



Blickstein Group **Law Firm COO Survey**

Compensation Patterns and Strategic Metrics for
Law Firm COOs and Principal Administrators



Talent, Tech, and Tensions: Strategic Insights from the 2025 Blickstein Group Law Firm COO Survey

The role of the chief operating officer and other lead administrative executives within law firms has grown significantly in recent years—expanding in scope, strategic influence, and complexity. As firms navigate a rapidly evolving landscape marked by shifting workforce expectations, technological disruption, and economic volatility, these leaders are increasingly at the center of critical decisions that shape firmwide performance.

The 2025 Blickstein Group Law Firm COO Survey offers a unique, data-driven look at how these professionals view their responsibilities, their firms' priorities, and the challenges they face. Now in its fourth year, this year's survey includes responses from 158 senior administrators, representing a broad cross-section of North American law firms. It examines compensation trends, along with key performance indicators, operational pain points, technology adoption (including GenAI), and the evolving nature of the COO role itself.

What emerges is a portrait of leaders who are focused on long-term value creation—through talent development, tech investment, and operational improvements—even as they wrestle with cultural resistance, compliance burdens, and the limits of discretionary compensation structures. The report also reflects a cautious but sustained interest in GenAI, which respondents view more as an emerging tool than an immediate disruptor.

In this report, we highlight the most meaningful trends from the survey, particularly those with strategic implications for firm leadership. From shifting investment priorities to stagnating real compensation, the data tells a nuanced story—one in which COOs are

indispensable drivers of law firm performance, but whose roles and rewards are still catching up to the demands placed upon them.

As these demands continue to grow, so too does the recognition of the COO's central role in law firm success. "COOs have long been important for law firm success," says Michael Motyka, Chief Operating Officer at Marshall, Gerstein & Borun. "In recent years, the role has become indispensable. COOs drive firm performance and provide strategic focus in the face of accelerating change."

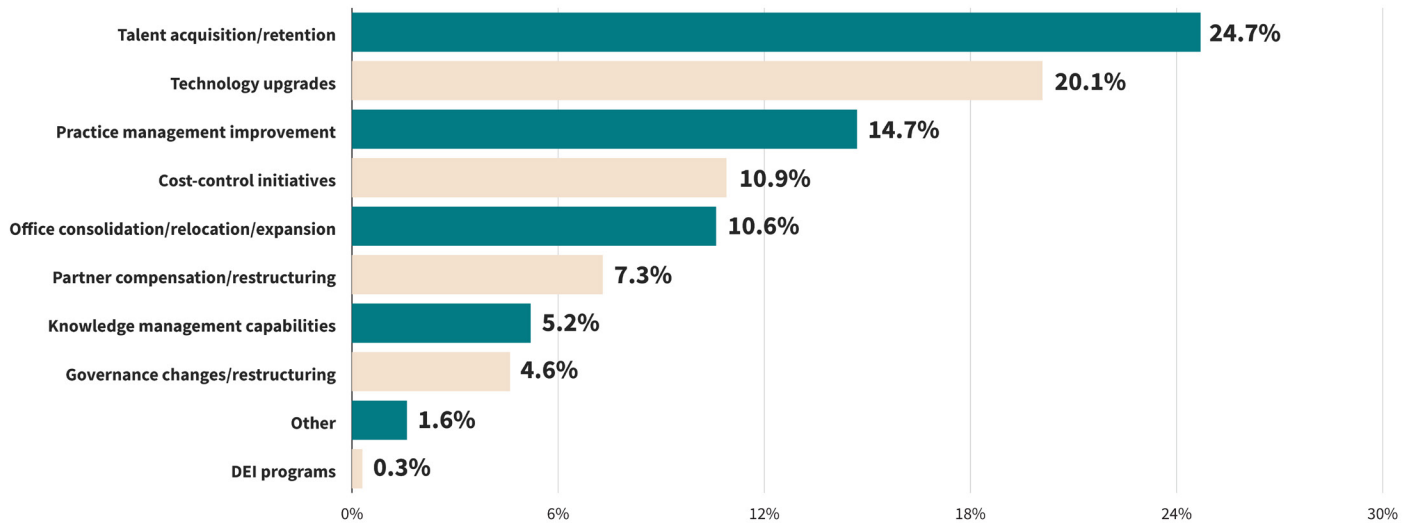
Key Performance Indicators and Pain Points

