

# Rise of the Legal COO



EDITED BY LAURA SLATER

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# Executive summary

For law firms considering restructuring their business to meet the demands of a highly competitive market, hiring an experienced chief operations officer (COO) is sure to be a consideration. But the reassignment of duties and shift in perspective this appointment will require may prove challenging for some firms. Finding the perfect match for a firm's unique culture and requirements is a difficult yet essential task.

With input from a number of current law firm COOs and executive directors, alongside some of the most respected and sought-after consultants working in the legal space, *Rise of the Legal COO* examines the enormous scope and variety of the legal COO role, its many challenges and demands, and the myriad ways a strong COO adds value to a law firm.

The book is divided into two parts. The first explores the role of the legal COO as it has developed over the past two decades or so, how it fits into and supports a firm's leadership, and factors that make a COO effective. The second part, through a series of interviews, provides first-hand insight into the role.

Part One opens with a chapter from Chris Bull, director of legal and professional services advisors Kingsmead Square and a former law firm chief executive, who tracks the development of the legal COO role, provides an overview of some of the most popular models that have been used in the legal sector to date, and considers what makes each model effective in specific circumstances. Chapter 2 builds on this, exploring the evolution of the role as law firms and their requirements have changed, drawing heavily on the insight of five current COOs and their experiences in the position.

Based on his extensive experience advising the leaders of premier law firms, over the next two chapters Patrick J. McKenna, principal of McKenna Associates, Inc., shines a light on the delicate nature of the relationship between the COO and managing partner of a law firm from two different angles: considerations for a COO when a new firm leader takes over; and factors that can make the COO-MP relationship challenging if left unaddressed.

In the final chapter of Part One, James G. Perkins, COO of Procopio, Cory, Hargreaves and Savitch LLP, shares his personal experience of the role and what makes a COO successful, with input from some of the partners who have been part of the management of the firm.

Part Two of the book comprises interviews with four current law firm COOs/executive directors whose descriptions of their own roles – and the career paths they took to get there – are illustrative of the huge variety in the role.

In the first interview, Alastair Mitchell, Pinsent Masons' current and first COO, talks about the reasons that led the firm to create the role in 2016, the importance of senior management support, and the way the position has developed since he was a “baby COO” of a practice group at Linklaters a decade ago. He also shares his thoughts on topics such as what differentiates a good COO from a less-effective one, bringing a commercial approach to support innovation, and empowering and encouraging people to think differently and do things better.

Blane R. Prescott spent 25 years as a consultant working with law firms, including coaching partners and sitting on firm compensation committees. In the second interview in this section, he describes how this background feeds into his role as COO of Foley & Lardner LLP, which was redesigned for him, the part he plays in driving change within the organization and helping the firm to prepare for the challenges and requirements of the future, and the need for lawyers to embrace a spirit of experimentation.

In the third interview, Sherry Gini, who has been with Goldberg Kohn for 17 years, starting out in the human resources department and moving into the (newly created) COO role in 2014, talks about working with a young and entrepreneurial partnership, the battle for talent and the firm's focus on diversity and inclusion, and the importance of building ties with clients and the community.

Finally, Michael L. DeLargy, Executive Director of Barnes & Thornburg LLP, discusses taking on this role after 17 years as a COO at another law firm, the alterations he made to the position held for 25 years by his predecessor, and the projects he has in view to ensure the firm can deliver services “better, cheaper, and faster” in the future.

One of the COOs quoted in this book described a key part of his role as “getting people to think about doing things in a different way... within a framework of this is what we want to achieve long term”. While there are few constants in the COO role, one message that does come through strongly in this book is that of the effective COO as a consultant, mentor, and guide – suggesting new routes for the firm to reach its goals; ensuring that individuals and the firm as a whole have the support they need to progress, grow, and succeed; and helping the firm to adapt and ready itself for the unforeseen challenges and opportunities of the future.