



The 2020 Chief of Staff Survey Results



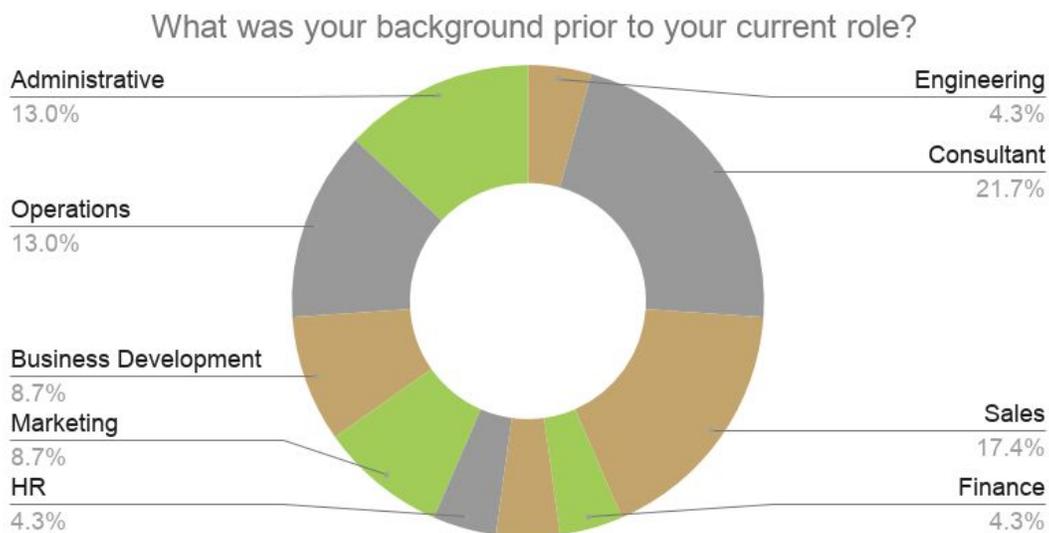
At Koan, we've been fascinated with the role of Chief of Staff. [An emerging role](#), it fills a highly specific niche: turning a company's strategy into action. Some of a Chief of Staff's responsibilities might overlap with that of other executives, but with no attachment to a specific department, they are more nimble in crossing functions to facilitate communication and create alignment.

A strategic role within a company, the Chief of Staff aligns the company's departments and divisions in support of the strategic plan and tracks progress towards goals, making OKRs an ideal tool for them. The position is still evolving and being defined, however, and we wanted to take a data-driven approach to uncover more about it. Our survey was conducted early this year. We received 50+ responses to our survey which was directed at mostly technology companies where the role is becoming prominent. Below are the survey responses, along with anecdotes from a number of Chiefs of Staff who agreed to be interviewed to gather deeper information.

If you're an aspiring Chief of Staff, want to learn more about how your peers view their role, or you want to gather data to determine whether you should add one to your organization, we think you'll find the following information helpful.

What was your background prior to your current role?

To start exploring the world of Chief of Staff, we first wanted to understand where those in the role got their initial start. When asked what their previous roles entailed, we received a vast variety of responses, though we saw a large concentration of backgrounds in Administration (13%), Operations (13%), and Sales (17.4%). This speaks to the soft skills that those sorts of positions can help hone (people management, communication, strategic thinking), which undoubtedly are needed in a position where they need to work cross-functionally, communicate clearly, and influence the executive team members. And while those roles can clearly help, the largest background we saw was in Consultancy at 21.7%.



