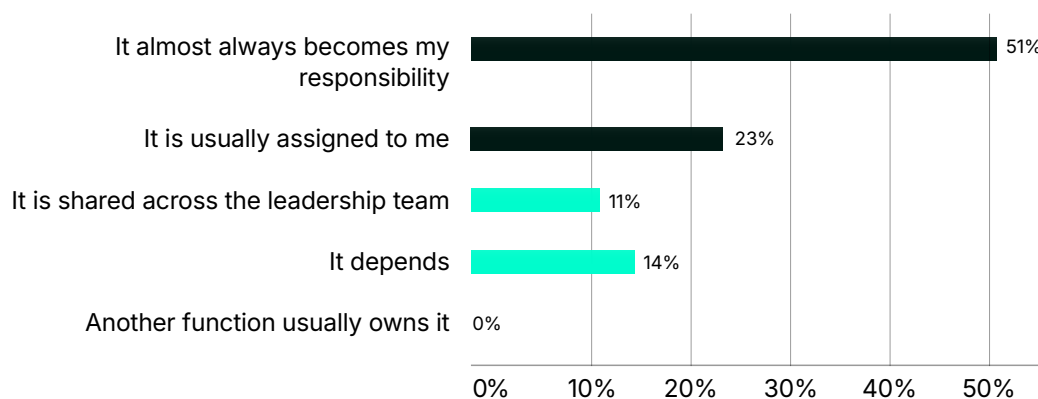
When something has no owner, three in four say it becomes theirs.

The clearest evidence of how far this ownership runs is what happens to work nobody claims.

When something important falls between teams with no clear owner, 51% say it almost always becomes their responsibility, and a further 23% say it's usually assigned to them. Together, 74% say unclaimed work defaults or is assigned to them. Only 11% say it's genuinely shared across the leadership team. Nobody selected the option "another function usually owns it". The operations leader is the default candidate for unclaimed work. The business treats operations as its backstop.

When something has no owner, 74% say it becomes theirs

Q17. When something important falls between teams with no clear owner, what usually happens?



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

When a gap is absorbed this way, the hole in the structure can stay invisible. It gets patched by the person already carrying the most, rather than fixed by whoever should own it.



"Moving everything and owning nothing."

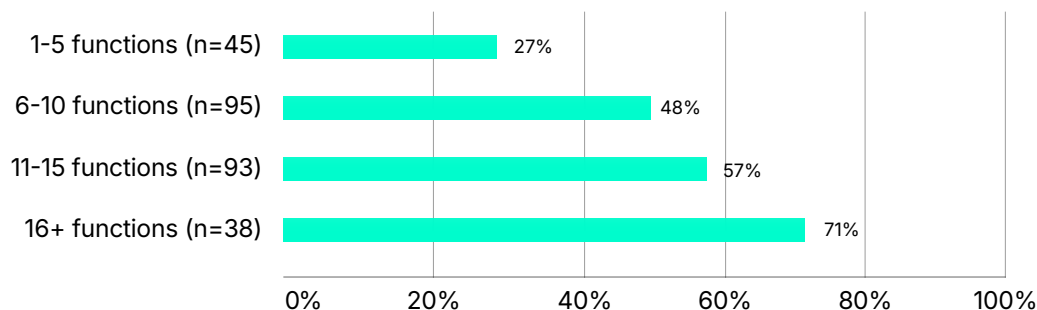
COO, 51-250 employees (survey participant)

The broader someone's remit, the more inevitable this becomes. Among those carrying 1-5 functions (n=45), 27% say unclaimed work almost always lands on them. That climbs to 48% at 6-10 functions (n=95), 57% at 11-15 (n=93), and 71% at 16 or more (n=38). The more of the business someone already touches, the harder it becomes for anything to fall outside their reach.

One survey can't show which comes first, but it looks like this is how remits grow: one absorbed gap at a time.

The more you own, the more lands on you

Unowned work almost always mine (% of each segment).



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

"When there's a new initiative and no one knows what to do, I'm the person that usually sets it up with the team."

VP of Operations, Software Startup (roundtable participant)

That's someone actively stepping into the gap because leaving it unfilled isn't really an option they have. One COO described the ongoing work of pushing back against that pattern:



"It's really easy to take on more and more stuff because the business needs it. There's nobody else that is either bright, skilled or available to be able to do it themselves. So the ability to coach your CEO into an understanding that the answer is always 'yes, but'. Yes, but what are we going to put down, stop doing, or cascade to more junior team members?"

Andy Spicer, COO, Scaleup (roundtable participant)

However, asked why unowned tasks usually land on the operations leaders, one of the roundtable participants answered with pride rather than resignation:

"I'm now CMO as well. Desperate to hire my own director[...]. I can't wait to give it away. But at the same time, I'm glad I'm the one that's building it, because I'm naturally the person in the business who can see the gap and identify the type of role that we need."

Shrina Lakhani, COO, Digital Entertainment Scaleup (roundtable participant)

In the roundtables, leaders said unowned work does eventually get re-homed, but slowly, and usually only because the operations leader pushes for it. Being the default owner is an ongoing job in itself.

Our read:

- The reason unclaimed work lands on operations specifically, rather than with the CEO or going undone, may be that the operations leader is usually the one person already touching every function involved, so picking it up requires no negotiation and no one else to ask.
- It's also possible the title itself signals to the rest of the leadership team that anything ambiguous is already theirs by default, before anyone asks.



Use this → keep a re-homing list. Every orphan you pick up gets a named owner and a date it moves. Review it with your CEO every quarter.

//

74% doesn't surprise me. Many COOs I coach are proud of being the safety net, and it takes too long to see the cost. Every gap quietly filled represents a structural problem the leadership team doesn't feel. This is fine in the early days but needs addressing as a business scales. In coaching terms, ops leaders slip into the 'Rescuer' role, and rescuing colludes with their role becoming a bit of a dumping ground unless they consciously parachute in, build a bridge and structure their way out of different spaces in the business.

Question for your CEO: *Which of the things I picked up this year are structural gaps in the business that will only get worse?*

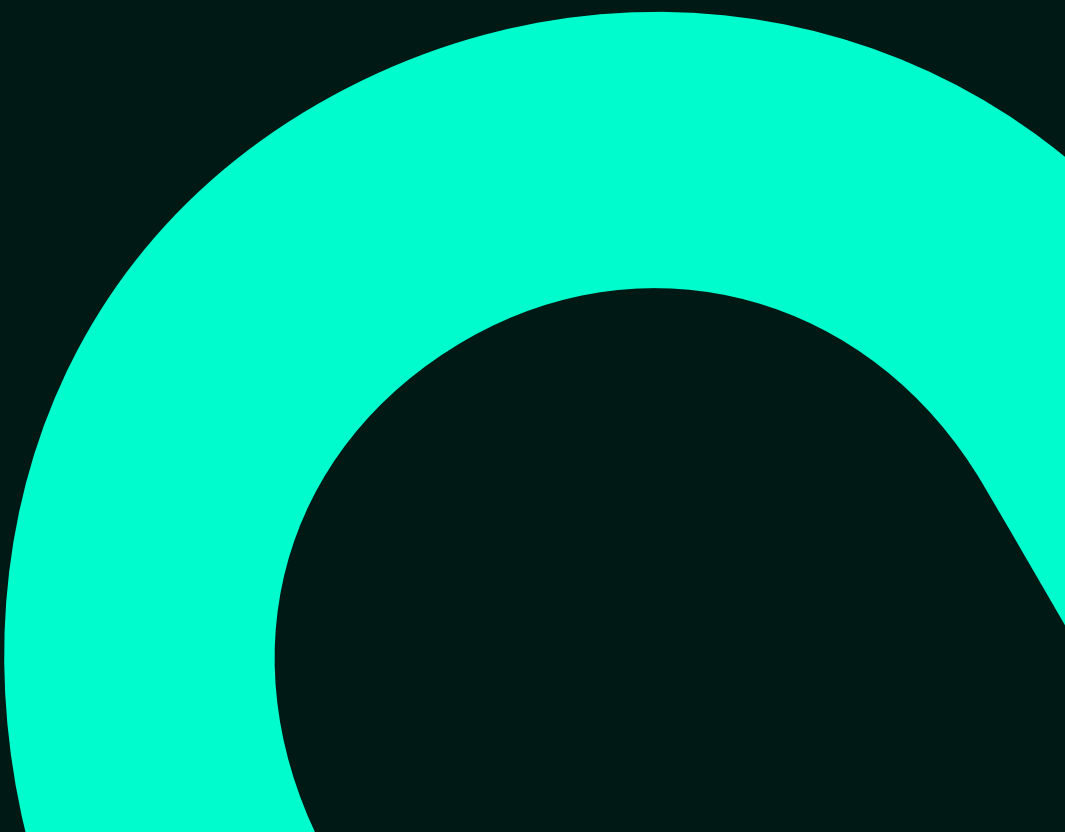


Divinia Knowles

COO Coach & Founder, London COO Roundtable

Part 2: What they don't own

Even inside a role this broad, operations leaders don't fully control how they're treated, or how their week gets spent. Both are decided by something other than their own choices.



