

Revisiting the Nonprofit Chief Operating Officer Role

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1 – 2 pm ET



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Our goals for today



Share takeaways from Bridgespan's research on the Nonprofit Chief Operating Officer (COO) role



Hear from leaders about their experience serving as COOs or supporting the COO role through strong CEO-COO partnerships

We heard insights from over 150 COOs about their roles



150+ SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Demographic data

		Survey respondents	Nonprofit sector data*
Gender identity	Female	65%	66%
	Male	33%	33%
Race/ethnicity (US respondents)	White	58%	63%
	Black/ African American	12%	17%
	Asian/ Asian American	8%	6%
	Hispanic/ Latino	7%	10%

*Demographics of individuals working as senior staff in nonprofits, [“The state of diversity in the U.S. nonprofit sector,”](#) Candid (2021).

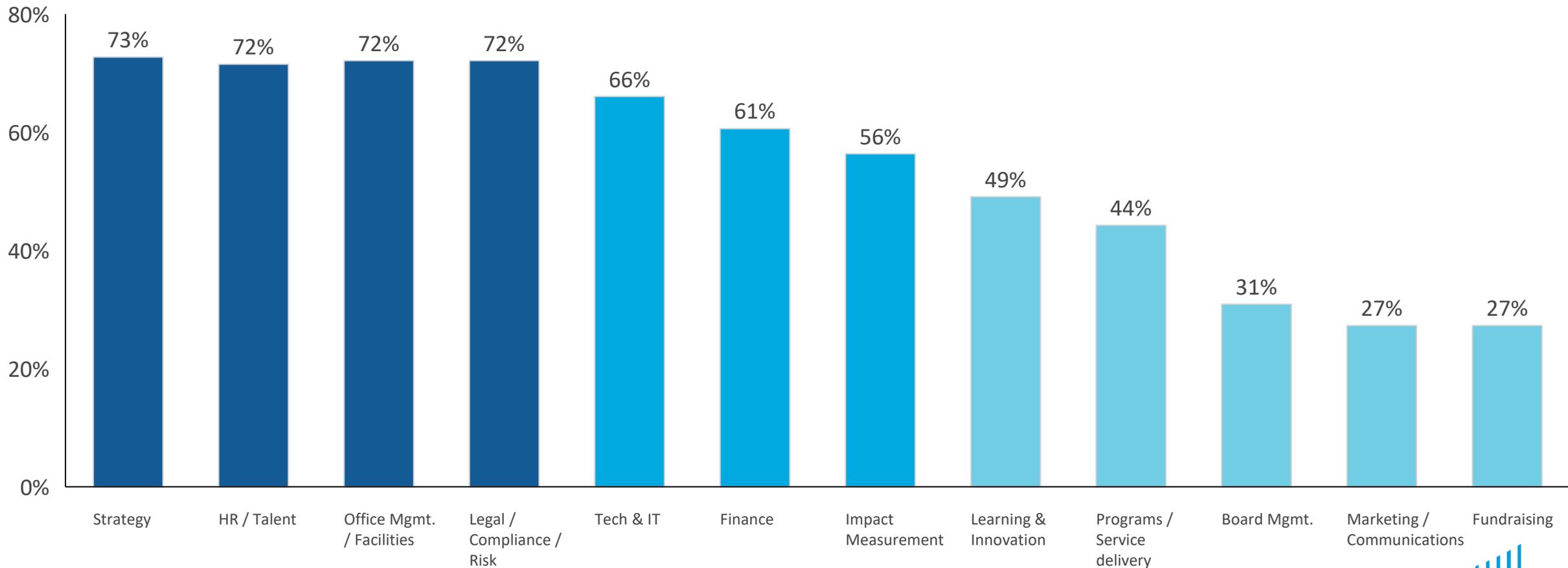
“It is a role that requires a significant amount of adaptability, strategic thinking, and curiosity... **you may feel like an octopus trying to have your arms around many moving parts** but you learn a ton, it is never boring.”

“ There are **many hats to wear...** while the work is deeply rewarding, it is **not for the faint of heart**; at times it feels like there are a million competing priorities to juggle, all while keeping our focus firmly on the mission. .”

“ If we see an organization as a machine, **I don't necessarily see myself as a cog but as the oil in the machine.** Almost invisible but vital to the efficient running of the system”

While the nonprofit COO job comes in many varieties, our survey found a common set of functional responsibilities

Which of the following organizational functions do you currently oversee or have direct responsibility for?



