

Frequently Asked Questions: About the COO Role

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*. 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 varies significantly depending on the organization's strategic imperatives, design, history, and culture as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the ED, the 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, 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: When and why do nonprofits create COO positions?

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:

Boston

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02116
P 617 572-2833
F 617 572-2834

New York

3 Times Sq., 25th Floor
New York, NY 10036
P 646 562-8900
F 646 562-8901

San Francisco

465 California St., 11th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104
P 415 627-1100
F 415 627-4575

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

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

A: There is no single profile of a typical nonprofit COO; ideally, a COO's unique qualities, skills, and experience fit well with the needs of his or her organization. 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/or for-profit sectors.

Q: What factors are most important to a COO's success?

A: The COOs Bridgestar has interviewed consistently mentioned three interrelated issues both as challenges of being a COO and as keys to success in the position: managing variety and complexity, defining the COO role clearly, and forging a strong working relationship with the ED.

Q: What kind of career path is there for a nonprofit COO?

A: Some experienced chief operating officers of nonprofit organizations go on to become EDs. However, the two jobs are very different, and they sometimes attract people with quite different skill sets, personalities, and profiles. Some COOs consider themselves "career COOs"—more suited for that position than for the ED role. For career COOs, the key to continued career growth is to keep taking on new challenges. This can mean moving to a COO position at a larger or more complex organization, or to an organization with a structure that gives the COO more responsibility—or taking on new challenges within an organization that is itself growing and changing.

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Since January of 2004, Bridgestar and its members have been exploring the COO role through regular gatherings of executives in the co-pilot 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.

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," and "Creating the COO Position."

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.