Chapter 4:

At the top table

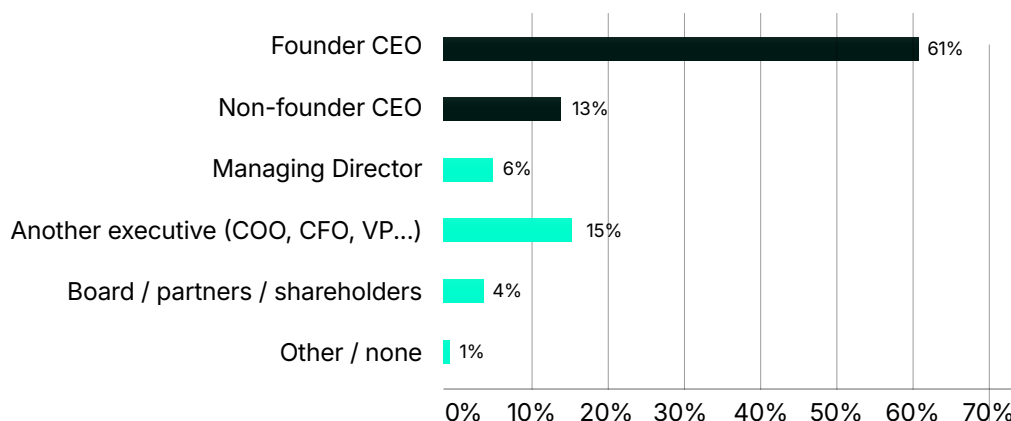
Three quarters report to the CEO. Only 36% call it a true partnership, and at the same load, the title still makes the difference.

How the role is treated once it exists, as a genuine partner or as someone who just executes, tracks their title and who they report to more closely than what they carry.

74% report straight to the CEO, 61% to a founder and 13% to a non-founder, with no operational layer sitting between them and the top (n=271).

74% report straight to the CEO

Q12. Who do you report directly to? (write-ins grouped)

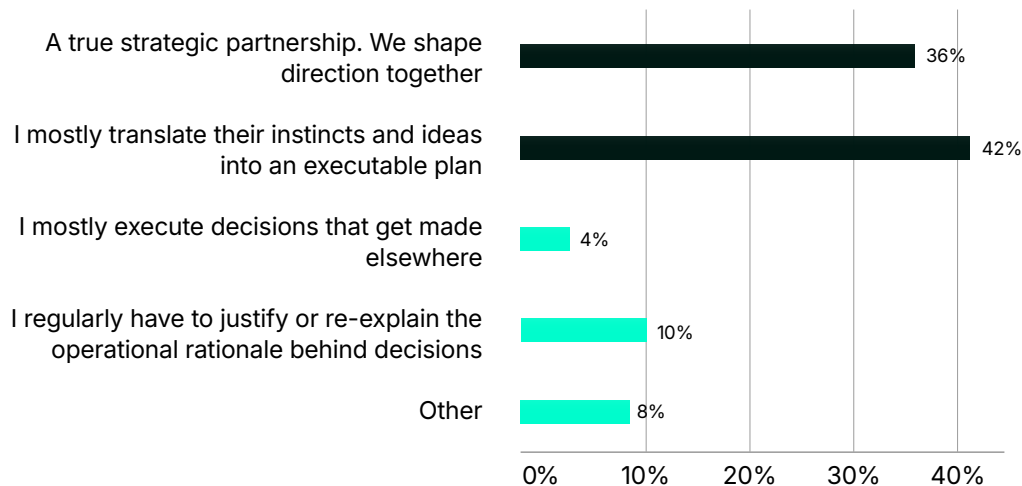


Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Highlighted: founder and non-founder CEO. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

That direct line shapes the relationship that follows. 42% mostly translate the CEO's instincts into an executable plan; 36% describe a true strategic partnership, shaping direction together. Between them, 78% are doing one of these two things; only 14% describe a strained relationship, mostly executing decisions made elsewhere or regularly having to justify their rationale.

78% shape direction with the CEO or turn it into the plan. 36% are true partners.

Q13. Which best describes your working relationship with your CEO/founder right now?

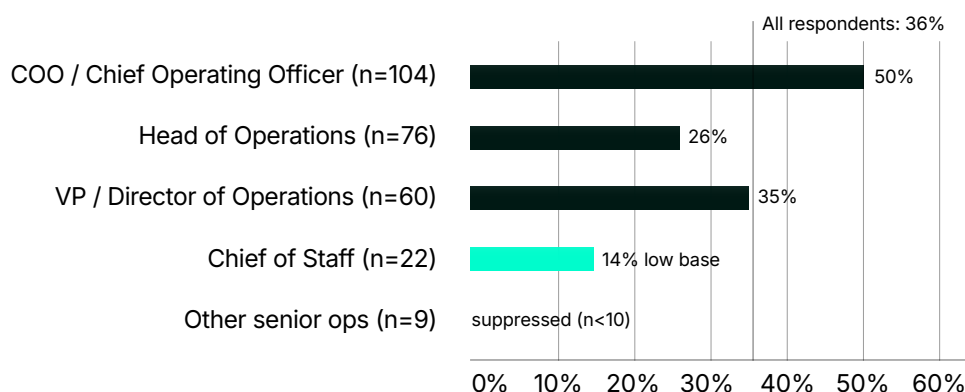


Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. 'Other' = write-ins, mostly 'a blend of these'. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

Whether someone ends up shaping direction with the CEO or just turning the CEO's instincts into a plan tracks their title more closely than what they do day to day. At companies under 51 people, COOs report a 53% true-partnership rate; Heads of Operations at the same size sit at 28%.

COOs are nearly twice as likely as Heads of Ops to be a true partner

% describing 'a true strategic partnership. We shape direction together' (Q13).



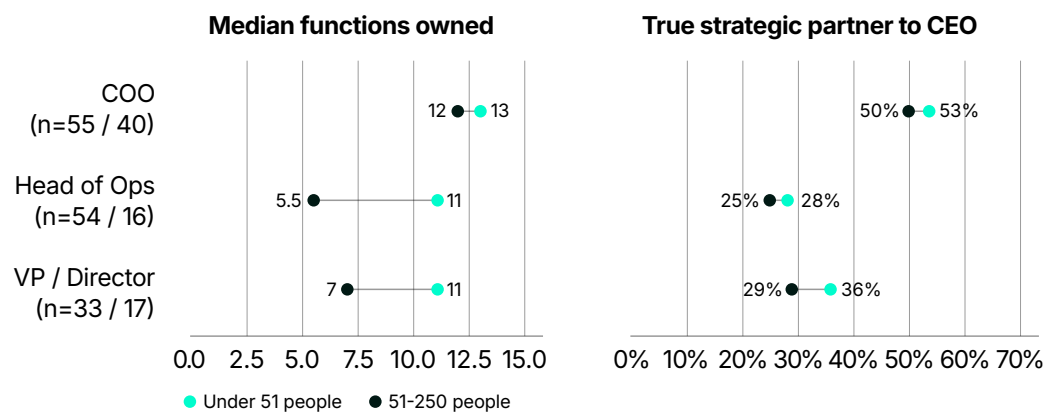
Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Lighter bars: $10 \leq n < 30$ (low base, indicative only). The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.



COOs are nearly twice as likely as Heads of Operations to describe a true partnership, a gap that holds after allowing for company size, tenure and remit. The title rather than the work itself seems to shape how the relationship is read.

Under 51 people, the same breadth of remit. The COO is still far more often the partner

Median functions owned and % true strategic partner, by title and headcount. 251+ omitted (cells $n < 10$ for COO and Head of Ops).



Base $n = 215$: COOs, Heads of Operations and VPs/Directors of Operations at organisations under 251 people; cell n shown as under-51 / 51-250. Head of Ops and VP/Director at 51-250 are low bases ($n = 16-17$): indicative only. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

48% of those reporting to a founder-CEO mostly translate instead of partnering, vs 24% of those reporting to a non-founder CEO. This gap shows up regardless of company size or operations title.

"With the founder, it was taking his ideas and either challenging them or reworking them so that they could be deliverable. Whereas with my [current] CEO, we are much more on the same wavelength around building for scale."

COO, Scaleup (roundtable participant)

Same person, same job, translating for one CEO and partnering with another. Partnership is worked at, not handed over.

"[...] We had what I like to call couples counselling three years ago because we didn't have a very good relationship. That was great."

MC Glover, COO, Series A Fintech (roundtable participant)

Being the person a CEO relies on this closely has a cost, and it came up in three of the five roundtables:

"The CEO/COO relationship is unique to every company. The "CEO whisperer" part of the role really surprised me, in that I've had to grow and evolve into that and it's also scary because you can feel very tied to that particular experience. You're very much appreciated by that level of the business but the internal and external translation of those skills becomes quite a daunting thing."

Shrina Lakhani, COO, Digital Entertainment Scaleup (roundtable participant)

Remit matters too, though not to the same extent as title. Those carrying 14 or more functions have a 53% partnership rate with the CEO, nearly double the 29% for those carrying 7 or fewer. Owning more of the business goes with some influence over how someone is treated, just not as much as title or who they report to. True partners also own more of the direction: 69% own Strategy & Planning, against 35% of those in strained relationships (indicative).

The title changes the week as well. 41% of Heads of Operations name reporting and admin among their top three time sinks, against 12% of COOs. VPs and Directors of Operations own strategy least (38%), but are the most likely to say they'd put an AI-freed day into strategy (63%). Chiefs of Staff sit furthest from the partner seat (n=22, indicative): 64% translate, 14% partner, and they have the smallest remits (a median of 6.5 functions).

"[The new CEO] was like, 'I don't think I need a Chief of Staff. What I need is a VP of Ops, or somebody who can actually properly act as a thought partner.'"

VP of Operations, B2B SaaS (roundtable participant)

Our read:

- A title is a signal a CEO can read in a second. A remit takes a conversation to explain.

Use this → carrying a COO's remit on another title? The numbers in this chapter are your case for that conversation.

//

I'd gently push back on "the title makes the difference". In my experience this depends on the size of the business. A Head of Ops can be as likely as a COO to be a trusted partner to the Founder CEO depending on the size and stage of that business and the operator's experience level. The founder finding rings truest. Many founders didn't hire a partner; they hired relief from the parts they don't enjoy. The operator who brings that relief can become a trusted partner if they focus on also building the relationship with that Founder CEO. The "couples counselling" quote isn't a joke. It's some of the most useful work I do.

Question for your CEO: *What decision do you currently make alone that you would appreciate me being a sounding board for?*



Divinia Knowles

COO Coach & Founder, London COO Roundtable

Chapter 5:

The week that isn't theirs

Firefighting gets the week because prevention leaves no trace.

