



**Inside the Symbiotic Partnership:  
The chief of staff and their CEO**

Point of View

# Introduction

This point of view examines the partnership between the chief of staff (CoS) and their principal who, in most cases, is the chief executive officer (CEO).<sup>1</sup> Given the nature of the CoS role, this partnership relies on a profound level of trust that must be cultivated and reinforced over time. More specifically, this study has two main objectives:

**1** To analyze the strategic partnership between the CEO and the CoS—identifying the underlying dynamics, enabling factors and barriers to effective collaboration—as well as its impact on the organization.

**2** To explore how the CoS navigates emerging risks and complexities in current geopolitical and economic environments, considering their perspective offers a valuable proxy for the CEO's viewpoint.

To enable a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis, this research adopted a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative analysis draws on survey responses from 121 global chief of staff members of The Chief of Staff Association, while the qualitative analysis is informed by multiple in-depth interviews.

This point of view is structured as follows: Focus 1 addresses the first objective: to examine the symbiotic partnership between the CEO and the CoS. Focus 2 addresses the second objective: to explore how CoS anticipate and respond to the growing complexities and uncertainties of today's geopolitical and economic environments. Finally, the research concludes with a point of view on these two themes within the financial services industry, which has been a leading adopter of the CoS role.

<sup>1</sup> 65% of chiefs of staff surveyed report directly to the CEO (either at the global or divisional level).

# FOCUS 1: The symbiotic partnership between the CoS and CEO

## 1.1 A Symbiotic Partnership

Over half of chief of staff (CoS) respondents describe their partnership with their principal, usually the CEO, as ‘symbiotic, based on close collaboration, mutual trust, and shared success’.

Overall, the results reveal a dual focus defining the CoS contribution: strategic guidance and day-to-day coordination. The blend of operational (64%) and advisory (51%) responsibilities highlights their twofold identity as an enabler of daily efficiency and a trusted strategic partner.

Examining their impact more closely, the CoS balances operational support with forward-looking strategic planning and crisis management. As evidenced by the interviews, their ability to manage turbulence positions a CoS as a strategic–operational integrator who translates vision into execution.

“Expect more. Don’t settle for someone just coordinating tasks. The right chief of staff can solve problems you don’t even realize are bottlenecks.”

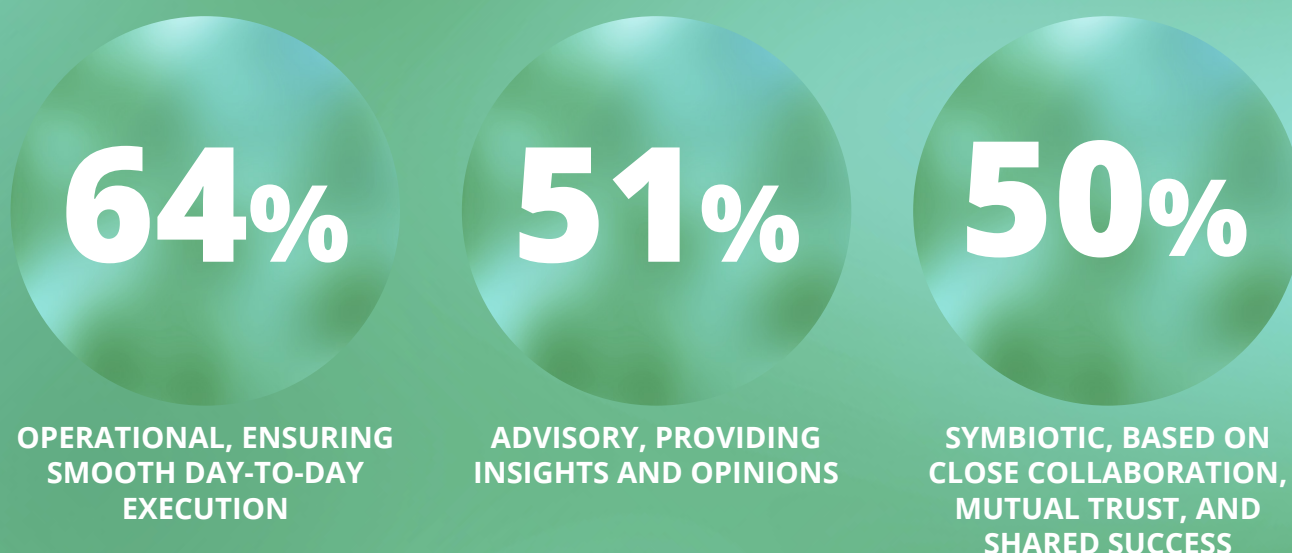
Figure 1: Top 3 areas of CoS influence



Scale: 1 = Not at all, 5 = Strongly influence most decisions

“I often serve as a proxy and strategic thought partner externally, representing the CEO in conversations outside the organization, pressure-testing ideas, and advancing priorities when he is not in the room.”