The survey reveals that, despite ongoing economic uncertainty, law firm business leaders remain focused on long-term strategic priorities. Respondents overwhelmingly selected talent acquisition and retention and technology upgrades as their top firmwide initiatives. These two categories lead all others, indicating that the people-and-platforms formula continues to define law firm success in the eyes of operational leadership. "Exceptional legal talent equipped with practical and effective technology is crucial for ensuring client satisfaction," says Motyka.

Interestingly, cost control—which might be expected to dominate in an environment of budget tightening and softening demand—ranked just fourth. Even lower was office consolidation, placing fifth, suggesting that while firms have adapted to hybrid work and may be rethinking their real estate footprint, it's not at the top of the strategic agenda for most respondents.

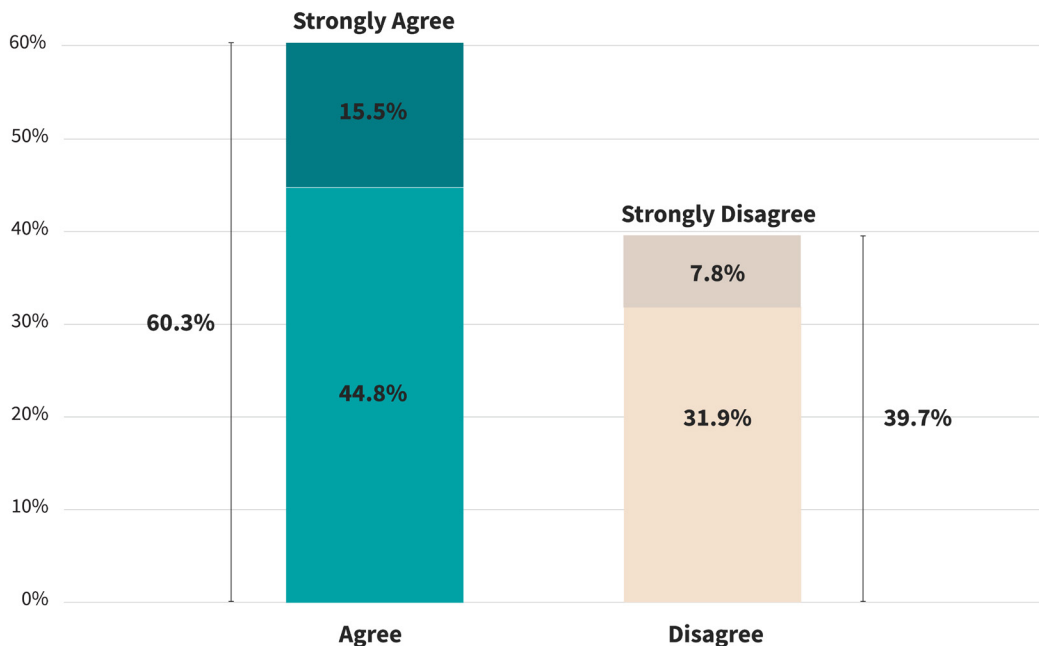
*The **full report** (60+ pages of anonymous, aggregated data) is provided only to those COOs/EDs/ Firm Managers who complete the short, secure survey. This selective report highlights certain findings from the full report.*

Key Initiatives For 2025



When it comes to pain points, e-billing and compliance with outside counsel guidelines remain major operational challenges. More than 60% of respondents (who say they are involved enough to know) identified these as significant pain points. This indicates continued friction in billing processes and client-mandated compliance protocols, especially in firms serving large corporate clients.