"...holding two timeframes at once. You're firefighting today's [operational issue] while still being expected to build the three year infrastructure that stops it from happening again. Most days you don't get to choose which one wins."

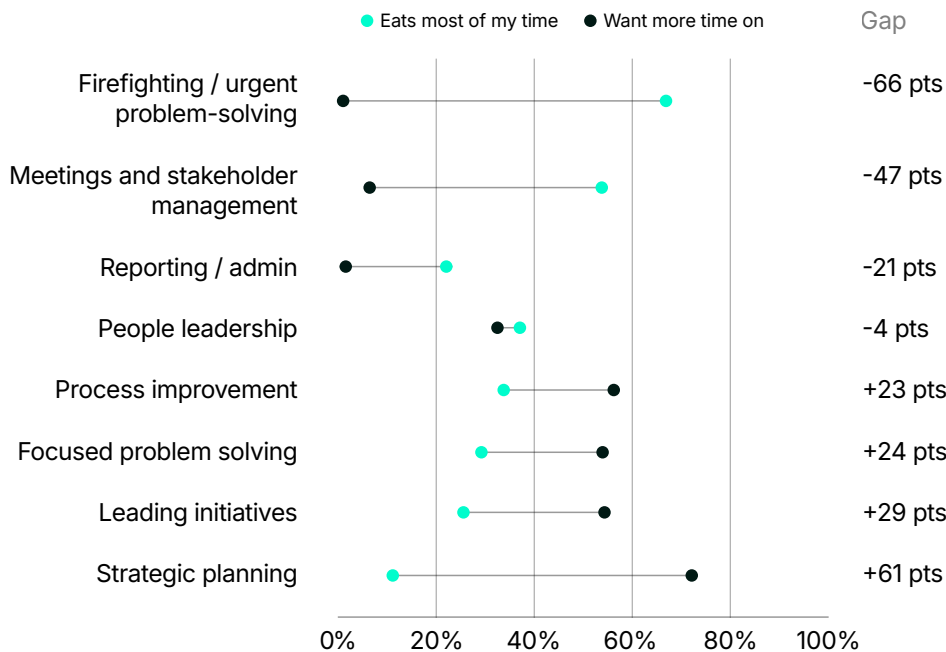
Head of Operations, under 51 employees (survey participant)

Firefighting takes up more of the week than anything else, and almost nobody wants more of it (1%). 67% name firefighting among their top three time sinks, the single largest time sink in the survey (n=271). Meetings and stakeholder management follow a similar pattern: 54% cite it as a current time sink, only 7% want more of it.

Activity	Eats time now	Want more of
Firefighting / urgent problem-solving	67%	1%
Meetings and stakeholder management	54%	7%
Reporting / admin	23%	2%
People leadership	37%	33%
Process improvement	34%	56%
Focused problem-solving	30%	54%
Leading initiatives	26%	55%
Strategic planning	11%	72%

The week they have vs the week they want

Q15. Which eats up most of your time in a typical week? / Q16. Which would you most want to spend more time on? (up to 3 each)



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Multi-select, up to 3 per question. Totals exceed 100%. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

The week they want is built around planning and improving: 72% want more time on strategic planning, 56% on process improvement, 55% on leading initiatives and 54% on focused problem-solving. Only 11% name strategic planning among the things that take most of their week, and almost nobody asks for more of what actually fills the week today.

Why does the fire win? The roundtables gave the clearest answer in the whole project: prevention leaves no trace, so the fire is where the value gets seen.

"We do so many things that no one ever sees. So every so often I [think], 'I'm going to let that fire burn, so everyone knows why I'm here.'"

Ghilaine Chan, Fractional COO & Growth Leader (roundtable participant)

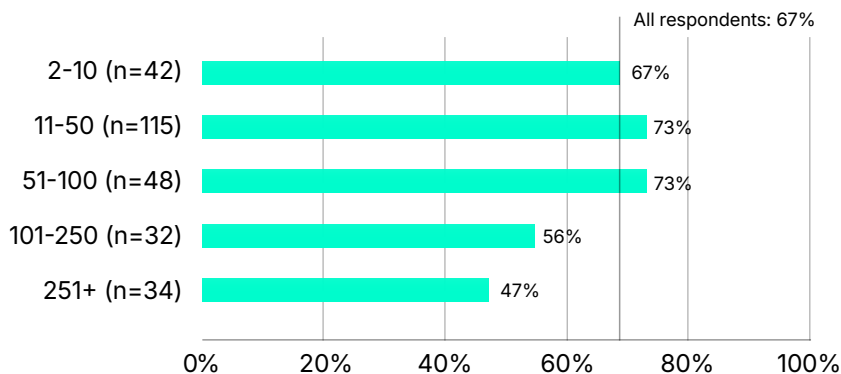


It's the other half of Chapter 1's "a good operation is a boring operation". The role rewards visible work, and prevention is invisible.

Size changes the job, not the standing. Firefighting drops sharply with company size, from 71% at under 51 employees to 47% at 251+ (n=34).

Firefighting eases once companies pass 100 people

Firefighting a top-3 time sink (% of each segment).



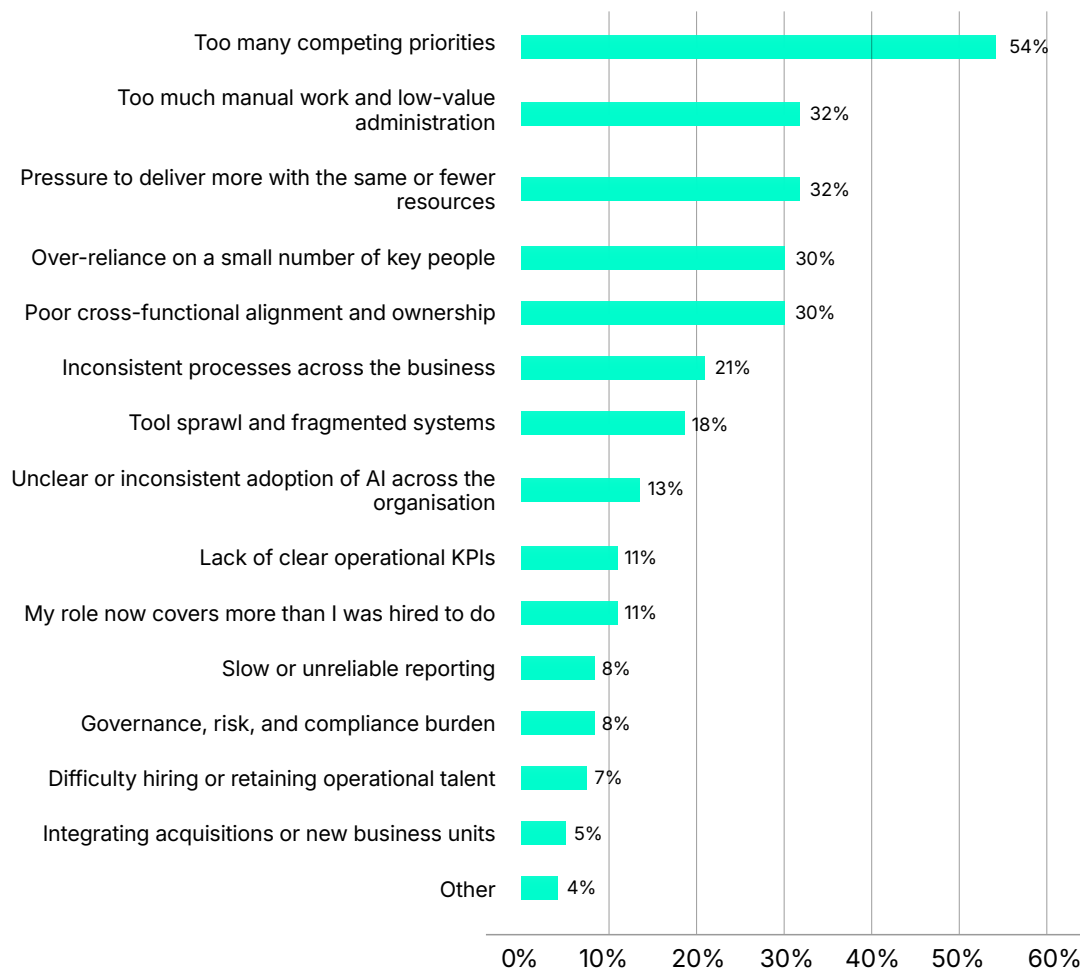
Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

At larger companies, firefighting is cited less and meetings more. The share of operations leaders naming meetings and stakeholder management a top-three time sink climbs from 44% at companies under 51 people, to 63% at 51-250, to 79% at 251+ (n=34). Poor cross-functional alignment follows the same climb as a top challenge: 23%, 33%, then 53%. What doesn't change with size is the partnership rate: 36%, 38% and 32%. In a small company you own everything. In a large one you coordinate everyone. Either way, a third are true partners.

Competing priorities dominate the challenges list too: 54% name too many competing priorities as a top challenge, ahead of manual admin work (32%), pressure to do more with the same resources (32%), and over-reliance on a small number of key people (30%). Scope may feed this pressure, but competing priorities are what leaders name.