Figure 2: Top 3 traits of the CEO-CoS partnership



# 1.2 Building trust as a source of strategic contribution

Trust is the cornerstone of the strategic partnership between the CEO and the chief of staff (CoS). 59% of CoS established trust within their first six months. This was achieved by delivering quick and reliable results, acting as discreet and confidential advisors, anticipating their leader's needs, and managing complex situations with diplomacy.

Sustaining their principal's trust long-term demands deliberate actions. Interviewees highlighted anticipating the CEO's needs; not just strategically, but in managing their time and energy. Others emphasized protecting CEO bandwidth through proactive issue resolution, effective communication, and absolute confidentiality.

For 57% of respondents, the partnership grew stronger as trust developed, fueled by consistent one-to-one interactions. These were weekly or, in 60% of cases, more frequent.

"You are not just helping your principal with a to-do list, or whatever the assigned project is. Everything you do reflects upon your CEO, and they've got to be able to trust you."

FOR

**57%**

**of CoS respondents, the partnership with the principal grew stronger as trust developed**

“Our relationship is built on trust, respect, and candor, with a shared focus on outcomes, over formality. This trust has been earned over time and allows me to operate with both independence and alignment.”

*Figure 3: Factors driving the CEO's trust*

**70%**

**DELIVERING RESULTS  
QUICKLY AND RELIABLY**

**64%**

**BEING A DISCREET AND  
CONFIDENTIAL ADVISOR**

**61%**

**UNDERSTANDING AND  
ANTICIPATING CEO NEEDS**

**57%**

**MANAGING COMPLEX  
SITUATIONS WITH  
DIPLOMACY**

# 1.3 Quantifying the impact of the chief of staff

Having a chief of staff (CoS) saves CEOs more than 30% of their time, a key indicator of the impact of the role. Interviews clearly highlight the cross-cutting impact of CoS; this 'time ROI' empowers leaders to focus on high-impact strategies, accelerating execution for sustainable growth.

Survey results further confirm this impact: 60% of respondents rate the CoS role as 'absolutely critical' to company success, and another 36% as 'somewhat critical'. This broad recognition, evidenced also by interviews, positions the CoS as a key force-multiplier for leadership, a bridge between strategic foresight and operational execution.

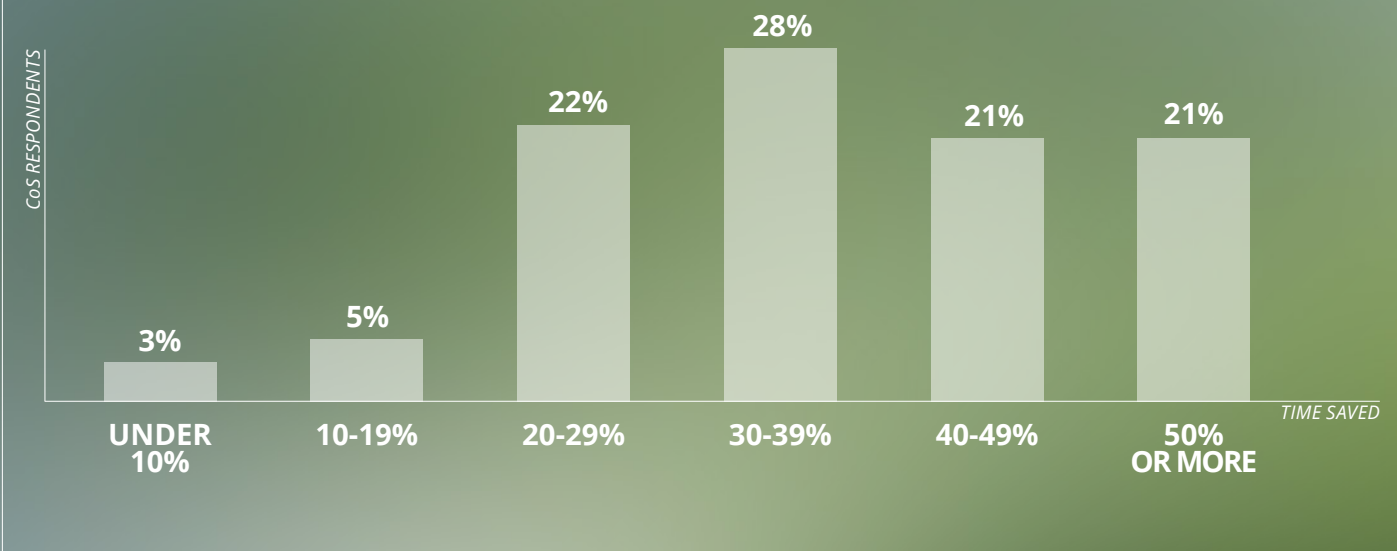
"Answering 80% of the CEO's questions on the spot, managing sensitive political balances, and resolving 30–40% of issues without the CEO's direct involvement."