Complying With E-Billing And Outside Counsel Guidelines Is A Significant Pain Point For Our Firm



COO Survey

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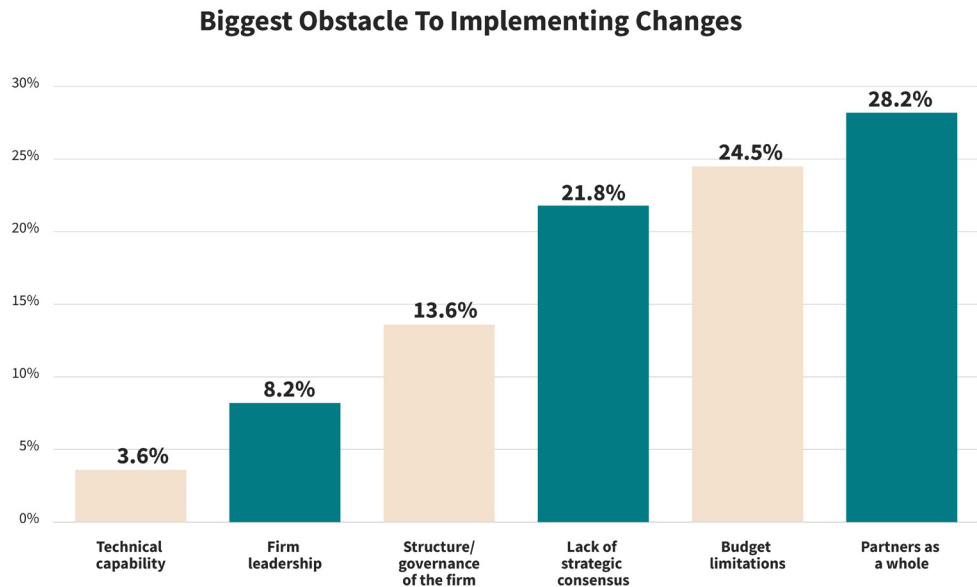
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Perhaps the most stubborn hurdle, however, is cultural. Respondents see their own partners as the biggest obstacle to implementing change, even more so than constraints like time or lack of strategic consensus. It is worth noting that respondents do feel supported by firm leadership—they chose “partners as a whole” as an obstacle at a much higher rate than firm leadership.

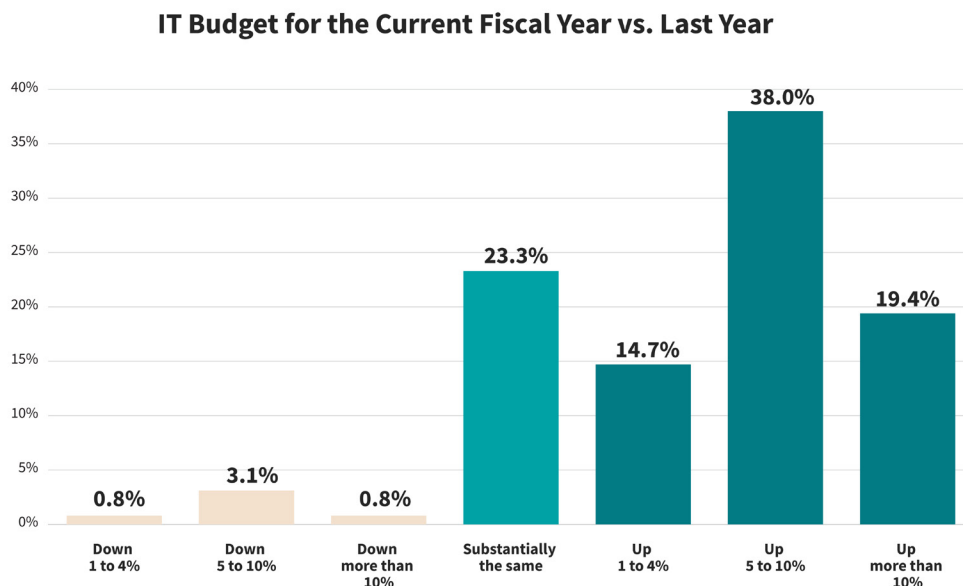
Melissa Prince, Chief of Legal Operations at Ice Miller, believes that the problem may be due to the dynamic among a large number of partners, all of whom have some influence. “It can be hard to get consensus just because there are so many different voices in the room,” she says.



Overall, these responses point to a picture of a group of law firm leaders focused on growth and modernization but still grappling with traditional law firm dynamics that slow or complicate change.