The biggest challenge is too many competing priorities

Q20. Which of the following are your biggest operational challenges today (up to 3)



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Multi-select, up to 3. Totals exceed 100%. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

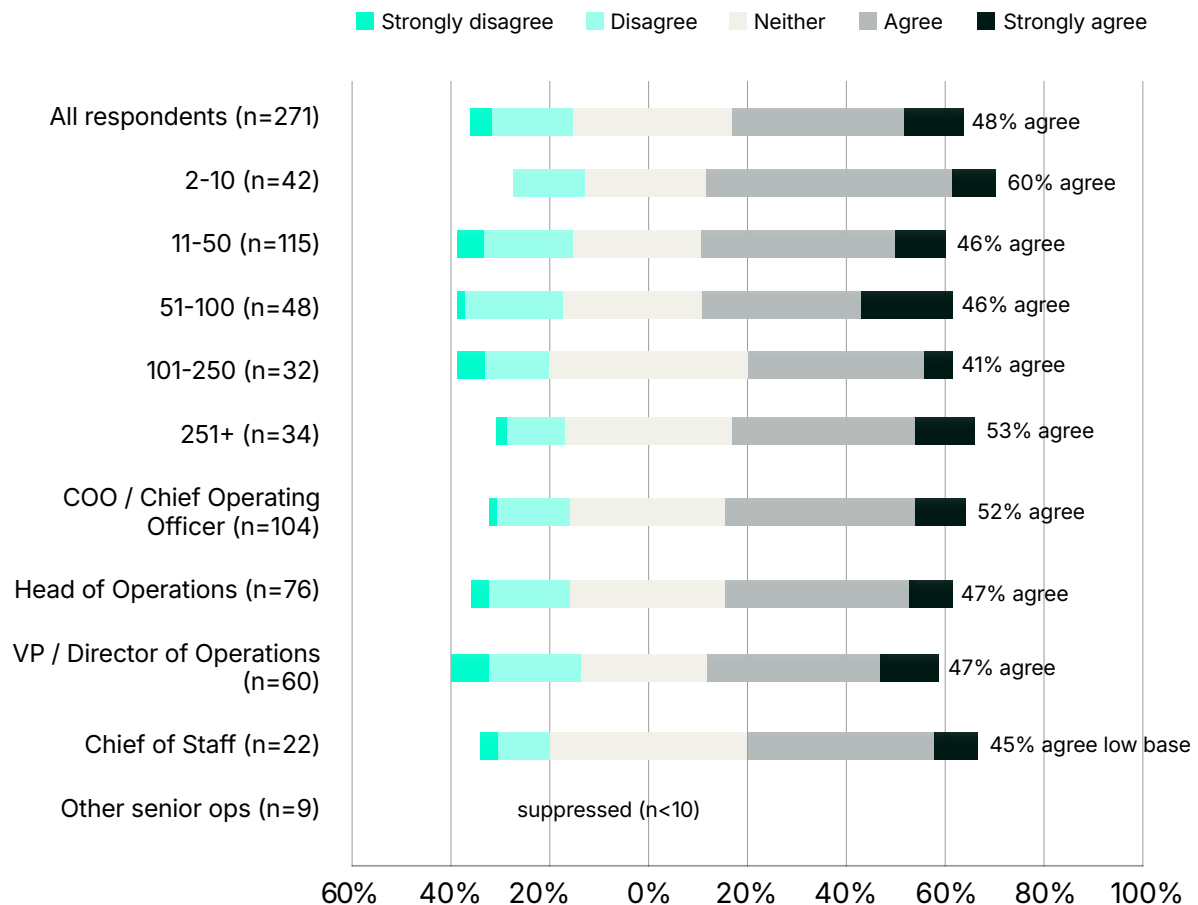
Reporting itself isn't yet the burden the firefighting data might suggest: 59% of operations functions spend under 5 hours a week on it, excluding those who don't know, and only 4% spend 16 hours or more. So when 72% say reporting should be mostly AI-assisted (Chapter 6), it isn't because reporting swallows the week. It's the obvious place to start.

All of this sits inside businesses that are getting harder to run. Nearly half (48%) agree that operational complexity in their business is increasing faster than their operational maturity; 21% disagree and 30% are neutral. US-headquartered leaders feel it most: 71% agree, against 41% in the UK (US n=49). The gap holds after allowing for company size, tenure, funding model and title, though sector mix may play a part.



48% say complexity is outpacing their operational maturity

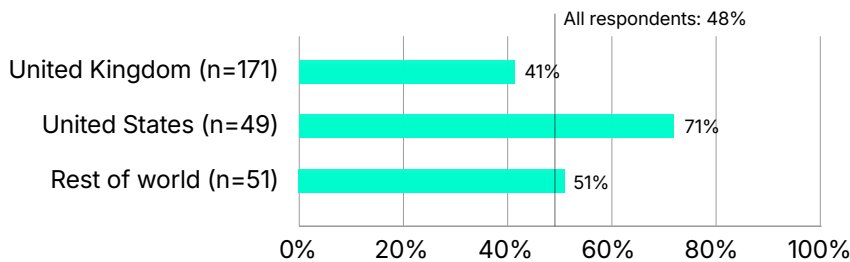
Q27. 'Operational complexity in our business is increasing faster than our operational maturity.'



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Bars centred on 'neither'. Segments with n<10 suppressed. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

US-headquartered leaders feel the complexity squeeze most

% agreeing complexity is increasing faster than operational maturity (Q27), by HQ (Q3).



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

"As we drink our own champagne and implement more AI on the inside [...] it's going to be [that] the AI has caused the fire. Can you put it out?"

COO, Scaleup (roundtable participant)

Our read:

- Planning time may stay flat as firefighting eases because prevention has no one waiting on it. It gives way whenever something urgent lands, while a fire always has an audience.
- The work may change shape as a company adds people: less time fixing what breaks, more time keeping a growing number of people and teams pointed the same way.
- The appetite for AI to take on reporting work looks like it's running ahead of any actual time pressure forcing the issue, since most people aren't spending many hours on it yet.

Use this → make prevention visible. Report the fires that didn't start the way you'd report the ones that did. That was the rooms' own fix: a log of wins, internal tools shown off, an operations metric.



//

The quote that stopped me was “I’m going to let that fire burn, so everyone knows why I’m here.” I’ve been that leader, and so have many I coach. Firefighting isn’t only done to us. It’s partly chosen, because it’s where we feel useful and seen. So I agree with the data, with one addition: 72% want more strategy time, but strategy is a muscle, and it wastes when every week is reactive. Hand most ops leaders an empty Tuesday and the fires would find it by lunchtime. Carving out time is one of the hardest and most valuable things an ops leader can do. Protecting the time is only half the job; however, using it well is the other.

Question for your CEO: *If I stopped firefighting for a week, what would you have me work on that would take the business forward faster?*



Divinia Knowles

COO Coach & Founder, London COO Roundtable

Part 3:

What they'll own next

Operations leaders want AI to take the load off their week. What they won't hand over is the judgement and accountability that come with the role itself.

Chapter 6: AI on the list, not in the work

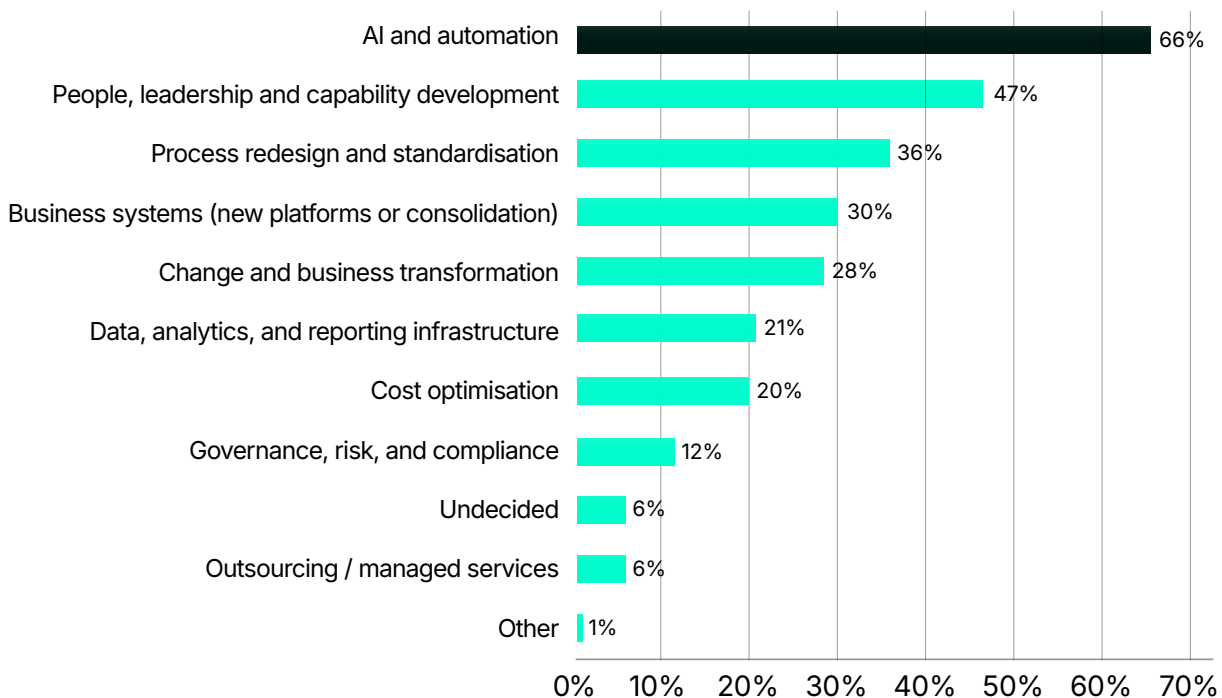
Three in four put AI in their top three priorities and/or investments. 72% have no part of operations running mostly on AI.

AI is named a top priority for the year ahead by 54% of operations leaders, ahead of scaling operations for growth (48%) and improving efficiency (42%) (n=271). Put next to the challenges list from Part 2, this is one of the few places where the stated priority answers a named problem directly: too many competing priorities and too much manual work are exactly what AI adoption is aimed at reducing.

66% put AI and automation among their biggest investment areas, ahead of people/ leadership development (47%) and process redesign (36%). Combined with those naming it a top-3 priority, 74% have AI as a top-3 priority or top-3 investment.