MORE THAN

**30%**

**of the CEO's time is saved  
by having a CoS**

Figure 4: Percentage of CEO time saved by a CoS



“CEOs are all short on time. The demands are relentless, especially in a global financial firm where there are only a couple of hours a week that the markets are closed. You’ve got to get information to your principal quickly, clearly and succinctly, filtering out the noise. Cut to the chase. Give the conclusion. Give the recommendation.”

# 1.4 Navigating challenges: balancing acts and expectation management

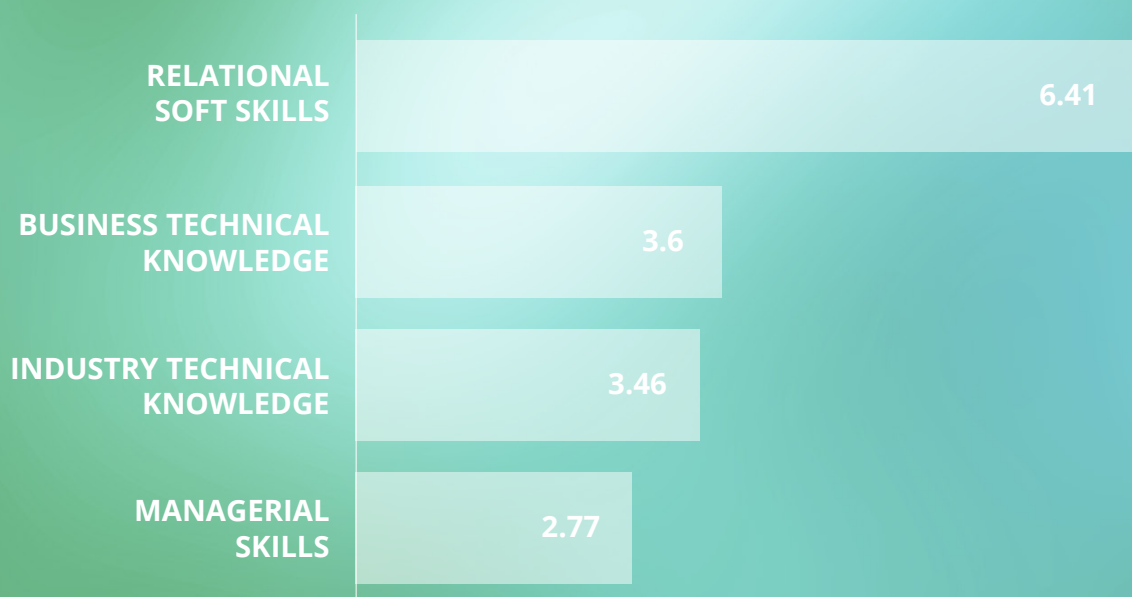
The survey uncovers key challenges in the chief of staff (CoS) and CEO partnership, with respondents citing difficulties in managing expectations and priorities (37%), balancing strategic and operational tasks (27%), and navigating interpersonal style clashes (23%).

Addressing these challenges requires empowering the CoS to complement the CEO role. Success in this role relies on relational soft skills, which survey respondents rated highest for CoS effectiveness. Developing these skills can mitigate tensions, foster alignment and unlock the full potential of this strategic partnership.

*Figure 5: The biggest challenges in the CEO-CoS partnership*



Figure 6: Critical skills enabling CoS impact



Scale: 1=Not important, 10=Critical

“The challenge lies in operating amid ambiguity. Priorities, decisions, and paths forward, are often evolving, which requires judgment, adaptability and comfort without full clarity. The reward is that the role has proven to function much like an apprenticeship under a visionary leader, providing sustained exposure to real decision-making, strategic tradeoffs, and enterprise-level thinking.”



# 1.5 The bigger picture: a critical force for organizational success

The chief of staff (CoS) role is emerging as a critical and evolving force for organizational success, as clearly confirmed by the survey findings. In fact, 62% of respondents report a significant or moderate evolution in the role since they started. And more, 79%, now view it as a permanent and essential component of corporate leadership.

Understanding this dynamic is crucial for business success, as it illustrates how the CoS is becoming a strategic pillar in operations, adapting to increasing organizational complexity and enhancing the executive leadership's effectiveness. Furthermore, 58% express interest in internal CoS communities within their own organizations, highlighting potential for collaborative networks that strengthen innovation and organizational alignment.

"The chief of staff role might be a universal 'steppingstone' to senior leadership positions."

"Over time, the role evolved from task execution to strategic influence."

**62%** of CoS respondents report a significant or moderate evolution of the role since they started

**58%** of CoS express interest in internal CoS communities, highlighting untapped potential for collaborative networks that strengthen innovation and organizational alignment

# FOCUS 2: A CoS lens on geopolitical and economic turbulence

Chiefs of staff (CoS) perspectives provide a privileged lens on geopolitical and economic turbulence, serving as a proxy for CEO viewpoints and priorities. Looking ahead, their outlook combines measured caution toward external risks with strong confidence in internal capabilities. While expectations for the global economy and the financial services industry remain moderate, most anticipate stronger performance within their own organizations.