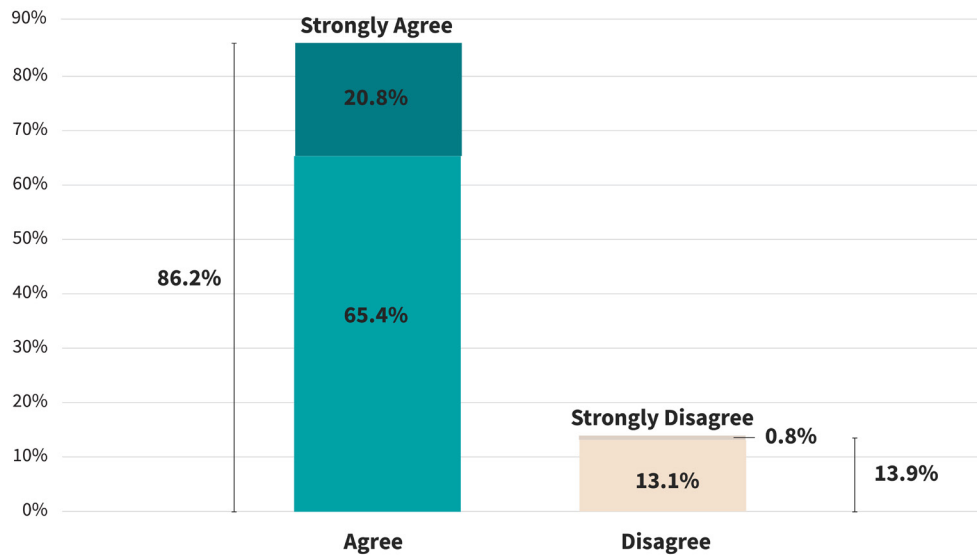
Impacts of Technology and AI

Technology—especially emerging AI capabilities—continues to play a prominent role in law firm operations, though expectations remain grounded. For starters, most respondents anticipate an increase in their IT budgets, with more than a third expecting growth in the 5–10% range and an additional fifth expecting increases of greater than 10%. This suggests that, even amid economic uncertainty, firms are continuing to invest in technology as a strategic priority. Operational leaders appear to be maintaining or expanding their tech spend to support efficiency, security, and innovation, particularly as interest in AI-driven tools continues to grow.



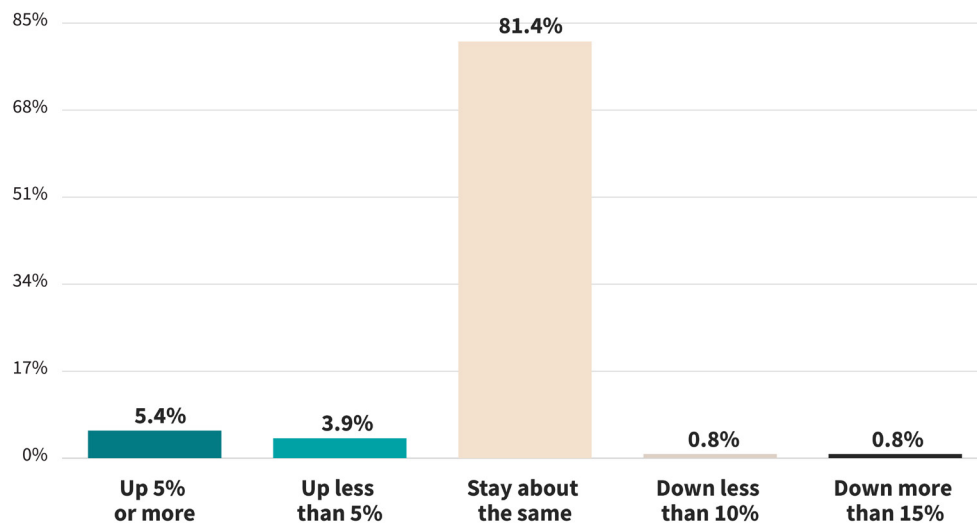
Despite the expected expansion, a strong majority of respondents (86.2%) already believe they have access to the right technology to do their jobs effectively, though a meaningful minority still report gaps in tooling. This suggests that while most firms do see room for improvement, most have made considerable progress in tech enablement.

