

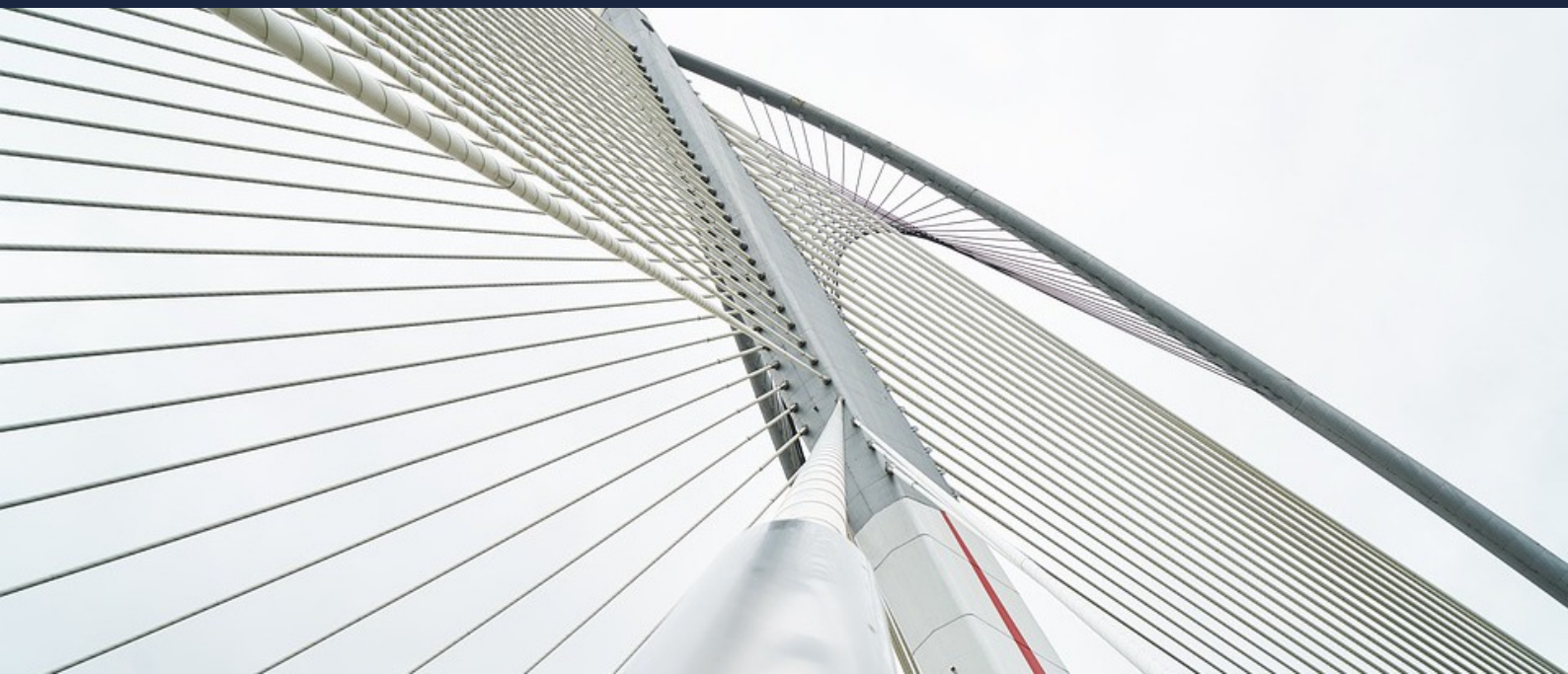
BEYOND SPECIALIST CHIEFS

The Return of the COO — Why Integration Became the Scarce Skill

On the Quiet End of the Chief-Officer Proliferation Experiment and What the Integrator Role Actually Demands

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*"Governance sets the rules; someone still has to play
the position."*

1. The Title That Disappeared — and Why It Is Coming Back

The slide deck landed on the board table in the way they always do: a neat grid of workstreams, each owned by a different chief — digital, data, transformation, customer — with a reassuring RAG status beside each one. Everything was green or amber. Nothing was red. And yet the organisation was visibly stalling: its cost base was rising, its programmes were duplicating effort across three different portfolios, and its front-line managers had lost count of how many "strategic priorities" they were supposed to be executing simultaneously.