## 2.1 Key Highlights: expectations and Risks

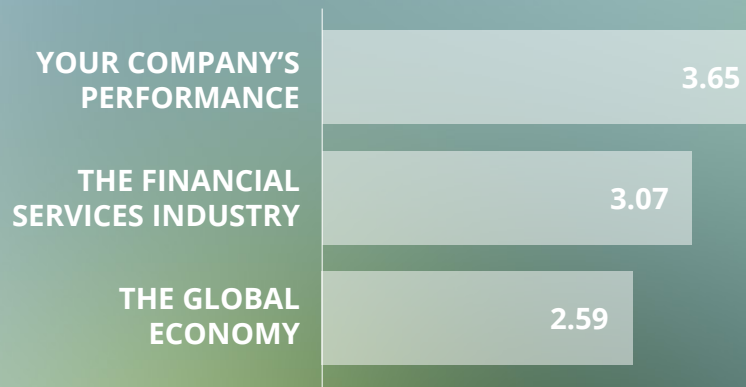
### LOOKING AHEAD TO THE NEXT 12 MONTHS:

- CoS respondents remain more optimistic about their own company's performance compared to external macro-trends such as the global economy and the financial services industry. This reflects a pattern of internal optimism versus more cautious views on uncontrollable external factors.
- The top external challenges identified by CoS leaders for the coming year are geopolitical instability (54%), financial market volatility (47%), and regulatory change (43%).
- In response to recent geopolitical movements, 46% report having revised their strategic investment priorities (10% significantly, 36% modestly), while 36% have made no changes.

### LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD:

- The top three risks that CoS expect could most impact their organizations next year are: 1. Economic downturn or recession; 2. Regulatory changes and compliance risks; 3. Geopolitical instability.
- Conversely, CoS identify the greatest opportunities for value creation in the areas of AI and data analytics (73%), strategic partnerships and M&A (62%), and digital transformation or new market expansion (41%).

Figure 7: Outlook for the next year (2026)



Scale: 1 = Very pessimistic, 5 = Very optimistic

Figure 8: The greatest opportunities for value creation in the next three years (2026-2029)



The top three risks that CoS expect could most impact their organizations next year are:

**#1**

**ECONOMIC DOWNTURN  
OR RECESSION**

**#2**

**REGULATORY CHANGES  
AND COMPLIANCE RISKS**

**#3**

**GEOPOLITICAL  
INSTABILITY**

# Summary

These perspectives reflect the experience of chiefs of staff across industries and geographies. What follows narrows that lens to financial services, a sector that has been among the earliest and most consistent adopters of the chief of staff role. The patterns that emerge here both reinforce and deepen the broader findings, offering a more detailed view of how trust, strategic partnership and executive decision-making operate in a fast-moving, high-stakes environment.

# FOCUS 1: The symbiotic partnership between the CoS and CEO

Deloitte and the Chief of Staff Association polled a representation of Chiefs of Staff (CoS) from companies within the Financial Services Industry (FSI).

## INSIGHT 1

### COS, A GROWING STRATEGIC FORCE IN EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

In the FSI, the dimension of trust emerges even more clearly as a strategic element in the partnership between the CEO and the CoS. Responses highlight how the relationship strengthens through the progressive development of trust, evolving toward a tactical partnership that reflects the strategic role of the CoS within the organization's leadership.