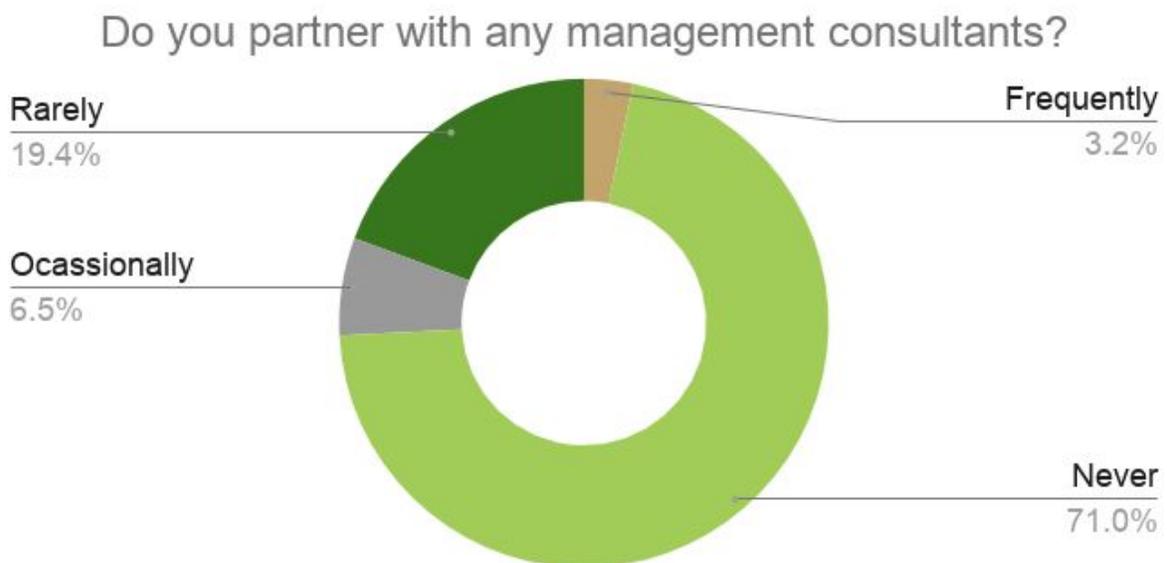
These roles made sense to Dara Warner, the Chief of Staff at Fictiv. For Dara communication is always important when you're at a startup in any kind of operations role, whether that's specifically with HR, communicating culture or helping as you scale. But so is understanding business and business practices. "A lot of emerging startups don't really think about the business side of things, they just have a great idea and they want to change the world. So I think it's a very applicable and good skill to have if you're coming in as a Chief of Staff to be able to talk with your C-suite about those kinds of things in a knowledgeable way," says Warner.

So while looking at the role of Chief of Staff, communication is key, but so is picking up a multitude of skills in as many areas as possible before helping scale the entire business.

Do you partner with any management consultants?

With an eye towards the consultancy background, one of the things that surprised us is that Chiefs of Staff, even those who were former consultants themselves, didn't tend to use management consultants. Only 9.7% said they frequently or occasionally partnered with consultants.

"Tim," a Chief of Staff that preferred to stay anonymous, understood the background of consultants. "I guess with [the number of former consultants], it's because [they're] generalists and a Chief of Staff is a broad role where you do a lot of different things. I think the number of CoSs with backgrounds in consulting is because they like to be generalists or because they developed skills as a generalist. Whichever came first there's a natural symmetry there," Tim said. Could this generalism be the reason that Chiefs of Staff feel they don't need to bring in outside help? The role a Chief of Staff certainly overlaps with what an outside consultant would bring to the table. We can't definitively say, but we found this datapoint interesting.

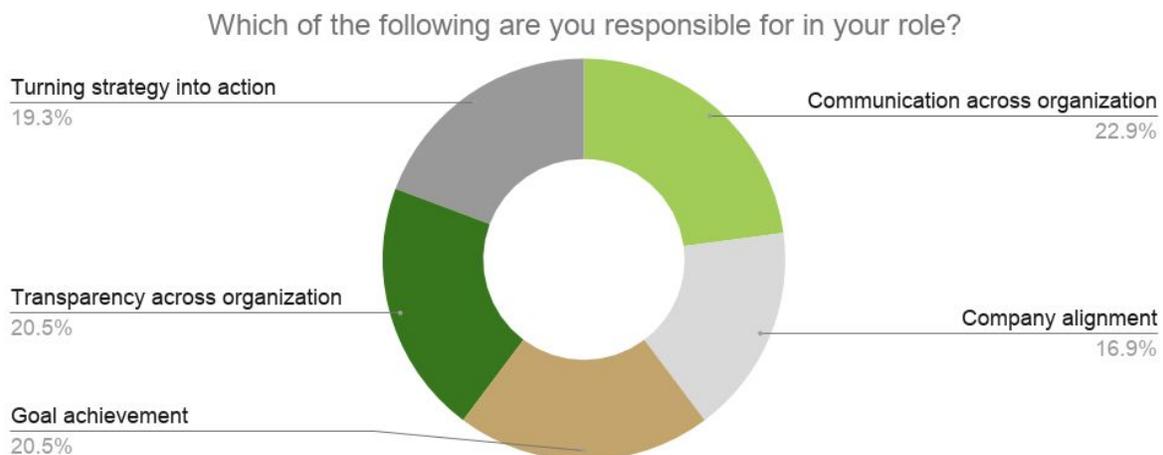


Which are the most important responsibilities of the Chief of Staff?

