

Frequently Asked Questions: Becoming 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 organization¹. 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.

¹ 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. In our recent interviews and survey, approximately half of the 34 responding organizations created the COO position more than 20 years into their operations.

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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:

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 should I consider in deciding whether to become a nonprofit COO?

A: Most COOs have a great volume and variety of responsibilities. If you not only have the skills and talents to balance and carry out these responsibilities but consider the variety and complexity within the job to be an advantage, then the COO job may be a good fit for you. Generally, those who find it most fulfilling are people who are passionate about making organizations work well. The COO role, while a challenging leadership position that interacts broadly across the organization is of course not the top job, and COOs often do a lot of their work behind the scenes. If you need to be center stage, this is not the position for you.

Q: Do I need nonprofit experience to be a nonprofit COO?

A: Yes and no. A number of the COOs Bridgestar surveyed and interviewed began their careers in the for-profit sector. However, prior to becoming COOs, most of them had some significant nonprofit experience, if not as staff members, then as a board members or longtime volunteers. Because COOs usually bear significant responsibility for broad areas of their organizations, search committees tend to look for candidates who can demonstrate an understanding of the functioning of nonprofit organizations. That said, many skills and practices may be transferable from one sector to another, and the COO role tends to be a good one for managers from the for-profit sector, in that it demands more skills that can be transferred across sectors than, for example, fundraising and programmatic positions.

Even within the COO role, there are some specific responsibilities that are more appropriate for people with significant nonprofit experience, and others more appropriate for those "bridging" from the for-profit

sector or for nonprofit executives with business background or training. Of the COOs in our research, those with less nonprofit experience were less likely to have responsibility over programmatic areas and more likely to have jobs focusing on administration and operations—areas in which skills are more transferable between the sectors.

Bridgestar has studied “bridgers”—leaders interested in moving into the nonprofit sector from business and government—and worked successfully in placing them in nonprofit roles. In general, we have found that the following attributes tend to provide the best preparation for a transition into the nonprofit sector:

- Demonstrated ability to influence colleagues and peers toward action, without necessarily having reporting-line authority over these employees (e.g. project management across departments)
- Ability to manage a wide range of activities, such as finance, HR, and communications
- Ability to collaborate with diverse stakeholders, including partner organizations
- Experience working with employees at different levels of the organization (from the sales floor up to the executive suite) and flexibility to engage in different ways with different people
- Prior responsibility for the professional development of other employees
- Experience working in resource-constrained environments—prioritizing, making trade-offs, and doing more with less

Q: Where should I look for a nonprofit COO job?

A: You can research existing job opportunities by browsing selected job posting sites, such as www.bridgestar.org, www.execsearches.com, www.idealists.org, and www.philanthrocareers.com. Research the field and/or organizations you are interested in to round out your target list and to prepare yourself for both informational and job-specific interviews. The better you understand both an organization and the field in which it operates, the more prepared you will be for these conversations. At the same time, start networking. A recent Bridgestar survey of 75 nonprofit organizations found that they tended to focus more on networking than on more formal search tools such as online posting and executive search and that the majority of the senior executives they hired came into the hiring process through personal networks.

Q: What advice do you have for COO candidates about how to be most successful in the position?

A: According to the nonprofit leaders with whom we have spoken, candidates can significantly increase their chances of success as nonprofit COOs if they are able to secure the right COO job at the right organization at the right time—not “right” by some objective standard, but rather “right” for them as

individuals in the sense of being a good fit between their own skills, interests, and disposition on the one hand and the particularities of the role, organization, and leadership team on the other. Beyond the basic fit issues any executive would face in considering a new position, the COO position poses particular challenges because of the level of variation across COO roles. It is critical for you as a COO candidate to gain an understanding of the culture and needs of the organization in question and the role and expectations of the COO at that particular moment in the organization's development, and to consider these in light of your own professional strengths and interests. Do your homework and learn as much about the organization and the position as you can.

Q: Where can I find out information about a specific organization?

A: Your three most important sources are the organization itself, publicly available information, and your network. Start by acquainting yourself with the information on the websites of the organization and its major partners and funders. This information should include mission, history, program descriptions, lists of key leaders and funders, articles about the organization, and annual reports and other publications.

The GuideStar website is also a great resource for researching specific organizations because it provides overviews and the Form 990 reports of over a million nonprofits. Basic information on organizations and their tax returns is free; more detailed search and reporting capabilities are available for a fee. GuideStar also offers a helpful guide to finding relevant information—such as budget size, major programmatic activities, names of senior managers and officers, and salary information—on 990s.

Once you have gathered what information you can from public sources, use your network to find people who have experience with the organization as employees, clients, partners, etc. and can offer you their insights. Make sure you have pursued all of these avenues and gathered all of the information available before going into an interview. Then you can use any opportunities you have in the interview process to ask informed questions about topics not covered by these other sources. Gathering the information you need to gauge your level of fit with the position and the job is an important objective to keep in mind in the interview process along with marketing yourself as a candidate, so ask as many questions as you can.

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. For example, one COO we interviewed who considers herself a career COO works at an organization that is merging with another nonprofit. Although she has left jobs in the past because they didn't offer enough new challenges, as she looks at her organization's plans for change and growth in the next five years, she sees significant opportunities to stretch her own skills and remain deeply engaged in her work.

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," "Finding the Right COO Position," and "Bridging' Skills."

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.