

The Rise of the Law Firm C-Suite

On September 18th, the Managing Partner Forum hosted its monthly webinar in the series “The Law Firm of the Future.” This webinar, titled “The Rise of the Law Firm C-Suite,” explored the evolving role and importance of the law firm administrator or COO position, including trends in compensation, the benefits of investing in these leaders, and the rise of fractional C-suite models.

Panelists:

- **Amanda Koplos:** Chief Operating Officer at [Shuffield, Lowman & Wilson, P.A.](#); President, [Association of Legal Administrators](#)
- **Rees Morrison:** Founder, [Savvy Surveys for Lawyers](#)
- **Geoffrey Williams:** Chief Operating Officer at [Stone Pigman Walther Wittmann L.L.C.](#); Past President, [Association of Legal Administrators](#)

Moderators:

- **John Remsen Jr:** President of [TheRemsenGroup](#) and President & CEO of Managing Partner Forum
- **Uri Gutfreund:** Senior Vice President and Managing Principal at [Ames & Gough](#)

Key takeaways:

1. The role of the law firm administrator has evolved significantly, moving towards more business-oriented, strategic leadership roles rather than just administrative duties. Firms are recognizing the need for strong business professionals in senior positions.
2. Compensation for these senior business leadership roles in law firms can vary widely, but generally trends higher at larger, more profitable firms. Investing in the professional development of these leaders is crucial.
3. Fractional or shared C-suite models are becoming more common, especially for smaller and mid-sized firms that may not be able to afford a full-time, high-level business executive. This can provide access to experienced talent without the full-time cost.

Administrative Professionals in Law Firms

Law firms are trending towards centralizing their administrative functions under senior business professionals, often with C-suite titles (such as CEO, COO, CFO, etc.). As law firms continue to adopt more business-centric models, there is a growing demand for leaders with formal business training and expertise. Firms aiming to stay competitive and relevant are prioritizing candidates with strong business backgrounds to help guide their operations.

Gone are the days when law firm administrators were limited to routine or clerical tasks. Today, these professionals play pivotal roles in shaping firm strategy and operations, reflecting a

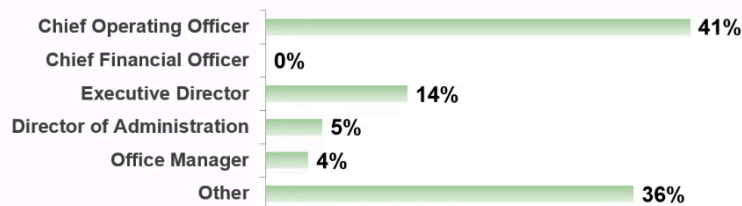
broader trend toward professionalization within the industry. This shift highlights the ongoing evolution of the legal field, where growth and survival depend on adopting a business-minded approach to profitability and firm management.

The Value of Titling in Law Firm Administration



REGISTRANT QUESTION #1

From the list below, what term best reflects the title your firm gives to its principal administrator?



In today's legal industry, a law firm's administrative titles should accurately reflect the scope and responsibilities of the role. When referring to senior-level or C-suite positions, such as Chief Operating Officer (COO), firm members should understand that these professionals are not only managing day-to-day operations but also playing critical roles in leadership, strategy, and change management. This contrasts with more traditional roles, such as "office managers" or "administrators," which focus solely on the operational aspects of running a firm.

A law firm COO, for example, is responsible for overseeing daily operations, but their responsibilities extend much further into strategic planning and broader firm leadership. As firms continue to evolve, the role of administrators has expanded, positioning these professionals as key business leaders who enable the firm's revenue generation. By managing the operational and business sides of the firm, C-suite leaders allow lawyers to focus on practicing law, mentoring, recruiting, and training.

Rees Morrison, one of the webinar panelists, noted that law firms often use a wide variety of titles for similar roles. After reviewing over 270 different titles, Morrison found that most fall into a clear category: chiefs, directors, administrators, and managers. This taxonomy mirrors the established titling conventions seen among legal professionals, such as the distinctions between associates, senior counsel, and of counsel. While the specific title may vary from firm to firm, it's clear that defining an administrator's role through their title is critical to recognizing their contributions as strategic business leaders.

Skill Set for an Effective Law Firm CEO

To be an effective law firm CEO, leaders must embrace a growth mindset; that is, a belief that there is always room for improvement, innovation, and scaling, both in their own leadership and in the development of their team. While practicing law is undoubtedly an art, it is also a business, and a high-level C-suite executive should approach firm management with an entrepreneurial mindset, constantly seeking ways to enhance performance and expand the firm's potential.

A successful law firm CEO also needs to think like an owner, taking a holistic view of the firm's operations. This is especially important in mid-sized firms, where a CEO must oversee a diverse array of departments, including IT, human resources, finance, and cybersecurity. While business management skills can be acquired outside the legal industry, the unique set of skills required for running a law firm are often learned only through direct experience in the field.