Almost a perfect pizza-slice-proportioned set of responses to this one, indicating a highly varied and complex set of skills necessary to do the job well.

Primary responsibilities for the Chief of Staff role range from communication to strategy, to ensuring transparency with an organization. We asked our audience to choose which were their most important responsibilities, and a vast majority (67% of respondents) chose four or more options. Managing organization-wide communication was the most common, narrowly edging out focusing on goal achievement and ensuring transparency.

This makes sense given what we've learned from talking with Warner. She is responsible for making sure that Fictiv's Monday All-Hands meetings are clearly documented and that all employees from their Headquarters to their satellite offices to their remote employees are well informed and on the same page with the company's direction, goal-focused or otherwise. Warner also works with front-line managers on how they communicate with their direct reports, handling a chain of communication from the executive level down to the ICs. Transparency and communication are tantamount to their goal achievement, and Warner needs to balance all three effectively to keep the company on track.

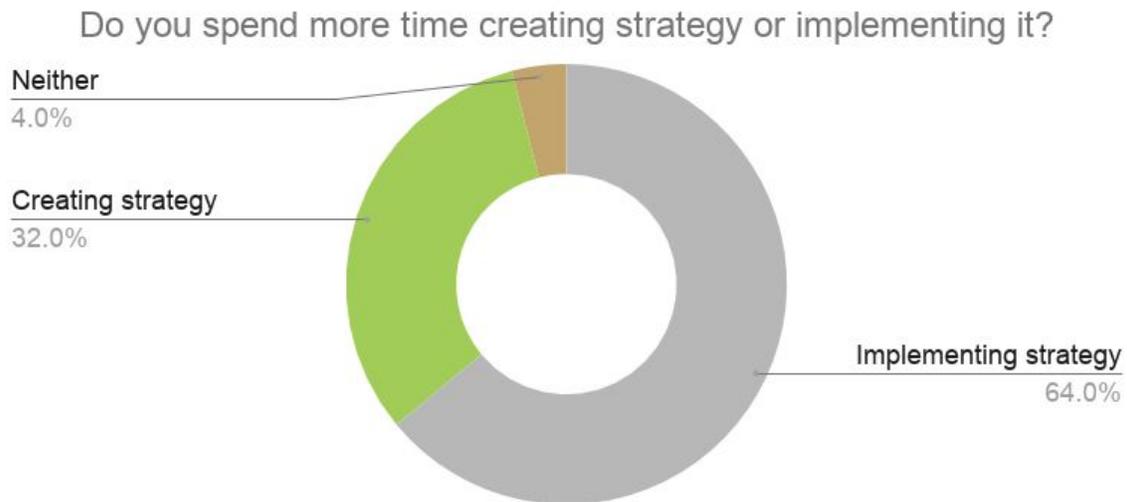


The balance of multiple roles and being able to quickly context switch was just the beginning, however. "I think if somebody wants their exact to-do list and a perfectly defined, clearcut role this might not be the right position for them because there needs to be a level of flexibility and willingness to jump in where needed," says Sarah Sefton from SnapLogic. One of the reasons we saw such a widespread of responsibilities with Chiefs of Staff was because each organization requires a different approach and the responsibilities change over time.

Do you spend more time creating a strategy or implementing it?

While the day-to-day responsibilities can vary wildly depending on where the Chief of Staff works, one of the things that remain constant is the overwhelming push for them to implement the company strategy. A non-negligible percentage (32%) were responsible for creating company strategy, however, the vast majority of them (64%) turned that [strategy into action](#). This means agility, according to Warner:

“I think agility is a really important trait. That's probably important in most roles at startups, but especially as a Chief of Staff where you are dealing with people who are extremely knowledgeable about the business you're in. They make very quick decisions and changes in strategy based on a smaller amount of information because they have so much background and they know it so intimately that they can make those calls. So in a role like Chief of Staff where you are working so closely with them, you need to be able to quickly react in the same kind of manner. You need that agility to be able to move with them.”

