

The In-House Experience: What Makes A Legal COO?



We know that in-house lawyers feel pressure to be efficient and to innovate more than ever. Beyond new technologies and new processes, more fundamental than a new piece of software, are changes right at the top of the legal department that smart organisations are embracing. The last few years have seen the emergence and rise of the legal Chief Operations Officer (COO) – a role that can help a legal function achieve the holy grail and be a genuine value-add to the business.

What does a legal COO actually do? Let's contrast them with the Chief Legal Officer, a role we all know well. The CLO is the company's most powerful legal executive, leading the response to legal and regulatory risks, and formulating the strategies that guide the in-house legal function in everything it does. They're usually a former general counsel, head of legal, or high-powered partner from an external law firm.

A legal COO has a different remit, and a different purpose. Their focus is to drive the performance of the in-house legal department to new heights, through operational best practice across a whole range of areas. The Corporate Legal Operations Consortium (CLOC) is the leading voice in the

promotion of legal operations as an essential discipline, and [its framework sets out core areas](#) where legal COOs provide leadership.

They include strategic, metric-driven planning; financial management; oversight of vendor management; aligning legal with other functions around the business, like HR, IT, procurement and finance; setting objectives to drive data analytics; knowledge management; professional development, team-building and everything that goes with a culture of growth and accountability; comms across and beyond legal; management and retention of records, policies and processes; and dedicated litigation support, including e-discovery and document review.

Two of the most important (and related) responsibilities of a legal COO are technology support, dictating the long-term technology roadmap covering the tools that legal will need; and oversight of alternative legal service providers (ALSPs), like managed services, LPOs and other relevant resources. It's the legal COO's job to understand and decide when outside support is needed, and which tools and systems need to be in place to support legal processes (whether BAU or while working with an outside provider).

Bringing peak performance in-house

Read back through those core competencies. For many in-house lawyers, those are the areas you know you should focus on to drive efficiency and high performance, but the truth is that you're usually too busy fire-fighting, meeting widening risks with tight budgets, to get to them. It's also a stretch to expect all lawyers to be able to grapple with such operational complexities – enterprise-level process management, data analytic dashboards and technology procurement aren't exactly taught at law school.

Legal COOs thus tend to have a varied background, and there's no right or wrong answer as to whether legal operations is right for you (or your company). Leaders in legal operations are drawn from the legal profession, but also finance, banking, consulting, technology, project management, and legal or business administration. The responsibilities of a legal COO are such that it takes years to accrue the right experience to be an expert, but that doesn't mean you should get bogged down with specifics around competencies. A decisive legal COO should instead focus on identifying the right goals, and the organizational needs that they're working towards. If a legal COO is driving change, and delivering value against the agreed goals, then an organization can be confident in his or her competencies.

Big names are already formalizing legal operations as a key part of their strategy for legal, and appointing big guns to run the team. BP announced last year that Associate General Counsel and Chief of Staff Jens Bertelsen would be taking on the Head of Legal Operations role, overseeing the four pillars of its legal operations strategy: panel management, technology, reporting and knowledge management & learning. Bertelsen told *The Lawyer*: 'Our people are stretched and there's a focus on material risk and growth.'

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If legal operations is an area you're looking to explore, you're not alone. Organisations like [CLOC](#) are at the vanguard of the innovative processes reshaping legal to put clients and business objectives first. The Centre for Legal Leadership (CLL) in London is focused on how to encourage innovation; [join us at our event](#) a few weeks from now, co-hosted with the CLL, where you can hear from industry thought leaders in an interactive workshop. By embracing legal operations you may find the growth and peak performance you've been looking for – and your customers might too.

26 February 2018, London: *Achieving innovation, diversity and sustainability by rewriting the panel process* #rethinkyourlegal – [find out more](#)

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