

Chief of Staff

"Jack of all trades, master of none, but better than a master of one."

Introduction to COS:

Origin:

Chief of Staff (COS) is a title that originated probably from the days of ancient Rome. This title (and others similar to this) were used in military, politics and advisory. CoS roles were plugged with more definitive work using more descriptive titles like Chief of General Staff, Chief of Army Staff, Chief of Defence Staff etc.

So why are you reading about this? -
Because in the 20th century, such roles started to emerge in the corporate and startup ecosystem recently. This has increased in recent years.

Understand CoS as a noise reducer, a work therapist, an advisor and a chaos-handler for the Chief Executive. Generally, CoS is required for a new CEO/Leadership in many cases, especially at a large corporate level for different motives (including implementing a new vision for the existing team that aligns with the CEO's vision). Nowadays, this role has become very repetitive in the startup ecosystem and it's crucial for you to understand it to make sure you know what you're choosing. So let's dive into that

Modern day CoS:

As mentioned in HBR's [The Case of Chief of Staff](#) article, a CoS serves as:

an air traffic controller for the leader and the senior team; as an integrator connecting work streams that would otherwise remain siloed; as a communicator linking the leadership team and the broader organization; as an honest broker and truth teller when the leader needs a wide-ranging view without turf considerations; and as a confidant without an organizational agenda.

Unlike an Executive Assistant (EA), someone who manages the calendar and routine of the chief executive, CoS is a far more important role. The responsibilities can vary a lot. The best place to find exact responsibilities? - Job description :)

Here we will try to simplify the roles and responsibilities so that you can make a career choice.

CoS in Corporate:

A CoS in corporate becomes more of a bucket. Understand CoS as part of senior leadership only but without a fancy CXO title. They don't care about the spotlight but rather focus on getting things done.

Different CoS can have different work depending what their objectives are. Generally, these are one (or more) of the following -

- Act as someone who can decide what communications the Chief Executive should get and what others you can take care of
- Act as someone who streamlines the work and becomes the spokesperson for the senior leadership
- Lead some particular work that requires a chief executive, say managing relationship etc

Following is a good bifurcation on different levels of CoS in a corporate world -

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Leader's challenge	Maximize efficiency with minimal change	Implement the existing strategy with only moderate change	Execute significant strategic, operational, and cultural agendas calling for considerable changes
CoS role	Help the leader become better organized, with more time for A items	Manage important projects well	Help CEO and senior executives navigate through uncertainty and risk

CoS capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the business • Can do project management • Can manage relationships • Communicates well • Organizes the CEO's office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can simplify complexity • Does strategic thinking and problem analysis • Can manage the process of idea to execution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can anticipate & avert problems • Can add value to the leader's vision • Has organizational and political intelligence
Reporting relationship	Part of the administrative staff	Reports to a direct report of the leader	Reports directly to the leader
Status	Administration	High-potential, future senior manager	Managerial or senior staff member
Managerial duties	Usually has no direct reports	Manages a small group or an individual contributor	Manages a department, such as strategy implementation or communications
Time with the leader	Regular, transactional, brief	Episodic, project oriented	Frequent, on a range of issues, whenever necessary
Advice to the CEO	Not expected	Expected within project parameters	Expected on a full range of topics

Who's it for:

The Corporate CoS role is generally for someone

- with a great work experience (5 yrs+)
- who recently worked in a relevant role recently or in previous work (eg, EA for Level 1, in-depth understanding role for Level 2, and a long experience in the same company and at managing people at higher level for Level 3)
- Flexible and a decision-maker
- Who has other relevant skills mentioned in the above table

Key Skills:

Following are generally the key skills required (but without previous experience, they are not relevant)

- Communication & listening skills
- Management skills (both people & project)
- Organisational & political expertise
- Decision-making
- Leadership
- An inclination toward getting work done rather than the spotlight
- Strategic mindset

Must read: <https://hbr.org/2020/05/the-case-for-a-chief-of-staff>

CoS in Startups:

Let's establish one thing, 'startup' implies ambiguity, flexibility, no-defined work and a lot of learning. Things depend a lot on the stage of the startup and the leadership. We'll try to cover what a CoS does generally and other info.

A CoS in a startup is our '*Jack of All Trade, Master of none, still better than Master of One*'
(Goes well with corporate CoS too!)

They do a broad spectrum of work - from project management to conducting events, from data analysis to strategies. They evolve rapidly as the startup evolves. They are an aide to the CEOs and are involved in day-to-day activities of the startup, indulge with CEOs in strategy discussions, decide what info reaches CEOs etc.

Following table gives a decent idea of how the responsibilities change as the startup grows:

Stage	Chief of Staff Responsibilities
Seed → Series A	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Act as founder's right-hand, deeply embedded in day-to-day operations• Translate founder's vision into execution and operational processes• Manage projects across functions, ensuring alignment with company goals• Fill gaps in early teams (ops, hiring, product coordination)• Maintain startup agility and culture while scaling processes• Serve as an internal multiplier for founder's bandwidth
Series B and Beyond	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shift focus toward strategy and scaling operations• Manage and align larger teams and cross-functional projects• Build systems for execution at scale (OKRs, dashboards, processes)• Strengthen stakeholder management (investors, partners, leadership team)• Ensure agility is preserved despite larger org structure• Often step into "mini-COO" mode, ensuring strategy → execution

Post-IPO / Large Unicorn • Drive high-level strategic initiatives (expansion, M&A, new markets) • Manage board and investor relations, including external communications • Coordinate across senior leadership for alignment on long-term vision • Shape company-wide policy, governance, and culture • Focus on external brand and strategic positioning • Ensure the entrepreneurial/startup DNA isn't lost at scale

In short,

Early stage → Execution-heavy, founder's extension

Growth stage → Strategic operator & cross-functional glue

Late stage → Strategic leader, investor-facing, policy & vision shaper

Who's it for:

If you're someone who

- Enjoys ambiguity and make things out of chaos (required for being startup-ready)
- Is executes, strategises and can maintain cross-functionality
- Can get work done from people and
- Lead teams
- Who can prioritize things and
- Can become the right hand of the CEO

Key Skills:

Following are some key skills you can expect as necessary for this role:

- Communication skill
- Strategic mindset
- Leadership skills
- Adaptable
- Raw thinking
- Quick decision making
- Execution skills
- People skills

Can read: <https://www.hirechore.com/startups/role-of-chief-of-staff-in-the-startup-ecosystem>

Summary:

In a nutshell, a CoS is a go-to person for a CEO for discussion, a Jack-of-All-trade, and an expert in people and project management. The role can be defined better by the Chief Executive and can be a set of anything mentioned above.

While Corporate CoS requires a lot of experience, some startup founders can prefer a recent graduate from MBA (or Bachelors, if you're exceptional) for this role as they have a lot more flexibility and adaptability.

If you are aiming for such a role, the founder's office can be a good start to eventually reach here. Work on your communications skills, make strategies, understand where you can make decisions and where the CEO needs to be involved and eventually you can grow into a CoS.

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