Figure 9: The evolution of the CoS role

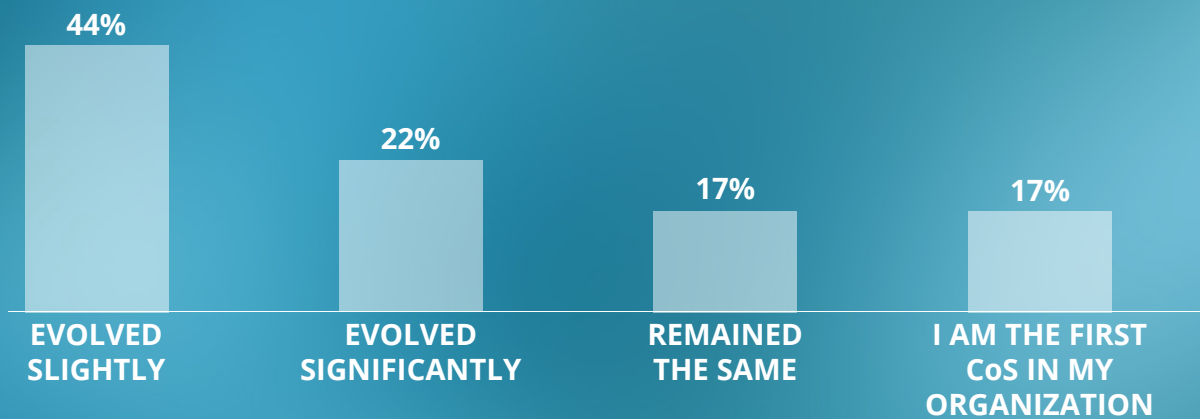


Figure 10: The evolution of the CEO-CoS partnership

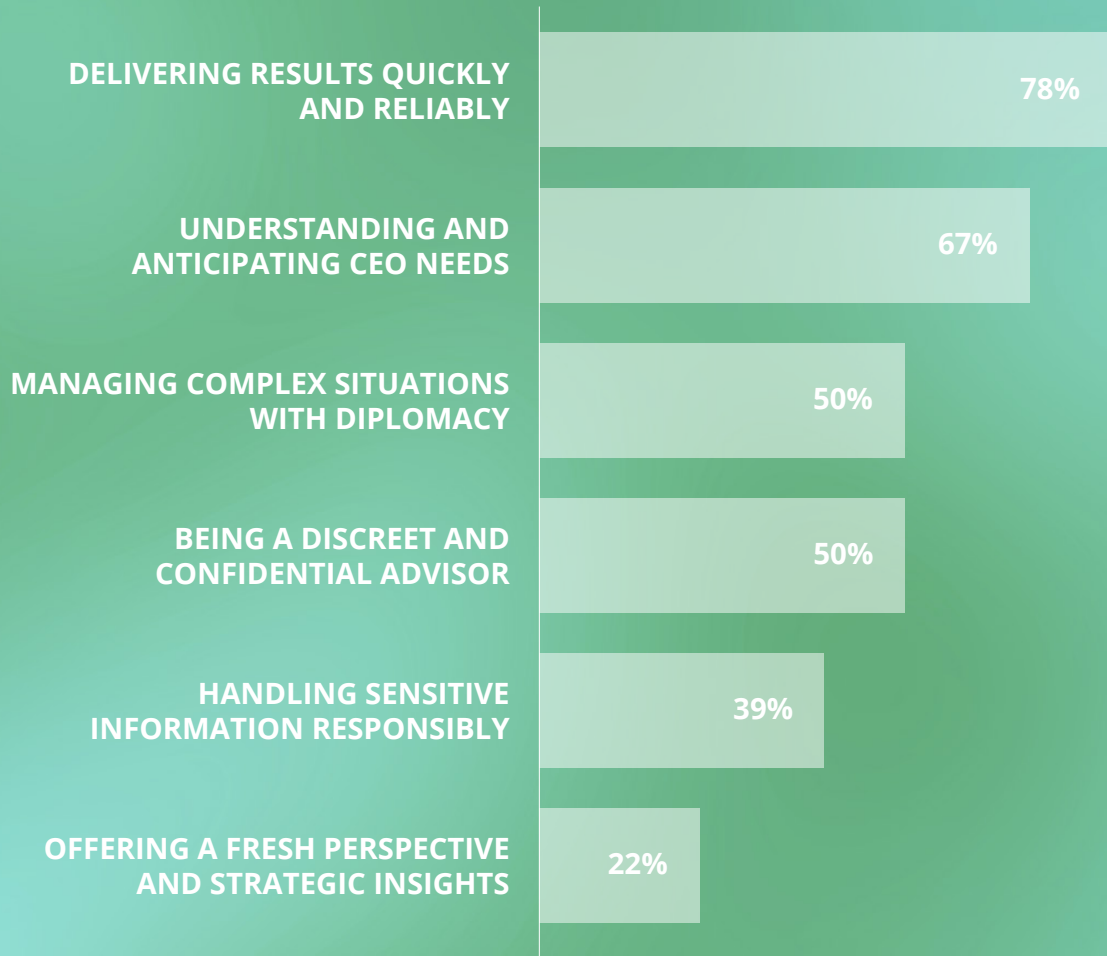


## INSIGHT 2

### COS AS A TRUSTED PARTNER TO THE CEO

CoS primarily build CEO trust by delivering reliable results and anticipating needs, supported by frequent one-on-one interactions, at least weekly for 83%, highlighting a strategic partnership rooted in consistent value delivery, discretion and diplomacy.

Figure 11: Factors driving the CEO's trust



### INSIGHT 3

## NAVIGATING STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL TENSIONS IN THE COS-CEO PARTNERSHIP

The resilience of the CEO-CoS partnerships stems from the ability of the CoS to navigate dual tensions: expectation/priority management and strategic/operational balance. Relational intelligence, more than technical skills, sustains this collaborative partnership.