I Have Access To The Right Technology To Do My Job



Nevertheless, more than 80% of survey respondents expect administrative headcount to be unaffected by the advent and use of GenAI over the next two years, with slightly more expecting their staff to grow than shrink. This finding contradicts some of the public hype around AI-driven job displacement and points instead to a more incremental integration of GenAI into law firm workflows.

Considering Your Firm’s Administrative Staff Headcount, Over The Next 24 Months, How Will That Headcount Likely Change Because Of The Use Of Large Language Models, Such As ChatGPT, Anthropic, Claude, Llama, Or Gemini?



What Really Drives COO Compensation—and Retention—in Law Firms?

Jennifer Johnson
CEO
Calibrate Consulting, Inc.



David Schaefer
Managing Director
Calibrate Consulting, Inc.



As part of our executive search work in the legal industry, Calibrate has partnered with Blickstein Group on this survey to better understand what drives COO pay and retention in today's legal market. While data continues to be collected, the results so far—along with consistent themes we've seen in executive searches and candidate interviews—point to several emerging trends in how COOs are compensated and retained in today's legal market.

Disclaimer: The quotes included in this article are paraphrased and anonymized reflections of commentary received in the course of executive interviews, candidate assessments, and confidential conversations. They are representative of industry sentiment but not attributed to specific individuals or firms.

Compensation Tracks with Profitability and Scope

The highest-paid COOs consistently work in firms with strong financial performance. In fact, our experiences, supported by early responses, suggest that COO compensation is more directly tied to profits per equity partner (PPEP) and revenue per lawyer (RPL) than to firm size or geographic footprint.

“At firms where the numbers are strong, the COO is seen less as overhead and more as an accelerator. We pay accordingly because we want someone who can drive performance—not just maintain operations.”

Compensation is also strongly linked to the scope of the COO's authority. COOs who manage all or most of the firm's administrative functions—finance, IT, talent, marketing, operations—and who report to the firm chair or managing partner typically command more competitive packages. A meaningful seat at the executive or management committee table is often the tipping point.

“My comp went up when I got a seat on the exec committee. Before that, I was just ‘operations support.’ Once I became part of the strategy team, everything changed—including how the partners viewed me.”

Retention Hinges on Authority and Autonomy

While compensation may attract top candidates, authority, autonomy, and trust are what keep them in the role. High-functioning COOs report the greatest job satisfaction when they are empowered to lead—not merely to implement.

“The reason I’ve stayed over a decade is simple. The managing partner trusts me to run the business side. I have the space to lead, make decisions, and push change.”

Conversely, where COOs are excluded from strategic decisions or undercut by unclear lines of authority, retention becomes fragile.

“I didn’t leave for more money—I left because I had no real authority. I was asked to solve problems but wasn’t given the tools or decision rights to actually fix anything.”

This pattern is increasingly common. In a competitive market, COOs often leave not for better titles, but for roles where their leadership is recognized, valued, and enabled.

Most Firms Don’t Reevaluate the Role—Until It’s Vacant

A striking trend emerging from our ongoing research is that most law firms do not reassess the COO role unless or until there's a vacancy. Few conduct regular performance reviews or realign the scope of the position with the firm's evolving needs—despite changes in scale, strategy, or market complexity.

“We hadn’t thought much about the role until our COO announced he was retiring. Only then did we realize we had an opportunity to define what we actually need—not just fill the old job.”

This reactive mindset creates unnecessary risk. Without intentional planning, firms may miss opportunities to elevate the role, retain strong performers, or future-proof their leadership team.

A Strategic Imperative

The COO role is no longer limited to back-office management. In firms that embrace modern leadership structures, the COO serves as a strategic partner to the firm's lawyers, helping to navigate complexity, execute strategy, and improve performance across every aspect of operations.