Effective law firm leadership requires fostering a common vision within the firm: helping each member understand what it means to be a part of that particular organization. An empowered CEO must be able to make difficult decisions independently, with the confidence that the firm's managing partners will support their choices. This autonomy allows the CEO to resolve internal conflicts without always needing to escalate issues to the managing partners, ensuring smoother day-to-day operations.

Seat at the Table

Having a seat at the table is no longer enough for law firm administrators; what truly matters is having a voice that is heard and valued. Today's administrators must attend executive and management committee meetings, but also have the ability to contribute meaningfully to discussions and policy proposals. As consultants to the leadership team, they offer insights, opinions, and guidance that influence the strategic direction of the firm.

Historically, law firm administrators were often excluded from high-level conversations, but this is changing. Given their deep understanding of firm operations, it is critical that they are involved in discussions about the business. As shown by a poll during the webinar, 88% of law firm administrators now regularly attend executive and management committee meetings, reflecting their growing role in shaping firm decisions. After all, it's difficult to have a meaningful conversation about running a business when the person responsible for day-to-day operations is not involved.

Does your firm's primary administrator regularly attend most executive/management committee meetings?

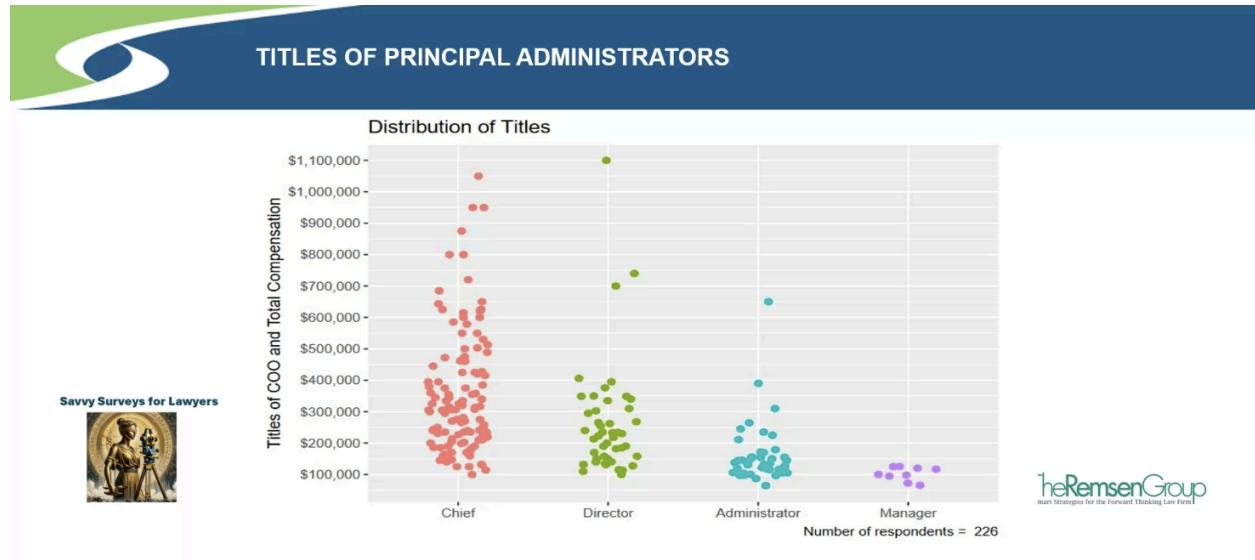


Reporting Relationships

In many law firms, reporting relationships are often characterized by a complex "dotted line" structure. How power is distributed among partners can significantly impact the dynamics of these relationships. For example, while Amanda Koplos, one of the webinar panelists, reports directly to the managing partner, she also maintains working relationships with other partners. Meanwhile, the rest of the administrative team reports to her.

This kind of structure, where there's overlap and ambiguity in reporting lines, is common in many firms. The level of clarity around reporting relationships can vary widely depending on how much authority the firm vests in its partners versus senior administrators. As firms continue to evolve, establishing clear reporting structures is essential to ensure smooth collaboration and decision-making within the organization.

Compensation



Morrison has been conducting surveys on law firm COOs and principal administrators for the past three years. Initially collecting data from around 200 respondents, the survey grew to include 230 participants last year. With support from the Remsen Group and other collaborators, this year's survey is expected to surpass 300 participants, providing even more comprehensive insights into law firm leadership.

The compensation data presented in the webinar was drawn from the second cumulative report, which covered approximately 240 principal administrators. Morrison categorized the wide range of titles into four primary groups: chief, director, administrator, and manager. The results revealed an interesting distribution of compensation across these categories, with notable variations based on title, education, gender, and other factors. A third report, expanding on these findings, is set to be released later this week.

As seen in the above chart, compensation trends for law firm administrators differ significantly depending on the role. Chiefs tend to have the highest compensation levels, while directors, administrators, and managers fall into lower ranges, reflecting the differing scopes of responsibility across these positions.