Beyond their functional roles, nonprofit COOs can play three valuable roles to create the conditions for the organization to achieve its goals



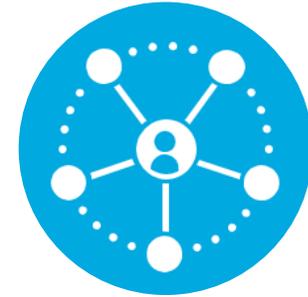
First responder

Stepping in to diagnose and address new, broken, or uncertain issues that lack a clear owner. They triage problems, learn quickly, and stabilize situations so the organization can keep moving forward.



Copilot

Acting as a trusted partner, sounding board, and at times proxy to the CEO. When the relationship is built on trust, clarity, and aligned decision-making, it frees the CEO to focus on what only they can do while ensuring the organization moves forward in unison.

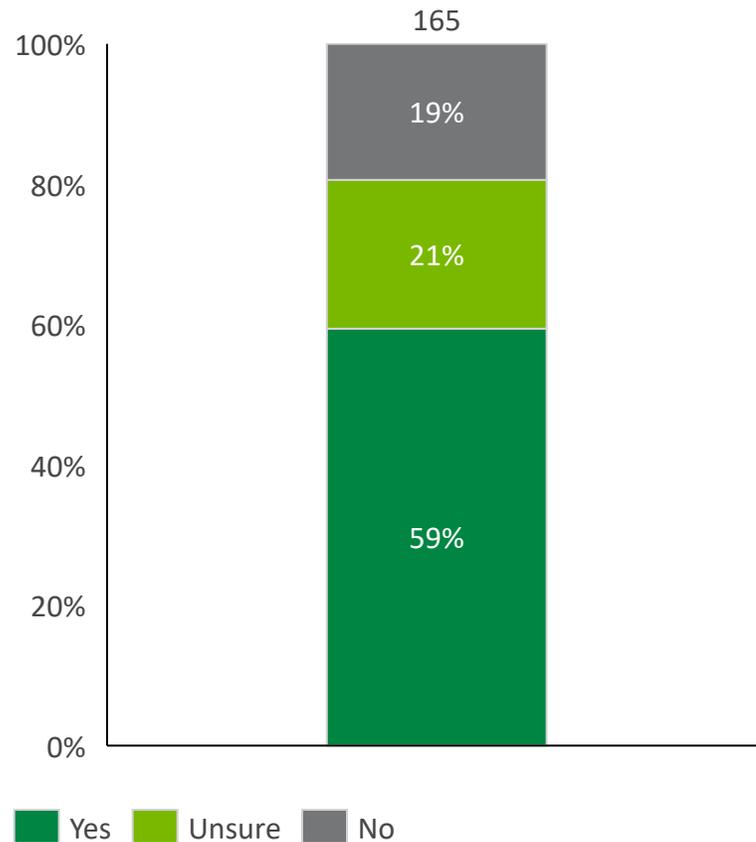


Connector

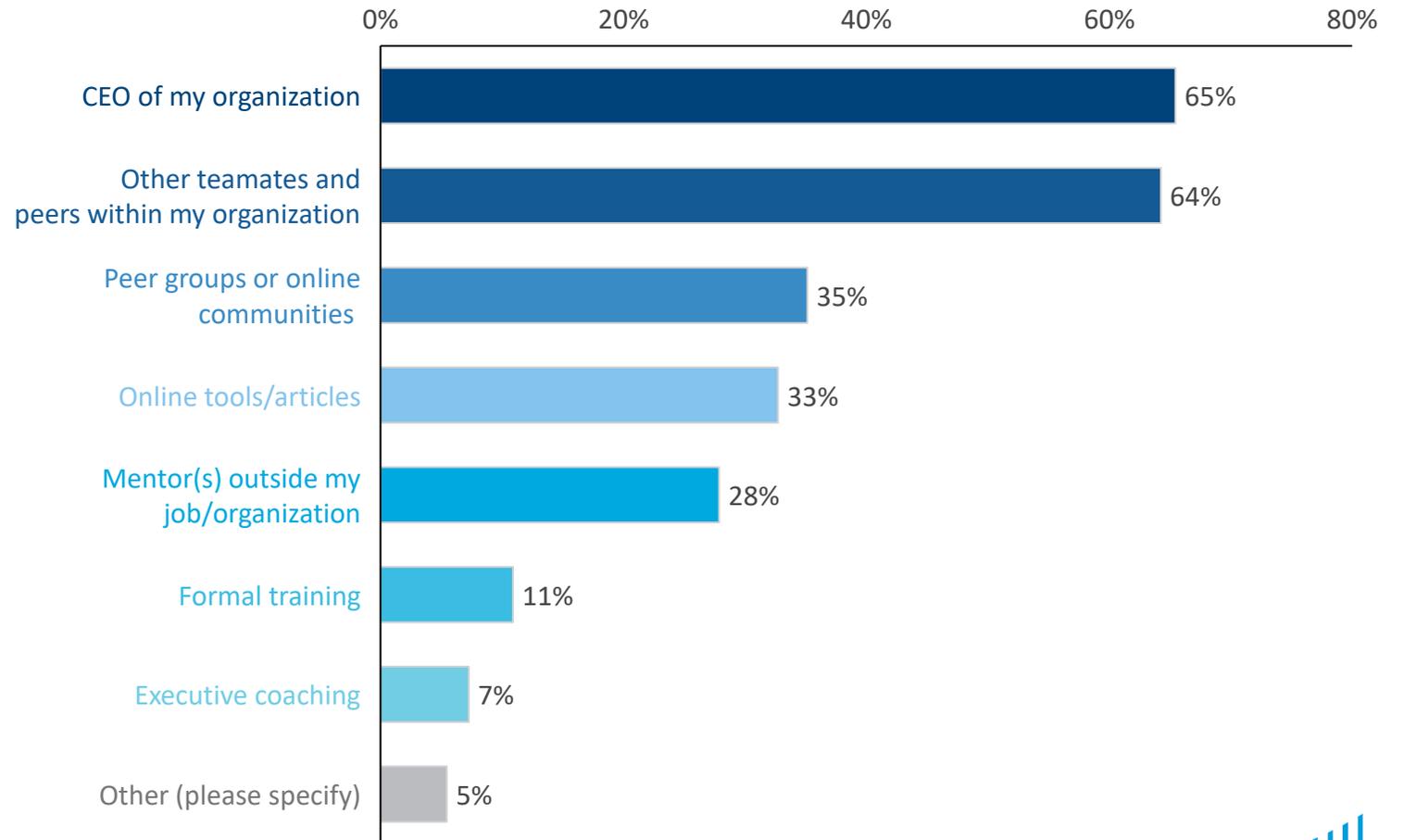
Linking strategy, operations, and people to ensure the whole system works in sync. Positioned across functions and relationships, they spot patterns, bridge silos, and bring others along in decisions so the organization moves forward with alignment and cohesion.

The majority of COOs intend to stay in their roles, underscoring the importance of ongoing support to help COOs succeed

Do you see yourself in your current role two years from now?



What are your primary sources of support for managing challenges?