Figure 12: The biggest challenges in the CEO-CoS partnership

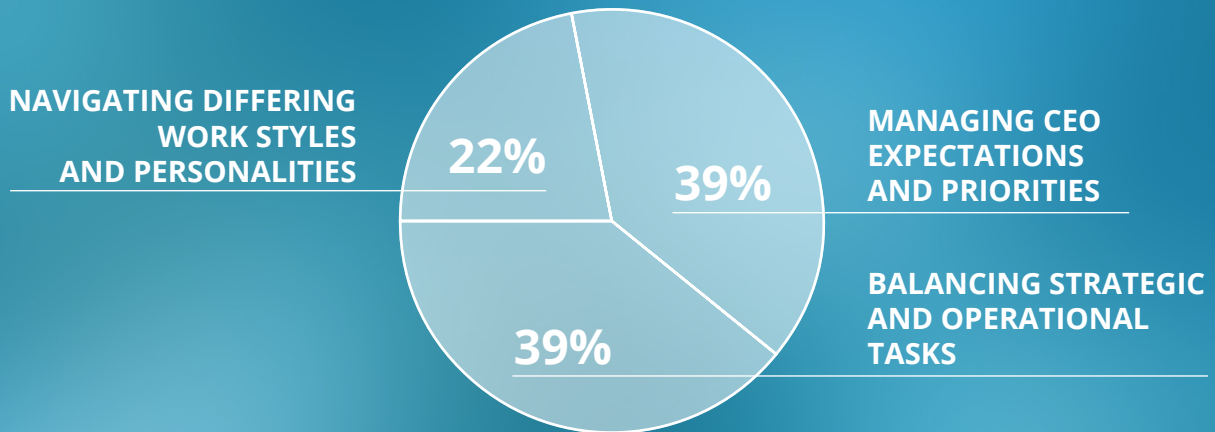
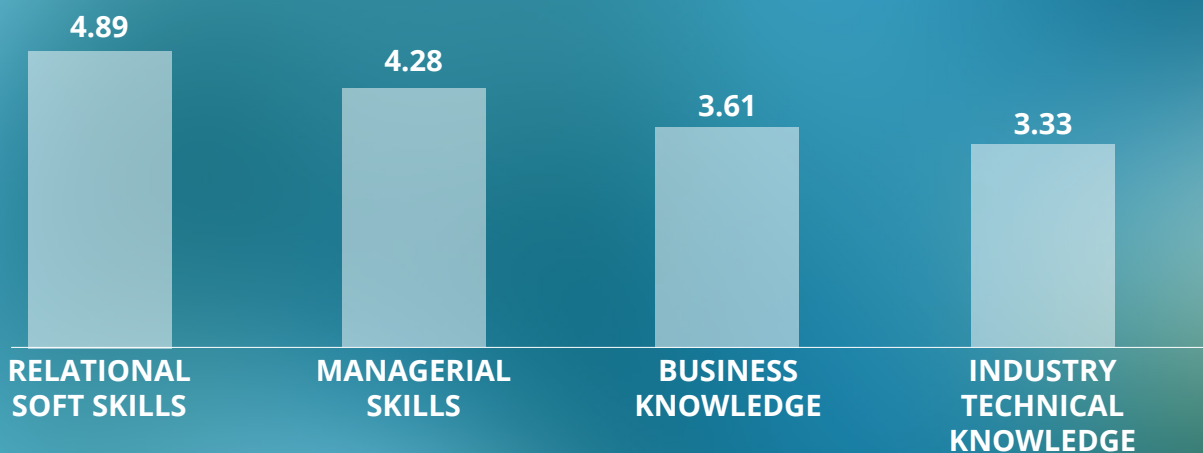