The question that followed was not about any individual workstream. It was the question that boards have been asking with increasing frequency over the past eighteen months: who is actually holding this together?

The answer, in a growing number of organisations, is the same title that many had quietly retired a decade ago: the Chief Operating Officer.

2. The Arc of Proliferation

We have spent the better part of fifteen years adding specialist chiefs to the executive team. The logic was sound at each step. Digital disruption demanded a Chief Digital Officer. Data's rising strategic importance demanded a Chief Data Officer. The sheer volume of organisational change demanded a Chief Transformation Officer. Customer experience demanded its own seat. Sustainability demanded another.

Each appointment solved a real problem: it gave board-level visibility to a domain that had been under-represented. I have written elsewhere about the particular case of the Chief Data Officer — a role that often struggled not because the domain was unimportant but because the organisational conditions for its success were rarely met. That argument still holds. But the CDO's difficulty was a symptom of a broader structural pattern: the proliferation itself created new problems that no single specialist could solve.

The problems that matter most to boards right now — operational resilience, cost discipline across a fragmented portfolio, cross-functional delivery at pace — are integration problems. They do not sit inside any one chief's mandate. They sit in the seams between mandates. And the seams, by definition, belong to no one.

3. The Integration Deficit

The case against the current model is not that specialist chiefs are unnecessary. Many of them do important work. The case is that specialist chiefs, collectively, do not produce integration — and integration is what the operating environment now demands above all else.

Consider what a typical executive team looks like in an organisation that has added three or four specialist chiefs over the past decade. Each has a strategy. Each has a portfolio of initiatives. Each has a team, a budget, and a reporting line to the CEO or the board. What none of them has is accountability for the whole — for the way their initiatives interact, compete for the same resources, and land on the same front-line teams.

The CEO is nominally responsible for that integration. But in practice, the CEO's bandwidth has been consumed by external-facing demands — investor relations, regulatory engagement, stakeholder management, the relentless pace of market shifts since 2020. The internal orchestration that a complex organisation requires has, in many cases, simply fallen through the gap.

I have watched this pattern play out with striking consistency. The symptoms are always the same: initiative overload at the front line, duplicated spend across portfolios, governance forums that review workstreams in isolation without ever examining their interactions, and a pervasive sense among operational leaders that nobody is flying the plane. The root cause is structural, not personal. The operating model has been designed for specialisation, and no one has been asked to hold the integration.

4. Why the COO Disappeared — and Why That Reason No Longer Applies

The COO role fell out of fashion for understandable reasons. In the 2010s, the dominant narrative was that organisations needed to become more agile, more digital, more innovative. The COO was associated with the old model — hierarchical, process-heavy, focused on operational efficiency at the expense of strategic agility. Boards and CEOs concluded that what they needed was not a single integrator but a constellation of specialist change-makers.

That conclusion was not wrong at the time. The digital transformation imperative was real, and many organisations did need dedicated leadership to drive it. But the assumption embedded in the model — that integration would emerge naturally from well-led specialist functions — turned out to be false. It did not emerge. The specialist chiefs each built their own momentum, their own governance, their own delivery apparatus, and the sum of the parts did not add up to a coherent whole.

The strongest version of the counter-argument deserves engagement: that the integration problem is best solved not by another chief but by better governance and operating-model design. If the CEO chairs a proper integration forum, if the strategy is clear enough to arbitrate between competing priorities, if the operating model defines decision rights precisely – then the COO is redundant. This is true in theory. In practice, very few organisations sustain the kind of real-time, operational integration that the current environment demands through governance mechanisms alone. Governance sets the rules; someone still has to play the position.

5. The Integrator Skill Profile

This is where the conversation becomes consequential – and where most organisations are likely to get it wrong. The reflex, when a board decides it needs a COO, is to hire for operational experience: someone who has run large operations, managed P&Ls, delivered efficiency programmes. Those capabilities matter. But they are not what makes the difference.

The integrator skill that is actually scarce – the one that separates a COO who transforms the operating model from one who merely administers it – is a compound capability that sits across several dimensions:

The integrator does not need to be the deepest expert in any single domain. They need to be the person who sees how the domains interact – and who has the authority and the credibility to act on what they see.

The profile has five defining characteristics, and they are worth examining because they are rarely found together and almost never the basis of the hiring specification.