It is essential to carve out space to step back periodically to keep alignment, trust, and communication strong over time



Four CEO-COO conversations to strengthen your partnership

- What's on the COO's plate?
- How will we lead together?
- Who decides what?
- How will we navigate disagreement when it inevitably arises?

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Research recap



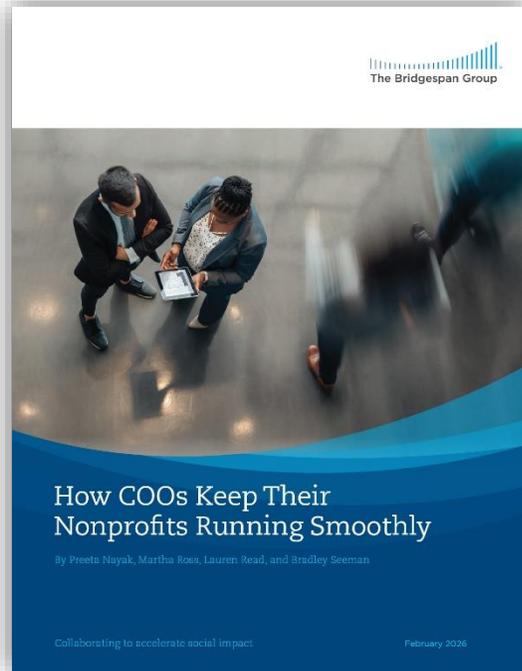
The COO job remains **challenging** and **highly varied**, including oversight of multiple functions

Beyond functional roles, nonprofit COOs often serve as **first responders**, **co-pilots**, and **connectors** within their organizations

CEOs are a **critical source of support**; essential to invest in the relationship and expectation-setting

Resources available on www.Bridgespan.org

How COOs Keep Their Nonprofits Running Smoothly



Four Conversations to Strengthen CEO-COO Partnerships



Find these new materials and more at Bridgespan's *Nonprofit Chief Operating Officer (COO) Resource Center*



www.bridgespan.org/insights/nonprofit-chief-operating-officer-resource-center

Sharing research, insights, and practical tools is core to our theory of change



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www.bspan.org/BLA

Enrollment opens April 27 for Fall programs

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