Figure 13: The most critical skills enabling CoS impact



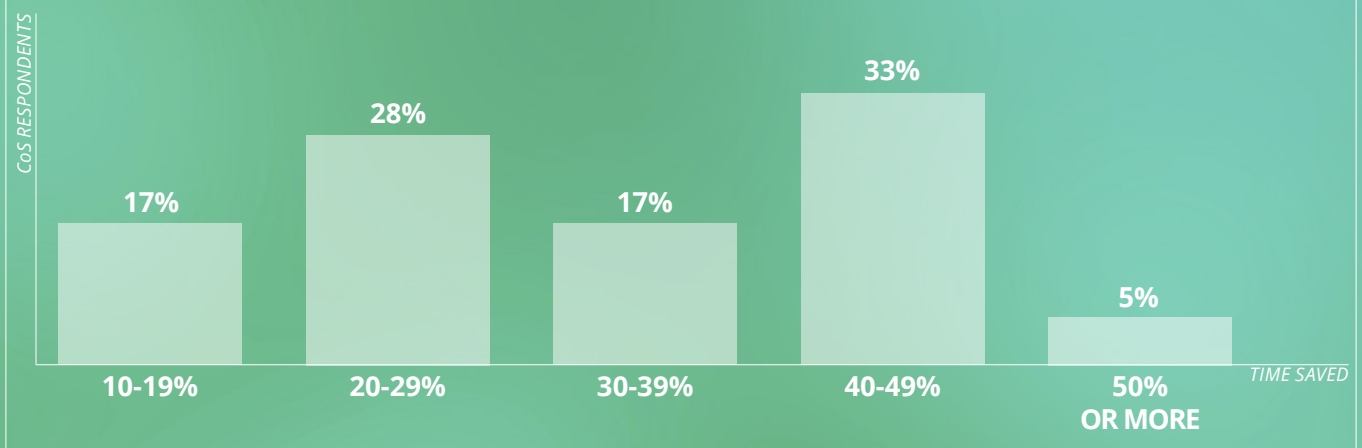
Scale: 1 = Not important, 5 = Critical

## INSIGHT 4

### COS EMPOWERS LEADERSHIP IMPACT AND INFLUENCE

CoS deliver substantial CEO time savings—50% of CoS estimate between 31-50% recapture, and 83% at least 21%—with 89% affirming criticality to company success, positioning the CoS as a strategic multiplier for leadership capacity.

Figure 14: Percentage of CEO time saved by having a CoS



# 89%

of respondents view the CoS role as critical to the company's success, highlighting broad recognition of its organizational importance

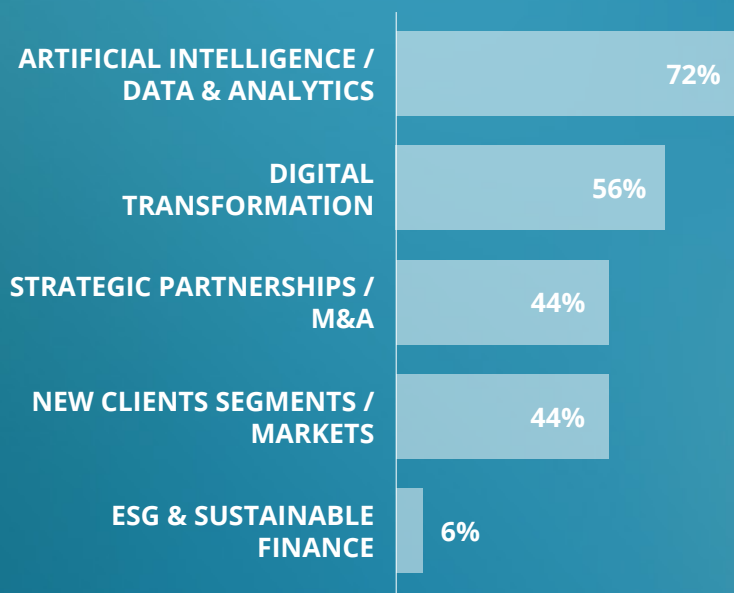
# FOCUS 2: A CoS lens on geopolitical and economic turbulence

## INSIGHT 1

### AI AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AS STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES IN FSI

Chiefs of staff (CoS) perspectives reveal that AI and digital transformation are dominant value drivers in the FSI pointing to tech-led growth despite neutral macroeconomic expectations. Accelerating AI and digital investments emerge as key to driving organizational growth, leveraging the CoS as a CEO proxy for swift execution.

Figure 15: The greatest opportunities for value creation in FSI in the next three years (2026-2029)



The greatest value creation opportunities identified by FSI CoS respondents

Figure 16: Outlook for the next year (2026)



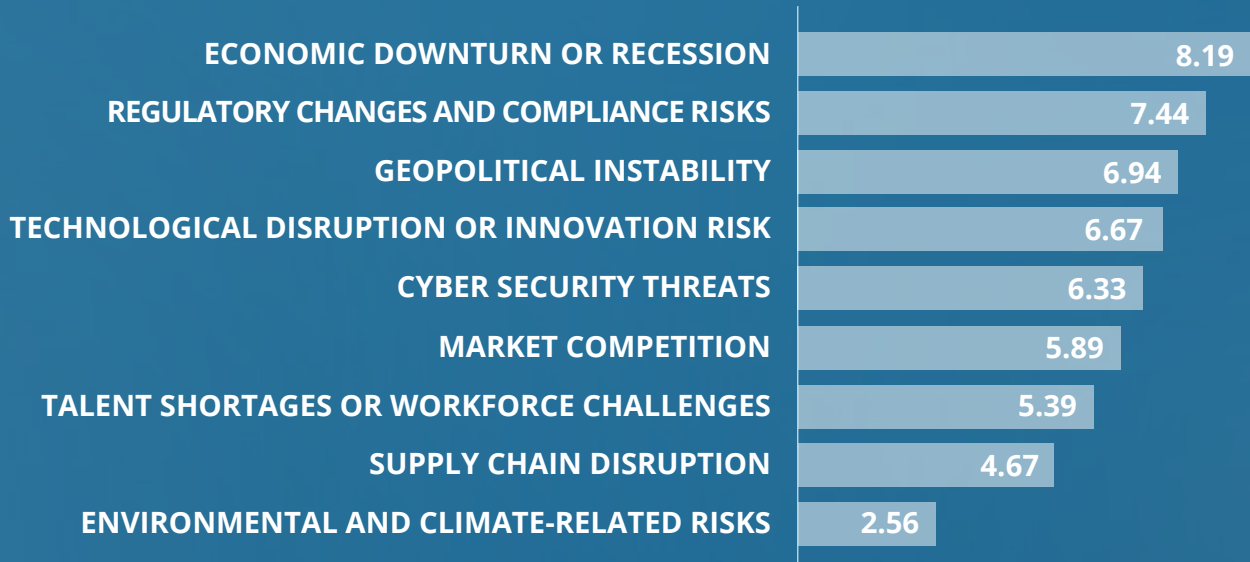
Scale: 1=Very pessimistic, 5=Very optimistic