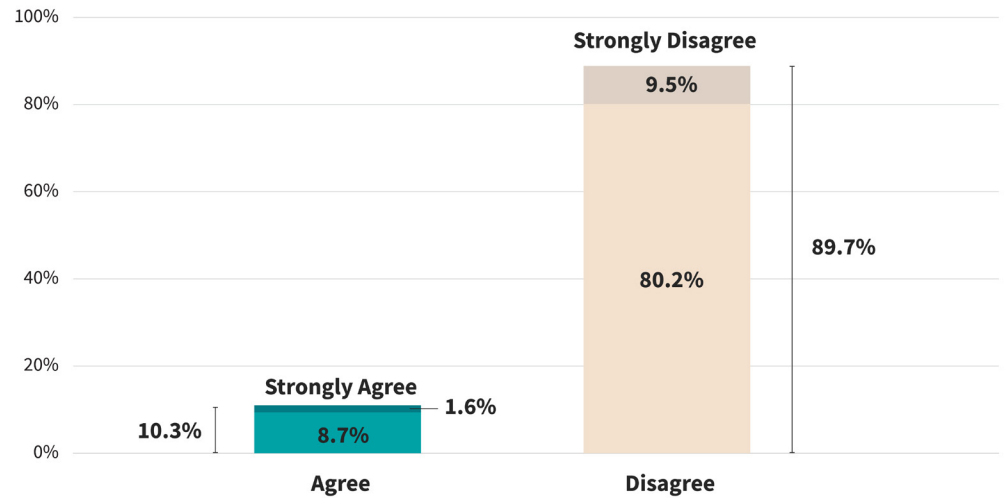
While full survey results will be released later this year, our early observations suggest this: Firms that invest in empowered, strategically integrated COOs—not just well-paid ones—will be better positioned to retain leadership talent and succeed in the evolving legal landscape.

This view is reinforced by the relatively few respondents expecting a significant impact on firm revenue from GenAI in the short term. While some foresee modest gains, almost 90% disagree that “Wider adoption of GenAI will cause a reduction in our revenue over the next 24 months.”

Altogether, the data paints a picture of firms that are embracing technology—particularly AI—with measured expectations. Respondents are pragmatic:

investing in core systems, experimenting with new capabilities, and watching the impact of GenAI unfold rather than racing to adopt it wholesale.

Wider Adoption Of GenAI Will Cause A Reduction In Our Revenue Over The Next 24 Months

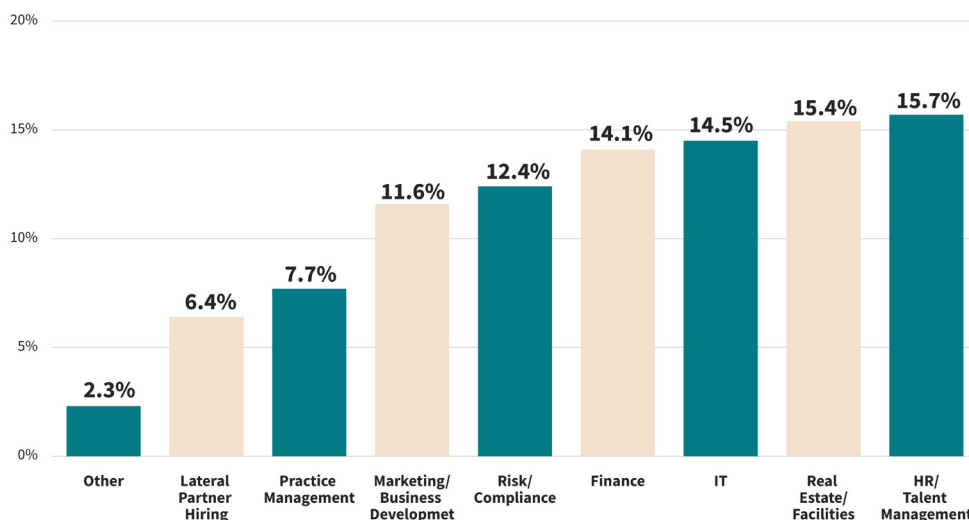


COO Roles and Responsibilities

The report provides a window into the roles and responsibilities of law firm COOs and other lead administrative executives, showing both the breadth of their duties and how they allocate their time.