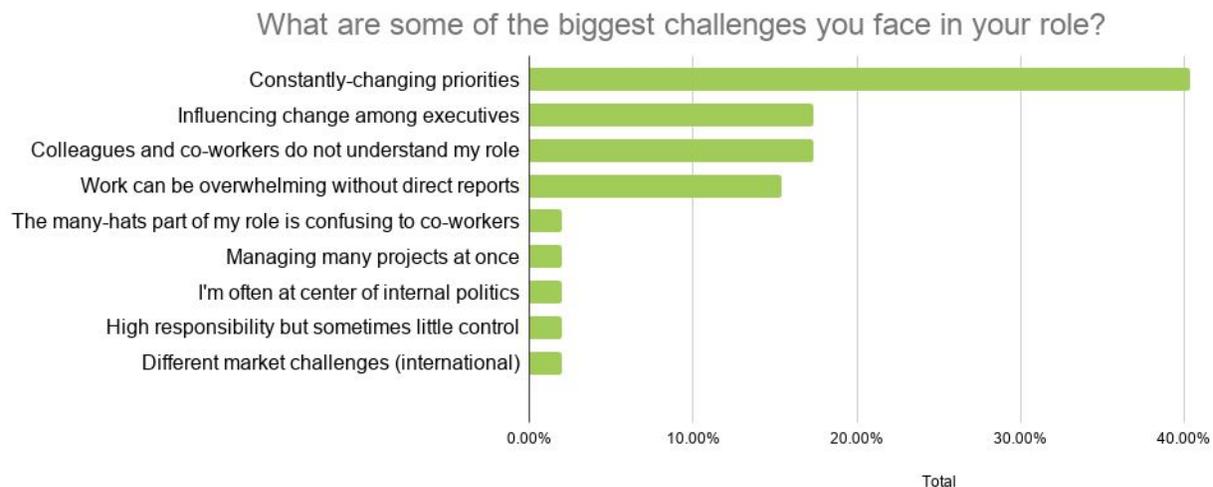


Ever-changing strategies, balancing multiple roles, having flexibility to the job -- these are requirements when it comes to ensuring that a business is staying on track and on target. And as we'll see, this responsibility to deliver the strategy doesn't come with glory, as many Chiefs of Staff have colleagues who don't fully understand their role.

What are some of the biggest challenges you face in your role?

With so many different and ever-shifting responsibilities, it can be hard to see success as a Chief of Staff. 40% of our respondents cited the constantly-changing priorities as the most difficult part of their job, with 20% saying that their colleagues don't understand their role. So when asked how to overcome those challenges, it shouldn't come as a shock that we heard a lot on relationship building. Warner again:

“Relationship building is super important. Because you work so closely with the CSuite and you help them with so many different things throughout your cross-functional projects, they are very likely to want to help you as well. There’s a lot of reciprocity going on around the company. This is especially true in the role of Chief of Staff, because you’re in such a central position that you have the ability to help a lot of people and they additionally want to help you.”



Communication was key for our Chiefs of Staff’s ability to overcome challenges and see success. Tim focused that attention to each meeting that his executive team had, ensuring to include action items for everyone involved, as well as providing a clear, concise, and simplified recap to make sure everyone was on the same page. By clearly and effectively managing communication, it made sure that nothing was lost in the shuffle, no matter what the day’s priorities were.

What advice would you give an aspiring Chief of Staff?

Given the new and evolving role, finding the right path can be tricky. Clearly having consulting, sales, or operations experience is important. Communications and aligning strong-minded executives to work together on common goals is a task that requires persuasiveness. Ultimately, the role is very rewarding for those that want to be at the center of the heartbeat of an organization, and wield a lot of influence. Our Chief of Staff respondents had a few pieces of advice to focus on for aspiring Chiefs of Staffs.

Dara Warner started more broadly-- “You need a strategic mindset... you are there to be a sounding board and to help in all of the planning processes and really coordinate all of that while thinking high level. So a strategic mindset is important. You have to be extremely detail-oriented.”

Tim wants to make sure that people are thinking about the Chief of Staff position thoroughly before jumping at the chance. “I would say the first thing is to understand why one wants to do the job. I think there's some element of Chief of Staff being a sexy title, or it's become more popular, so

I do think there is some allure that it sounds important and it's got chief in it. You know, there's truth to that, but there's also a lot of groundwork. So the first point would be: make sure you understand the difference between the glamour side of the job and the grunt side of the job. The second thing I would say is like to make sure you feel like you'd have a good relationship with the people you're working with.”

Sarah Sefton, on the other hand, summed it up neatly: “Keep lines of communication open, be accessible, and be open to understanding a lot of different types of the business.”

Turning strategy into action for a company isn't easy, and the data shows Chief of Staff as a role that still has a lot to be defined, but focusing on keeping everyone aligned by communicating clearly goes a long way to seeing success in the Chief of Staff position. Koan was built to serve the needs of a Chief of Staff; keep your company aligned towards your common goals, facilitating communication, and creating positive accountability. See how we can help at koan.co.