66% name AI among their top three investment areas

Q21. Where will the largest share of your operational investment go in the next 12 months? (up to 3)



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. Multi-select, up to 3. Totals exceed 100%. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

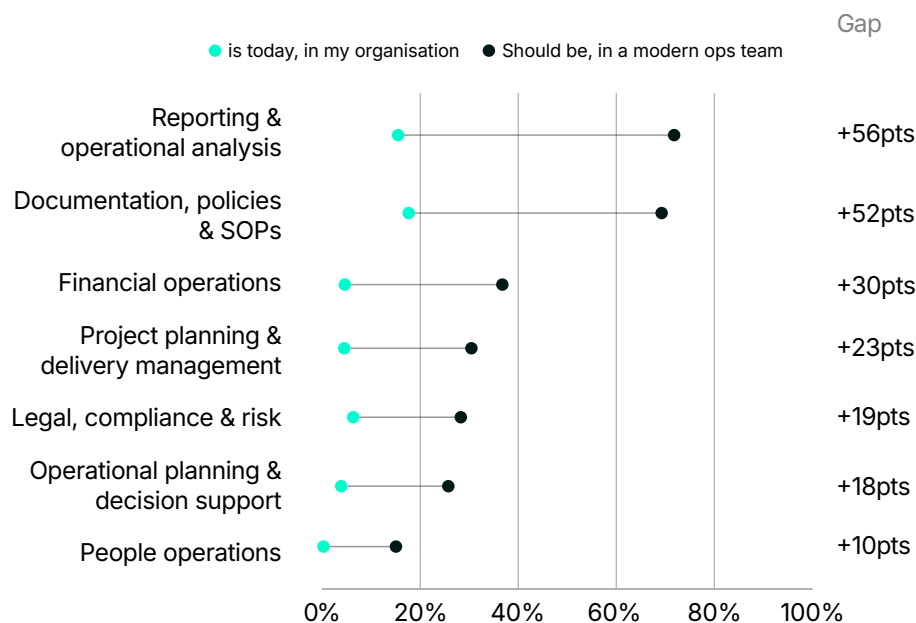


That appetite hasn't turned into adoption yet. In all seven areas, fewer say the work is mostly AI-assisted in their organisation today than think it should be in a modern operations team. The gap is widest in reporting (72% vs 16%) and documentation (70% vs 18%):

Area	Should be mostly/entirely AI	Is mostly/almost entirely AI today	Gap
Reporting & operational analysis	72%	16%	56pts
Documentation, policies & SOPs	70%	18%	52pts
Financial operations	37%	7%	30pts
Project planning & delivery	30%	7%	23pts
Legal, compliance & risk	28%	9%	19pts
Operational planning & decision support	25%	7%	18pts
People operations	13%	3%	10pts

The AI gap: 72% say reporting should be mostly AI-assisted; 16% say it is

Q23: to what extent *SHOULD* each be AI-assisted in a modern ops team? Q24: to what extent *IS* each AI-assisted in your organisation today?



Base n=254-269 in-house leaders. Per area, 'Don't know' / 'Not applicable' excluded. Q23 asks about ops teams in general; Q24 about their own organisation. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

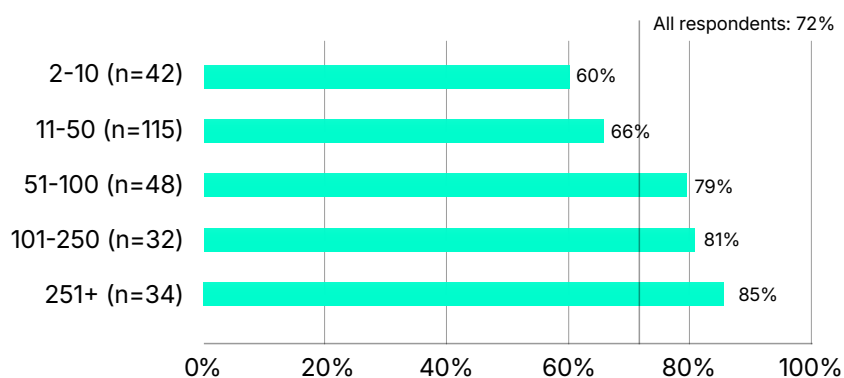


72% currently have no part of operations running mostly on AI. Making AI a priority hasn't yet turned it into practice: 29% of those with AI as a top-three priority have any area mostly run on AI, against 28% of those without it. Professional services shows the gap most clearly: 74% of leaders there put AI among their biggest investments, yet only 16% have any area of operations running mostly on AI.

This rises with company size, up to 85% having no part of operations mostly on AI at 251+ (n=34). Smaller companies are ahead here.

The bigger the company, the less AI is doing today

% with none of the 7 ops areas mostly or entirely AI-assisted today (Q24), by headcount.



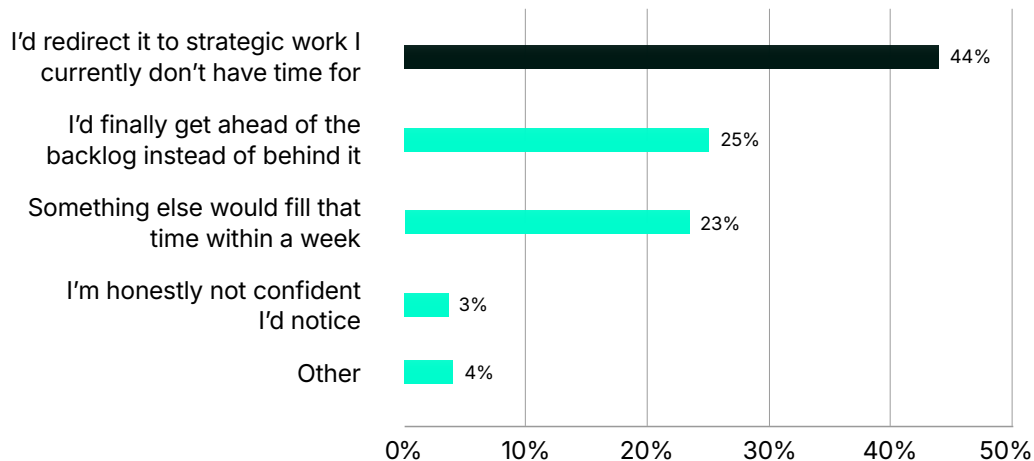
Base n=271. "Don't know" and "Not applicable" answers are included in the base. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

Asked what would happen if AI gave them a full day back, 44% say they'd redirect it to strategic work they don't currently have time for, and 25% would finally get ahead of the backlog. 26% expect the time to disappear anyway, either filled by something else within a week or not noticed at all.

That 44% is intent. The survey can test it against what's already happening: where AI already does real work, 62% still name firefighting among their top three time sinks, against 69% elsewhere, not a meaningful difference. The people already using it explain why.

A day back: 44% would spend it on strategy; 26% say it would vanish

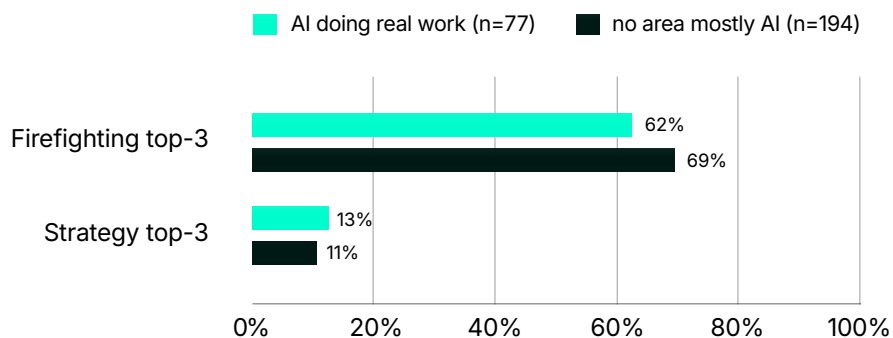
Q25. If AI gave you back one full day every week starting tomorrow, what would actually happen?



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

Firefighting is still a top time sink where AI already does real work

% naming firefighting / strategic planning among their top-3 time sinks, by whether AI already does real work in their ops.



Base n=271. Neither difference is big enough to rule out chance, even comparing companies of the same size. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

"Everything that I've put a process in place for, I think I've made it better. But the work wasn't taken away. It's the same output, but the quality of it's way better. In terms of the time that I spend, I'm not saving any time. My time just goes towards a different place."

Jasmine Liu, Director of Operations, consumer brand (roundtable participant)

For some, the gains go to quality, not time. And AI output creates work for everyone else. One Head of Operations pointed to the time cost of setting AI up in the first place. Another described a new kind of work AI has created: "fielding AI slop from customers who now find it easier to write really long emails which take up team time." One COO described the imbalance directly:

"It has become a lot harder to get work done in the last year. You can get AI to make a document for you in 20 minutes, that used to take you a couple of hours, but now it's going to take me an hour and a half to wade through it. The cost on you is nothing; the cost on the rest of the team is massive. Seventy per cent of the messages in our company Slack are now sent by bots. How in the world are you supposed to know what's important?"

MC Glover, COO, Series A fintech (roundtable participant)

Someone has to manage that volume, and it's landing on operations by default, the same pattern as unclaimed work generally, in Chapter 3.

"It's going to change into more like governance, infosec, and all that sort of stuff. Which I've sort of [brought on myself], because I said, don't go at AI just willy-nilly. Like, do not do that. Let's think about it properly. And they're like, okay, that's your responsibility then."

Former Director of Operations, Series A (roundtable participant)

Whether that's the right place for it to sit remains unsettled. At one of the roundtables, a VP of Operations at a B2B SaaS company argued that AI governance "probably can only sit with ops." Anna McElerney, an experienced B2B SaaS COO, disagreed: "be a voice, but we don't have to own it."

Our read:

- Smaller companies may be ahead in AI adoption because fewer approval layers make it easier to try new tools.
- Time won't free itself. Someone has to decide where it goes, and that is the operations leader's job.