Respondents hold direct responsibility for a wide range of operational areas. Unsurprisingly, HR/talent management and real estate/facilities top the list, reflecting the COO’s central role in managing people and physical infrastructure. But many also report oversight of IT, finance, marketing/business development, and practice management, underscoring the multifaceted nature of the position. In fact, the typical respondent claimed to be directly responsible for six different disciplines. This broad scope confirms that today’s law firm COOs are far more than back-office managers—they are cross-functional leaders at the center of firm operations.

Direct Responsibilities



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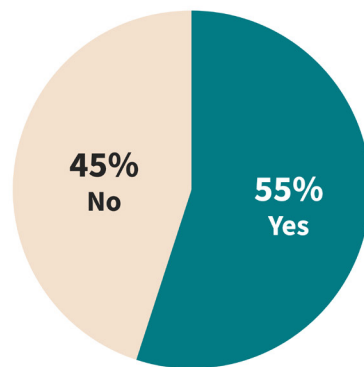
Leadership Advisory

Increase profitability and drive sustainable growth through the implementation of firmwide strategies and infrastructures aligned with your firm's strategic direction.

It is unclear however, whether law firm stakeholders are aware of this broad scope, since only 45% of respondents do not have a written job description or mandate. The lack of formal job documentation for nearly half of respondents suggests some ambiguity remains in how these roles are defined and perceived within their firms.

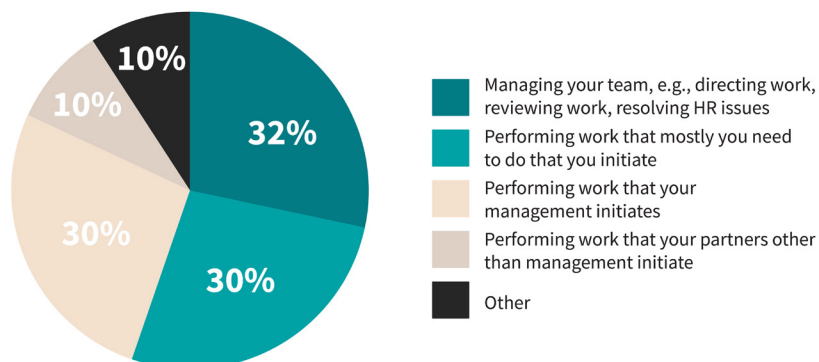
“Many have strategic responsibilities but are still required to manage day-to-day operations that take up time,” says Ice Miller’s Prince. “One often overlooked factor is the reporting structure. When the COO is also responsible for finance, he or she often ends up spending a lot of time focusing on the financials. When the CFO does not report to the COO, the COO often has more time for strategic endeavors.”

Do You Have A Written Job Description Or Mandate?



Respondents divide their time fairly evenly across three main activity types: managing their teams (31.7%), self-directed work (30%), and initiatives driven by firm management (30%). This balanced distribution reflects a role that requires both strategic execution and people management, while also supporting leadership directives. Notably, work initiated by partners outside of firm management accounts for only 10% of respondents’ time, indicating that while COOs support the broader partnership, their focus remains squarely on internal operations and management-driven priorities.

