

Frequently Asked Questions: Hiring a COO

Q: What is a COO?

A: COO is short for chief operating officer. Like COO positions at for-profit businesses, nonprofit COO positions vary widely from organization to organization.¹ However, for purposes of this discussion, we consider any senior manager who either is second in command to the executive director (ED) or oversees operations/administration to be a COO. Other titles some organizations use for this position include: deputy director, managing director, chief administrative officer, chief financial and administrative officer, associate director, associate executive director, director of operations, vice president of operations, and executive vice president.

Q: What do nonprofit COOs do?

A: The most salient characteristic of the COO job seems to be its variety. COO roles—and the organizational structures in which COOs operate—are highly varied across organizations and even within organizations over time. The way a COO's responsibilities are defined differs significantly depending on the organization's strategic imperatives, design, history, and culture, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the ED, COO, and other key leaders. Nevertheless, most COO positions can be categorized under one of three basic models:

The COO oversees all operational and administrative functions. In this model, the COO oversees the functions that support the programs but do not relate directly to program participants, and other senior managers are responsible for the programs themselves.

The COO oversees all programs. In contrast to the first model, some COOs are responsible primarily for programs, while the ED, the chief financial officer (CFO), or another senior executive oversees the more administrative functions.

The COO oversees all internal functions. This third model is the broadest: the COO oversees everything internal, freeing up the ED to focus on external matters such as fundraising, public relations, and partnerships.

Q: How can I tell whether my organization needs a COO?

A: Nonprofits introduce the COO position to accommodate the management needs of the organization at a particular point in its development, which can be at their founding, a few years later, or decades into their operations. Usually they hire a COO to accommodate one or more of the following needs:

- Reducing excessive ED workload and enabling the ED to allocate time to major external initiatives
- Building the organization's capacity to implement a strategic or growth plan
- Balancing or supplementing the skills of the ED
- Planning for ED succession

Your organization may need a COO for one or more of these reasons. However, to be ready to take advantage of what a COO has to offer, your organization's board and ED must be prepared to delegate significant authority for

¹ Since January of 2004, Bridgestar and its members have been exploring the COO role through regular gatherings of executives in the copilot seat in their organizations for broad-ranging conversations about their work. In addition, we recently conducted a brief electronic survey of 23 COOs and a series of 16 in-depth interviews about the COO position with nonprofit COOs and EDs representing a diversity of organizational growth stages, budget sizes, funding sources, geography, missions, and individual backgrounds and tenures



managing the organization to the COO. While many overworked nonprofit leaders welcome the addition of a COO position, some are reluctant to give up direct control of or contact with areas they have previously managed directly. Likewise, staff members must be prepared to adjust how they work in response to changes in reporting relationships and communication patterns that come with the addition of the COO position. If your organization is considering hiring a COO, you and your colleagues should ask yourselves the following questions:

- To what extent do the ED and the board understand and value the role of a COO?
- How open is the ED to being a partner with the COO? Is the ED able to delegate and to let go of delegated areas adequately for the COO to manage them?
- How open is the rest of the management team to fully incorporating the COO role into the organization?
- What impact will hiring a COO have on other staff and what adjustments will they need to make to work successfully with the COO?
- Who will the COO need to be and what will the COO need to do to gain the confidence of the ED and other key stakeholders?

Q: What advice do you have for organizations designing or restructuring a COO position?

A: Clearly defining the COO role is one of the most important prerequisites to positioning the future COO for success. The COO job description and reporting structure should respond to the needs of your organization. The first step in creating or restructuring a COO position is to assess your organization's talent needs in the context of its strategy. Key members of the leadership team should consider and discuss questions such as the following:

- What are your organization's major strategic plans and goals?
- What does your organization need to make those plans a reality and achieve those goals?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of your current staff? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- How are they aligned to help your organization achieve its goals?
- What role and responsibility gaps begin to emerge? What skills and qualities are needed to balance those of the existing leadership team? How can the position be defined and structured to fill the gaps?
- Will the position's focus be program, administration/operations, all internal matters, or some variation on these models? What are the roles and responsibilities of the new position?
- What are the qualifications needed of your potential candidates?
- How might the COO position change in the years to come?

The answers to these questions should start to provide you and your team with a sketch of the COO position. This is a good point in the process to conduct a reality check: based on your initial assessment, is it realistic to think that the role and responsibility gaps you have identified can be filled by one person, or does the situation require a broader solution (e.g., restructuring the overall management team, adding multiple positions, or adjusting the strategic plan)? If you have determined that your organization is otherwise well positioned to achieve its goals but requires the additional hire or restructured position to complete the team, then you can move forward with writing the job description and recruiting candidates.



Q: What is the profile of the ideal nonprofit COO?

A: COOs come from a wide variety of educational and professional backgrounds. MBAs are fairly common, but other graduate training ranges from law degrees to social work degrees, and some COOs have no advanced degree at all. They may have spent their entire previous careers in one sector or moved among the nonprofit, government, and for-profit sectors. There is no single profile of an ideal nonprofit COO; the key to finding the right person is to consider what qualities, skills, and experience will provide a good fit with the needs of your organization. If you are looking for someone who offers something different from your existing leadership team, be sure to consider candidates who bring that needed diversity but who share the mission and values of the organization and can work effectively with your team.

Q: What advice do you have for organizations recruiting and selecting a COO?

A: Because the COO job is often so broad and its responsibilities touch on so many different parts of an organization, hiring a COO is more like hiring an ED than like hiring a functional manager such as a CFO or director of communication. Style and fit with organizational culture are important. As a result, it is essential that you invest significant time in interviewing and getting to know candidates. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions of candidates, and expect to get hard questions from them as well. Being frank with candidates—which includes discussing organizational challenges—gives them the opportunity to assess for themselves whether the position and the organization are a good fit for them. The ED should spend enough quality time with each final candidate to get a sense of whether they will be able to work together productively and to determine if they have compatible value sets. This time should include at least one off-site meeting over lunch or dinner, late in the interview process. Getting together away from the office in a more social and relaxed setting will allow the candidate and the ED to get a better sense of personality and underlying values, which are critical to making sound hiring decisions.

Q: Where should I post my nonprofit COO job opening?

A: There are many available sites focusing on nonprofit leadership, including www.bridgestar.org, www.execsearches.com, www.idealists.org, and www.philanthropycareers.com.

Editor's note: this article draws on several other pieces also available on this site that cover in more depth some of the topics discussed here. They are "The Nonprofit Chief Operating Officer," "COO Roles and Structures: Stories from the Field," "Creating the COO Position," and "Finding the Right COO for Your Organization."

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