Use this → decide where the AI day goes before it arrives, or it will go where the roundtable rooms said it goes: somewhere else. And name who governs the tools before the bots multiply.

//

29% versus 28% is the most honest number in this report. It says AI is being bought as a tool, not run as a change. I have heard this through the COO Roundtable from our COOs: implementing AI is not only a difficult change but also time-consuming for COOs who have many other important priorities in their role. It goes back once more to carving out the time to make it a strategic transformation and being clear on desired outcomes. On governance, I side with the experienced COO: ops should design it, but the CEO has to own the risk.

Question for your CEO: *What are we willing to stop doing so that AI gets implemented, not just bought?*



Divinia Knowles

COO Coach & Founder, London COO Roundtable

Chapter 7: What stays human, and who learns it

The job left is judgement. The question is where the next generation learns it.

"Decision making. AI can bring the intelligence, but we bring the wisdom."

COO, 51-250 employees (survey participant)

Asked what should never go to AI, the answers cluster around two things: anything about people (leading, hiring and firing, hard conversations, relationships, 64% of substantive answers) and decisions (judgement, strategic direction, and the final call, 43%).

The roundtables agreed more strongly here than anywhere else. Judgement came up in every room, and one operations leader showed why:

"I asked AI to calculate days on hand, so how many days of inventory we had, and it told me around 2,500 days. That's nonsense, because sixty days is the industry standard for a business like ours. But if you've never done that job, you might look at that number and not spot the issue."

Adolfas Kupliauskas, Fractional COO (roundtable participant)

Who learns to spot the 2,500?

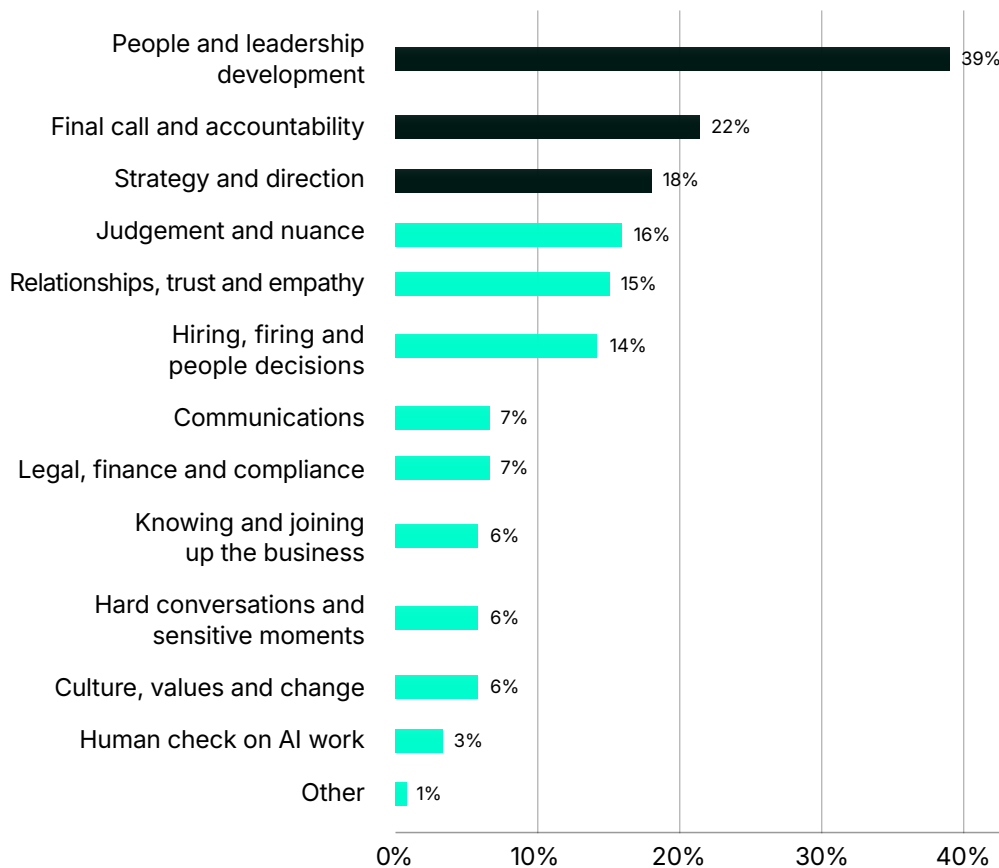
Judgement comes from having done the work, and the roundtables worried AI is taking over the entry-level work where people used to learn it. Four of the five came back to this.



What should never go to AI: people, and the final call

Q26. Which part of the COO / operations leader role should never be delegated to AI?

(64% people-related; 43% decisions, judgement and accountability)



Base n=256 in-house operations leaders who gave a substantive answer. Net figures count each answer once: 'people' = people and leadership development, relationships, hiring and firing, or hard conversations; 'decisions' = final call, strategy and direction, or judgement. Answers can carry up to 3 themes. Highlighted: the three most common themes. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

"We have no junior engineers anymore. We have no QAs anymore. [...] That terrifies me because at some point something's going to go wrong, and it's going to be like pilots who [have] never been trained to fly a manual plane. Nobody will know how to fix it."

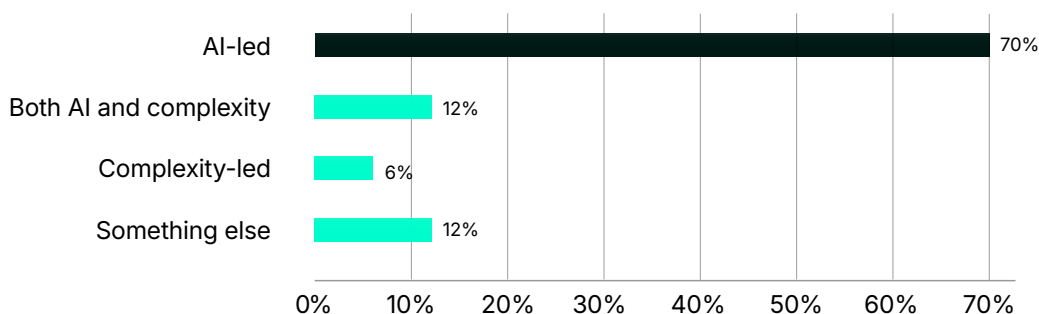
VP of Operations, B2B SaaS (roundtable participant)

A slide widely attributed to an IBM training document from 1979 put the underlying logic plainly, decades before anyone was asking it about AI specifically: “A computer can never be held accountable. Therefore a computer must never make a management decision.” That’s close to what operations leaders are saying in their own words when they name “the final call” as something that stays with them. AI can produce the analysis, but it can’t be the one who answers for what happens next.

Looking ahead, 82% of substantive answers (n=243) name AI as the shift that will most define the role over the next two years: 70% name AI alone and 12% name it alongside complexity. Only 6% point to complexity alone. Only 6% point to complexity alone.

82% say AI will define the next two years

Q28. What single shift will most define the job over the next two years? Open-text answers grouped by theme (n=243).



Base n=243 substantive answers. Grouping is a judgement on top of the coding. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

“The shift from managing capacity to designing accountability. As AI collapses the cost of execution, the scarce resource in operations stops being time and starts being judgement, deciding how things should work and who owns it when they don’t.”

COO, 51-250 employees (survey participant)

Not everyone draws a line. One COO in a company under 51 people answered: “There is nothing I wouldn’t delegate to AI.” They were the only one.

"[...] the business is growing, business is changing, the situation is changing, context is changing. Someone needs to be the shepherd of that change. And really, I think that's what the operators are doing."

Jasmine Liu, Director of Operations, consumer brand (roundtable participant)

Our read:

- AI output looks polished and can seem trustworthy on its own terms, but the operations leaders who caught it being wrong had the experience to know a number was implausible, a judgement AI doesn't have.
- If execution gets cheaper, what's left for operations leaders may be deciding how things should run and who answers when they don't, the same accountability logic as "the final call," applied to the shape of the whole role.

Use this → protect one rung of the ladder where people still learn the work by doing it, or in five years nobody spots the 2,500.

//

Judgement isn't only learned by doing the work. It's learned by making mistakes with someone nearby who asks why and supports you in fixing them. This is how experience is gained and learning is integrated. If AI removes those repetitions, we must intentionally replace them through shadowing, joint work reviews, structured reflection, and coaching. That isn't a nice-to-have. It's the succession plan for the role this report describes. My worry is less that junior roles disappear (although that is definitely worrying for the next generation!) and more for this audience that we stop teaching problem solving and thinking skills, which are operations leaders' foundations.

Question for your CEO: *Who in this business is learning to do my job, and how?*



Divinia Knowles

COO Coach & Founder, London COO Roundtable

Coda: Owners in all but name?

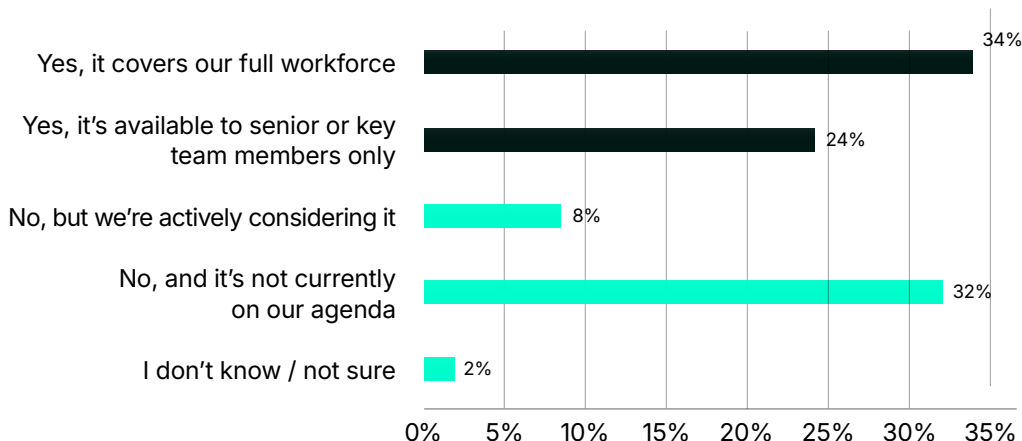
58% work somewhere with a share scheme.
We didn't ask whether they hold a stake.
Next year we will.