## INSIGHT 2

### EMERGING RISKS IN FSI

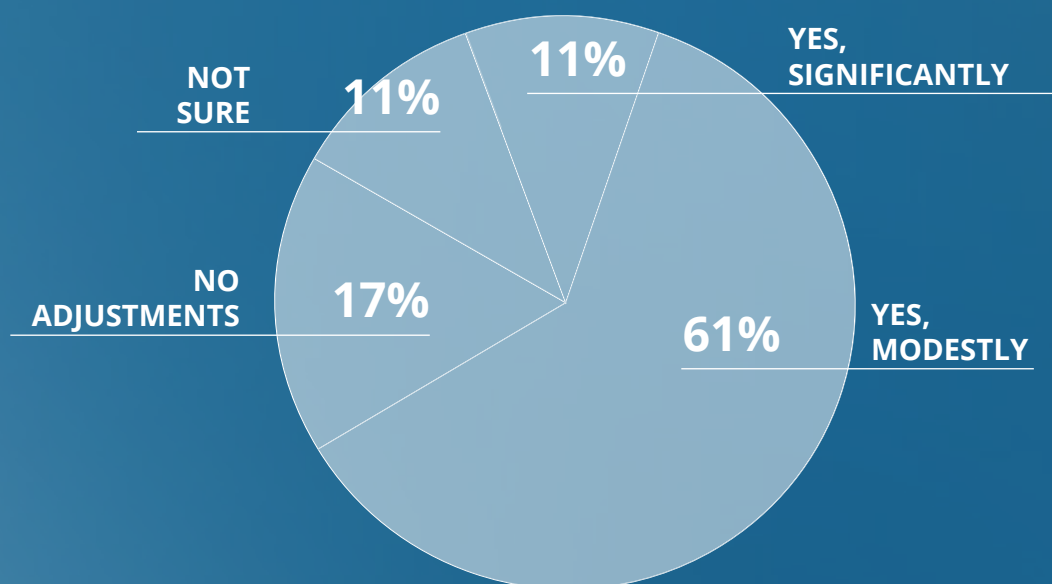
Recession and regulation dominate the CoS risk radar, driving 72% of strategic pivots. The CoS emerges as a strategic amplifier for CEO foresight, translating complex risk signals into actionable priorities and ensuring organizational agility in volatile markets.

Figure 17: The greatest risks for value creation in FSI 2026-2029



Scale: 1 = Not important, 10 = Critical

Figure 18: Strategic pivots in investment priorities due to geopolitics and trade developments



# Conclusions

This research set out to examine two aspects: the nature of the partnership between the CEO and chief of staff, and how chiefs of staff are responding to today's geopolitical and economic pressures.

Two key trends emerge from this point of view. The first is the symbiotic partnership between the CEO and chief of staff, built on trust. Second, the chief of staff helps the CEOs navigate uncertainty in today's shifting geopolitical and business landscape. Specifically, the findings confirm that the chief of staff has moved from a supporting role to a strategic position within the leadership function. Across sectors and geographies, a consistent pattern emerges: where trust is strong and the chief of staff has both access and mandate, leaders make better decisions, move faster, and manage complexity more effectively.

Looking ahead, the chief of staff is well positioned to embed scenario planning within the leadership agenda, drive growth by accelerating strategic partnerships, and support the adoption of artificial intelligence. The role is also well placed to help organizations seize opportunities while mitigating key risks. The role is also evolving. 62% of respondents report significant or moderate change since they started and 79% now see the chief of staff as a permanent feature of executive leadership. This indicates an important shift, where the chief of staff is now a critical force in organisational success and strategic impact.

This point of view sheds light on the key enablers and challenges of the position. The ability to balance strategic and operational priorities, while leveraging strong relationship-building skills, stands out as a decisive success factor. When properly structured and empowered, a chief of staff saves the CEO more than 30% of their time, a clear indicator of the role's strategic impact.

The next step is to explore the conditions under which the chief of staff role has the greatest impact. Specifically, when and why it tends to thrive, in which organizational contexts it has proven effective or faced challenges, and which organizational, cultural, and other factors may influence its success.

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