The ability to hold the operational and the strategic in a single frame. The integrator must be fluent in both registers – capable of engaging with the board on portfolio strategy and with a front-line team on delivery sequencing in the same afternoon. The failure mode we see most often is the COO who defaults to one register: either a strategist who cannot get into the operational detail, or an operator who cannot connect the detail back to the strategic intent. The integrator lives in the translation between the two.

Cross-domain pattern recognition. The most valuable thing an integrator does is notice patterns that specialists cannot see because they are inside their own domain. The data programme that is building a capability the digital programme has already contracted for. The transformation initiative that is solving the same problem in three different business units because no one has compared the roadmaps. The cost reduction that will break a customer commitment no one has connected to it. This is not a matter of being clever; it is a matter of holding enough of the landscape in view to see the interactions. It requires a particular cognitive disposition – a preference for breadth over depth, for connections over components – that runs counter to the specialist culture most organisations reward.

Institutional credibility without positional authority over every domain. The COO does not own all the domains they integrate. The CDO still owns the data strategy; the CTO still owns the technology architecture. The integrator's authority is therefore partly positional and partly earned – a function of their ability to ask the right questions, see the gaps, and broker the trade-offs in a way that specialists find credible rather than intrusive. This is a relational skill as much as a technical one, and it is the dimension that hiring processes are worst at assessing.

Comfort with ambiguous accountability. Integration work is, by nature, work that does not sit neatly in anyone's accountability framework. The integrator operates in the gaps between accountabilities – the spaces where two mandates overlap, where a decision requires input from three functions, where the right answer is a trade-off rather than an optimisation. Many experienced executives find this profoundly uncomfortable. They want clear ownership, defined metrics, unambiguous success criteria. The effective integrator works without those certainties and still drives outcomes.

Operational tempo. This is the most practical dimension and the easiest to underestimate. Integration is not a planning exercise; it is a real-time discipline. The integrator needs to operate at a pace that matches the organisation's delivery rhythm – close enough to the work to intervene when interactions go wrong, fast enough to prevent small misalignments from compounding into large ones. This requires a particular kind of stamina and a willingness to stay engaged with operational detail that many senior leaders have long since delegated.

6. The Hiring Mistake to Avoid

The composite profile above explains why the most common hiring approach for the COO role produces mediocre results. Boards tend to look for one of two archetypes: the "transformation COO" – a change leader with a track record of large-scale programmes – or the "operations COO" – a seasoned operator who has run complex business units. Both archetypes have strengths, but neither captures the integration skill.

The transformation COO often brings the strategic register but lacks the operational patience and institutional credibility to hold the integration over time. They are programme leaders, not operating-model stewards. The operations COO brings the operational credibility but often defaults to efficiency – optimising within existing structures rather than redesigning the way the structures interact.

The integrator is a third archetype, and it is the one most organisations do not have a hiring playbook for. They are looking for a leader whose primary skill is seeing across boundaries, brokering trade-offs, and holding the whole – and who combines that skill with enough operational depth to be credible and enough strategic fluency to connect the work to the board's intent.

7. What This Means for the Executive Model

The return of the COO is not a repudiation of the specialist chiefs. It is an acknowledgement that specialisation without integration produces diminishing returns – and that integration requires someone whose primary job it is.

The organisations that will navigate this transition well are those that resist two temptations: the temptation to simply resurrect the old COO model – hierarchical, process-focused, concerned primarily with efficiency – and the temptation to hire for track record rather than for the integrator skill profile itself. The old COO was a functional leader who happened to sit at the top of the operational hierarchy. The new COO is a systems leader whose value lies precisely in the fact that they do not belong to any single function.

The scarce skill is not operational excellence or strategic vision. It is the ability to hold them simultaneously – and to see the organisation as a system of interactions rather than a collection of functions.

We are, in effect, watching the executive model correct itself. A decade of fragmentation is giving way to a renewed demand for coherence. The interesting question is not whether this correction will happen – it is already happening – but whether organisations will be thoughtful enough about the skill profile to get the hire right. The integration capability they need is genuinely scarce. It cannot be assembled from a job specification written for a different era. And it will not announce itself in a CV full of functional leadership roles.

The COO is coming back. The question is whether organisations understand why – and whether they know what to look for.