Operations leaders act like owners. They take the work nobody owns, carry Finance, People and Legal, and put out everyone else's fires. So we asked about ownership in the literal sense too.

58% (157 of 271) work for an organisation that offers an employee share scheme: 34% (93) to the full workforce and 24% (64) to senior or key staff only. Prevalence varies by company type: 88% (30 of 34) of early-stage companies and 85% (68 of 80) of scaleups offer one, against 34% (16 of 47) of bootstrapped businesses and 3% (1 of 36) of non-profits. Among those with a scheme (n=157), the outcome they most hope it delivers is an ownership mindset (42%, 66).

58% of organisations offer an employee share scheme

Q29. Does your organisation currently offer an employee equity or share scheme?



Base n=271 in-house operations leaders. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

That mindset is the behaviour this report has described in every chapter.

"In both cases, I was always referred to as a quasi-founder of both startups, which to me [meant] more responsibility than [it did] equity. But it did mean I was very much at the table with them."

COO, B2B Software (roundtable participant)

Sidebar:

The fractional view

At this size the figures show a pattern, not a precise measure, so we give counts.

15 of 22 in this group built a career in operations and chose fractional work deliberately, for the variety and autonomy it offers over a single, full-time role. Most were experienced, senior operations people looking for a different way to apply their skills.

On unowned work, 45% of fractional operations leaders (10 of 22) say it depends on the situation, against 14% of in-house leaders (39 of 271). 41% of fractional leaders (9 of 22) say it almost always becomes their responsibility, against 51% in-house (138 of 271).

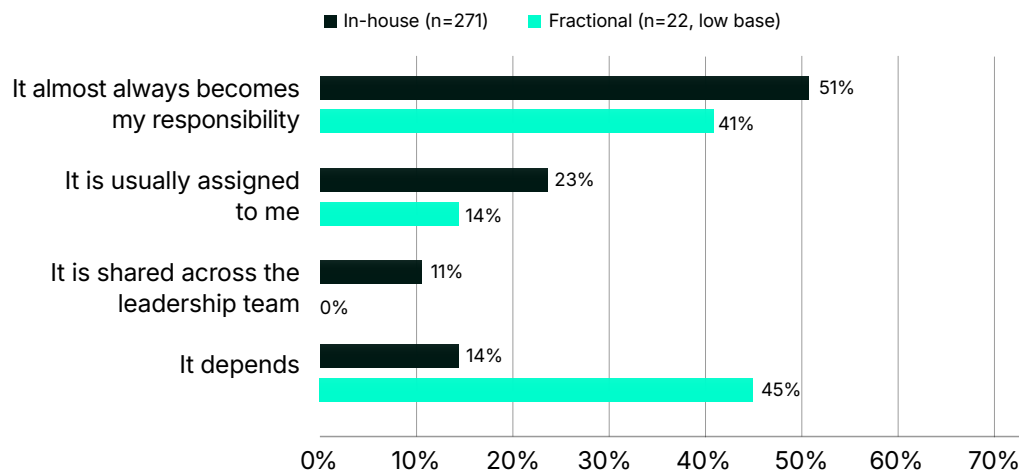
That's the clearest structural difference between the two groups: an in-house leader is a permanent fixture with standing across one business and can simply absorb what's unclaimed. A fractional operations leader moves between clients without that same standing at any one of them, so each situation gets judged on its own merits.

The CEO relationship looks different too. 23% of fractional operations leaders (5 of 22) describe a true strategic partnership, against 36% of in-house leaders (97 of 271). A further 27% (6 of 22) say it varies significantly by client, an answer only the fractional survey offered, since in-house leaders have one CEO.

One likely reason: partnership takes time and repetition to build, and a fractional operations leader working across two or three clients at once has less of both with any single one.

Orphan work: in-house it lands on you; for fractionals 'it depends'

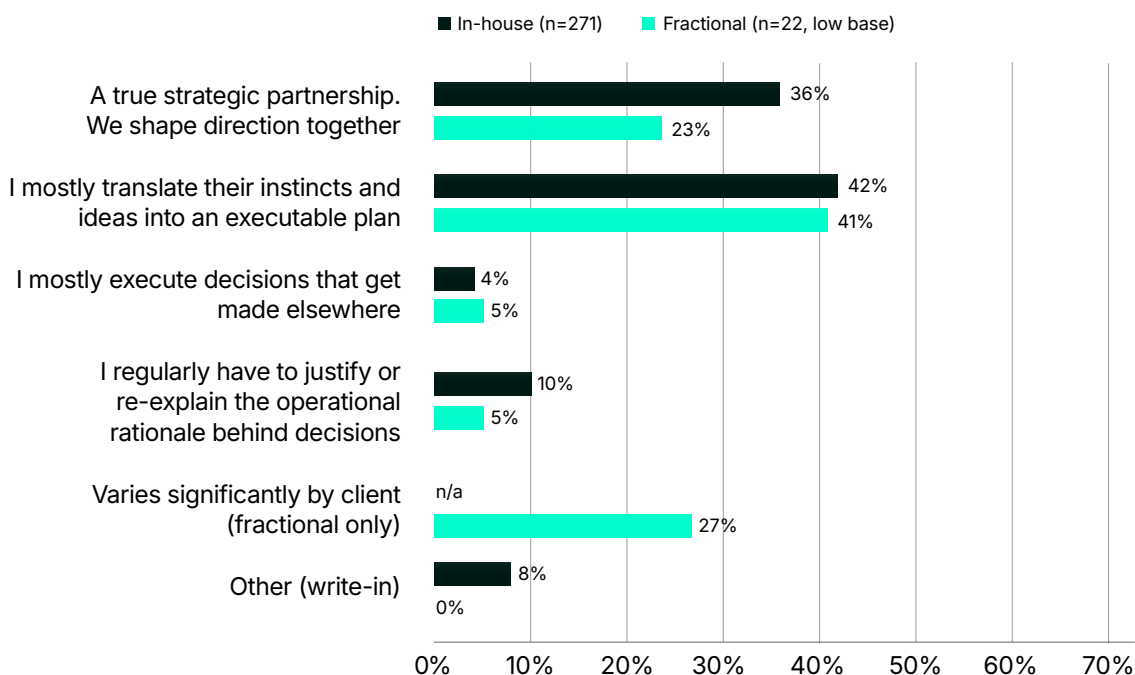
Same question asked of both groups (fractional wording adapted to 'at a client').



Base: in-house n=271; fractional n=22. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

Fractional vs in-house: relationship with the CEO

Same question asked of both groups (fractional wording adapted to 'at a client').



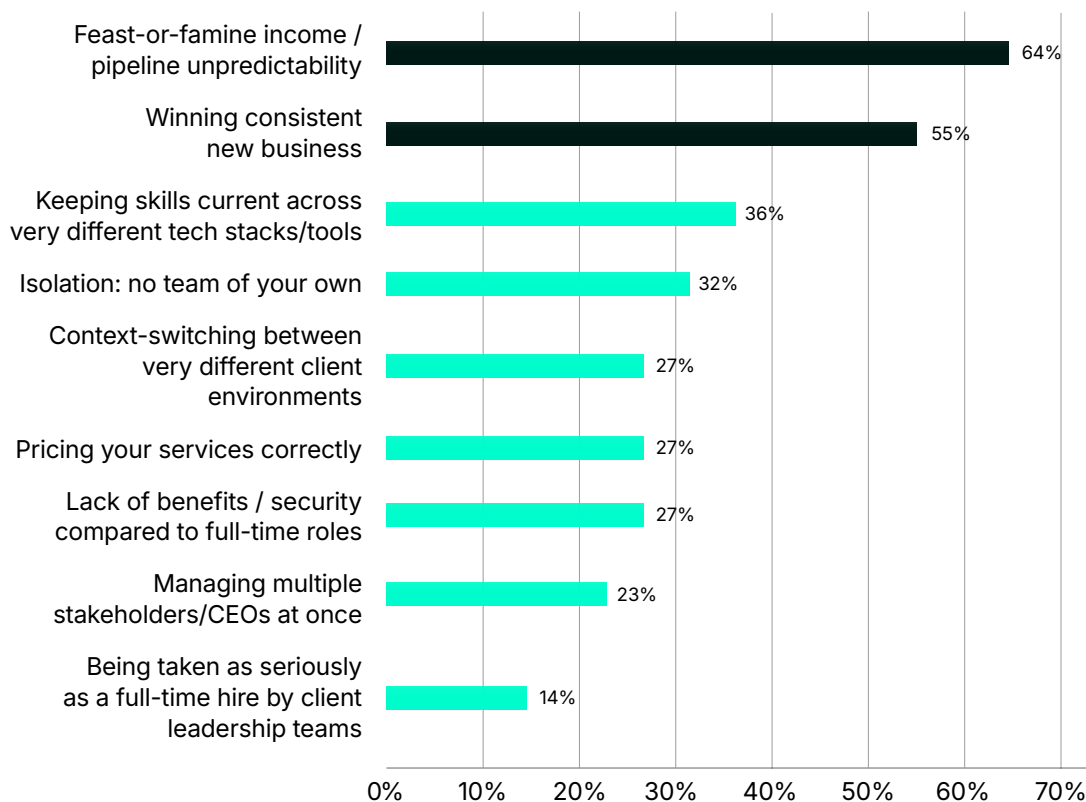
Base: in-house n=271; fractional n=22. 'Varies significantly by client' was only offered to fractionals. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.



Income is the least stable part: 64% (14 of 22) name feast-or-famine income among their biggest challenges, ahead of winning consistent new business (55%, 12 of 22). Trading a stable salary for autonomy comes with a real cost: the work itself may suit them, but the pipeline behind it doesn't run on a schedule they control.

For fractionals, the hard part is the pipeline

Fractional survey: What's the biggest challenge in running a fractional/portfolio practice today? (select up to 3)



Base n=22 fractional/portfolio operations leaders. The Modern COO Benchmark 2026.

Despite that instability, 14 of 22 (64%) expect demand for fractional leadership to grow significantly, and 12 of 22 (55%) believe AI makes the model more viable rather than less.

Our read: AI allows one experienced operator to cover more ground, so a client has senior judgement on demand instead of committing to a permanent hire they may not need year-round.



However, one roundtable voice questioned whether the model has much of a future at all:

"Fractional COO-ness, I think, is on its way out, because actually everyone can hire a COO as their second rather than their fifth hire."

Ghilaine Chan, Fractional COO & Growth Leader (roundtable participant)

That view sat alongside a very different one elsewhere: an in-house leader (Andy Spicer, COO) who called fractional work "where the next additional value is likely to sit."

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We're finding that founders increasingly want senior operational judgement without a permanent hire, so from our perspective demand is definitely rising. But the fractional model sells days rather than outcomes, so income intrinsically rises and falls with each engagement. In short, the feast and famine problem is packaging, not demand. Phased work with a clear end point is easier to buy and easier to repeat than "traditional" time and materials fractional work.

The partnership gap is honestly partly built-in and that comes with pros and cons. People working in a portfolio model generally have less time and less standing than someone in the building every day, but it is fixable. Partnership comes from being in the room when decisions are made and from being scoped around outcomes rather than tasks, both of which are controllable by the contractor when they're designing the engagement.

I don't think the flexible model is on its way out, but I do think day rate engagements don't always drive the best outcomes. Hiring a COO as your second hire sounds lovely, but most early-stage companies can't afford one and don't yet know what they'd need them to do. Fractional or flexible leadership is how you find out before you commit, and gets you to the point where you actually can afford to.

Question for your CEO: *Before you bring one in, ask: what outcome am I buying, and who owns it once they've gone?*

Milly Barker is the founder of Pay As You Go COO, a strategy, operations, and finance consultancy. She has 20 years of experience in getting shit done and has worked with over 500 companies in the last few years.



Milly Barker

Founder of Pay As You Go COO

What to do with this

For operations leaders:

01. **Count your remit.** Tick your functions against the 27. 14 or more puts you in the broadest quarter.
02. **Keep a re-homing list.** Every orphan you pick up gets a named owner and a date it moves. Review it with your CEO quarterly.
03. **Answer every new ask with “yes, but”.** Yes, but here’s what comes off.
04. **Make prevention visible.** Report the fires that didn’t start the way you’d report the ones that did.
05. **Check the title against the load.** If you carry a COO’s remit on another title, the data in Chapter 4 is your case.
06. **Decide where the AI day goes, and who governs the tools,** before either happens by default.
07. **Protect one rung of the ladder** where people still learn the work by doing it.

For CEOs:

01. Ask your operations leader what they’d stop, not what they’d add.
02. Count what didn’t break last quarter, and who stopped it.
03. If they carry a COO’s remit, check the title and the seat match it.

Benchmark yourself

Find your title and company size, then compare your own numbers with your peers.

Title – company size	n	Median functions	% true partner	% unowned "almost always" mine	% firefighting top 3	% any area mostly on AI
All in-house	271	10	36%	51%	67%	28%
COO · under 51	55	13	53%	58%	69%	47%
COO · 51-250	40	12	50%	58%	73%	18%
COO · 251+	9	-	-	-	-	-
Head of Operations · under 51	54	11	28%	54%	76%	28%
Head of Operations · 51-250	16	5.5	25%	19%	75%	31%
Head of Operations · 251+	6	-	-	-	-	-
VP / Director of Operations · under 51	33	11	36%	58%	70%	33%
VP / Director of Operations · 51-250	17	7	29%	53%	53%	18%
VP / Director of Operations · 251+	10	7	40%	40%	30%	0%
Chief of Staff · all sizes	22	6.5	14%	36%	59%	23%

Notes: Highlighted rows have 10 to 29 respondents and are indicative only. "–" means the group has fewer than 10 respondents, so figures are suppressed. "Any area mostly on AI" means at least one of the seven areas is rated "Mostly" or "Almost entirely" AI-assisted. Base: 271 in-house operations leaders.

Questions for 2027

This is an annual benchmark. The roundtables raised questions this year's survey didn't ask, and next year's will:

- Who owns AI governance in your organisation? (All five roundtable rooms raised it.)
- Has your organisation reduced entry-level hiring because of AI? (Four of five roundtable rooms raised it.)
- Has AI-generated content increased the time you spend reviewing others' work?
- How many people are in your operations function, including you?
- Do you personally hold equity in the business you run?

Closing note

Operations leaders now carry more of the business than any single title was built to hold, and the gap between what the role has become and what it was designed to be is exactly what this benchmark exists to make visible.

If you took this survey, thank you. This report exists because you did.

Where to find your peers

Most operations leaders have spent their careers benchmarking themselves against a sample of one. This report is one way out of that. The other is talking to people who do the same job.

More than a quarter of the leaders in this survey didn't name a single professional community. If that's you, start here: the communities, podcasts and resources where operations leaders compare notes, ours and plenty of others. We keep the [full list](#) online so it stays current.

Know one we've missed? Tell us at community@operationsnation.com.

Communities

- Ask a Chief of Staff - askachiefstaff.com
- BizOps Network - bizops.network
- Chief of Staff Network - chiefstaff.network
- COO Alliance - cooalliance.com
- COO Forum - www.cooforum.net
- Generalist World - generalist.world
- London COO Roundtable - www.cooroundtable.com
- Operations Nation - operationsnation.com
- Operators Guild - operators-guild.com

Podcasts

- A Chief of Staff Podcast - achiefstaffpodcast.com
- Between Two COOs - betweentwocoos.com
- COO Secrets - jbmc.co.uk/coo-secrets
- Operations Room - operationsroom.co
- Second In Command - youtube.com/@secondincommandpodcast
- The Handbook: The Operations Podcast - scoro.com/podcast

Methodology

The survey

An anonymous online survey in two versions: one for in-house operations leaders and one for fractional and portfolio operators. Fieldwork ran from 16 July to 20 September 2026 (published close 18 September; five late responses included).

We received 326 responses. 9 were screened out at the role question, 24 took the fractional survey and 293 the main survey. Of those 293, we excluded 8 who said they aren't involved in setting operational strategy or priorities, and 14 with out-of-scope job titles (CEOs, a CFO, a Chair, junior and former roles). That leaves a main sample of 271. In the fractional survey, 2 were excluded on the same strategy question, leaving 22.

Respondents were recruited through Operations Nation's and Vestd's networks and on LinkedIn. 63% of organisations are UK-headquartered and 58% have under 51 people. 48% of respondents name Operations Nation as one of their communities. The results describe this community of operations leaders well; they are not a census of the profession.

All data is accurate as of October 2026.

How we report

Every figure is a percentage of those who answered the question, with the base shown on every chart. Pick-several questions sum to more than 100%. Percentages are rounded, so combined figures may differ by a point from the sum of their parts. Groups under 10 are suppressed; groups of 10-29 are shown as indicative.

Segment findings compare each group with the rest of its cut, with a correction for multiple comparisons and a check holding company size constant. The biggest findings were also tested with regression holding other factors constant. Everything is associated from one survey at one point in time: we write “goes with”, not “causes”.

Definitions

- **Grew into the role:** became the cross-functional problem-solver, grew with the company, or inherited operations (Q9).
- **Grew the role beyond the brief:** expanded significantly, mostly by default, or changed so much the title no longer fits (Q10).
- **True partner:** “a true strategic partnership. We shape direction together” (Q13). Strained: mostly executes decisions made elsewhere, or regularly has to justify the operational rationale.
- **Mostly AI-assisted:** “mostly” or “entirely / almost entirely” on the seven-area AI grid, excluding “don’t know” and “not applicable” per area. The “should” question asks about a modern operations team in general; the “is” question asks about the respondent’s own organisation.
- **Functions owned:** count of 27 listed functions with primary executive responsibility; write-ins not counted. Owning a function means executive responsibility for it, not doing all of it.
- **Open text:** every answer to the three open questions was read and coded into themes (first-pass AI-assisted coding, reviewed by a person; up to three themes per answer). Theme percentages are of substantive answers.
- **Leads operational strategy:** says they lead their organisation’s operational strategy rather than contribute to it (62%, 167 of 271). Different from owning the Strategy & Planning function (55%).



The roundtables

Five roundtables (two in July, three in September 2026) with 24 practitioners, held under the Chatham House rule. They explain the numbers; they don't prove them. Quotes are anonymous unless the speaker agreed to be named.

Every roundtable quote has been approved by the speaker.

About



Share schemes tend to land on operations. Someone has to keep the records right, file what needs filing and answer when an auditor or investor asks who holds what. Vestd is ShareTech built to scale, giving UK companies a centralised equity system of record for issuing shares and options.

Operations teams use Vestd to manage multiple schemes in one platform, from EMI and CSOP to growth shares and Agile Partnerships™. Two-way Companies House integration automates compliance and reporting, and keeps grant records and cap tables accurate in real time and historically. Teams can prepare with confidence for audit or due diligence, and Vestd's in-house equity specialists help them plan their next steps.

Vestd Ltd is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (685992).

Thinking about a share scheme for your team? [Book a call](#) with Vestd's equity specialists.



Most operations leaders benchmark themselves against a sample of one. Operations Nation exists so they don't have to: it's a membership community of 800+ COOs, Heads of Operations, Chiefs of Staff and other operations leaders across 40+ countries, who compare notes through events and a members-only community.

If you're an operations leader, join our community:
operationsnation.com/community/on-membership