Time Spent Per Activity

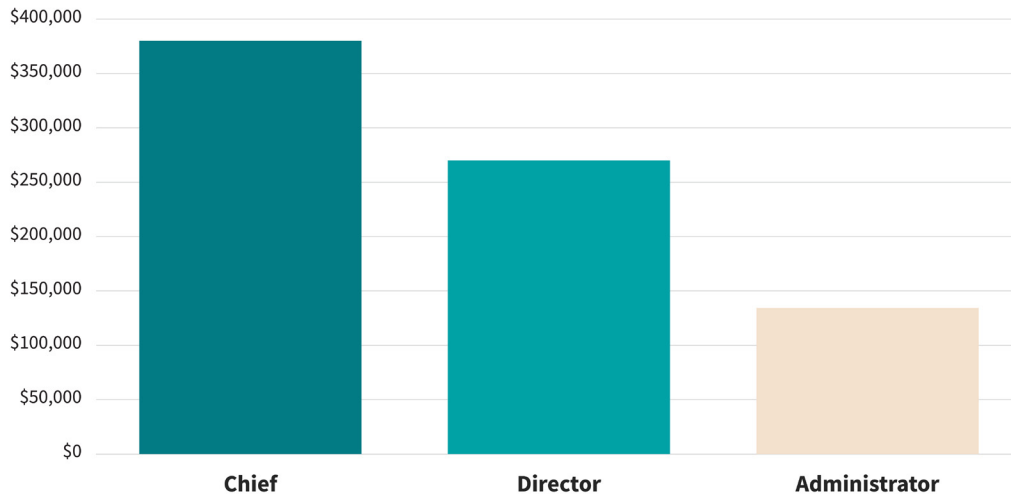


Together, these figures portray law firm COOs as versatile, high-impact professionals managing a wide range of responsibilities, often with limited structural clarity but with significant autonomy and leadership influence.

Compensation Highlights

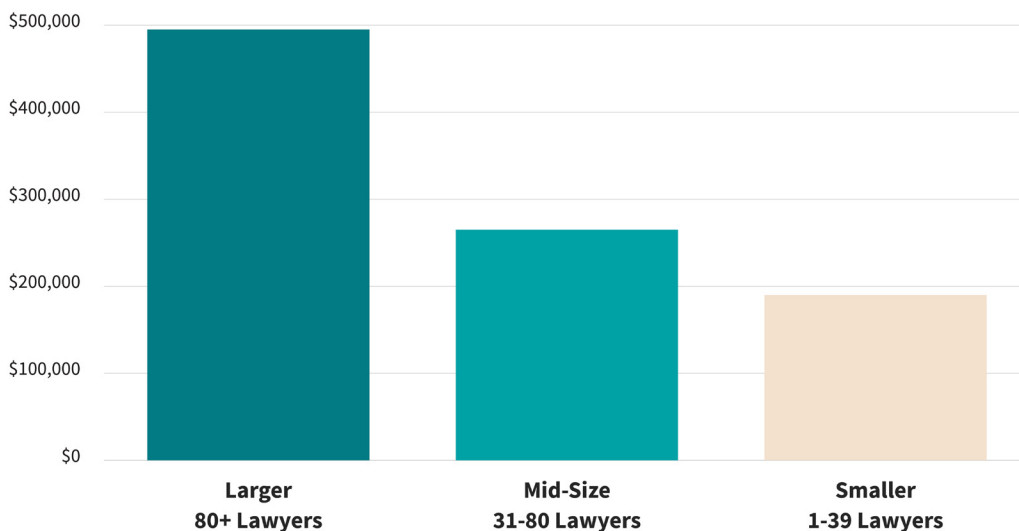
The survey collected extensive compensation data (available only to those who participate in the [SURVEY](#)), but several highlights stand out. Median total cash compensation improves greatly with title, with those holding a “Chief” title reporting a median of \$380,000, compared to \$270,000 for “Directors” and just \$134,391 for “Administrators.” This wide spread reflects not only differences in responsibility but also the growing tendency for higher-performing firms to assign “Chief” titles to their top administrative leaders.

Median Base Salary By Title



There is also a strong correlation between firm size and compensation. Respondents at the smallest firms (under 31 lawyers) report a median total compensation of \$190,000, while those at the largest firms (81 lawyers and up) report a median of \$495,000—more than double. This stark difference highlights how compensation scales with firm complexity and resources.

Median Base Salary By Firm Size



INTEGRATING AI WHEN HUMAN TALENT GETS COSTLY

Dominic Rovano
Partner
Armanino



Kelsey Campbell
Director
Armanino



When the cost of human talent becomes prohibitive, AI offers cost-effective alternatives. Some firms report using Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT and Claude, to supplement or reduce their administrative workload. However when asked by the Blickstein Group Law Firm COO Survey, “Considering your firm’s administrative staff headcount, over the next 24 months, how will that headcount likely change because of the use of Large Language Models,” out of 129 responses over 90 of them responded that it would stay the same. This view reflects a sentiment of strategic prioritization rather than outright rejection of the technology.

Firms actively deploy AI to create use cases, such as reducing hours spent on routine HR tasks, managing internal communications, and improving operational reporting. The goal is efficiency—not replacement. By offloading repetitive tasks to AI systems, firms free up valuable employee time, redirecting human enterprise to high-value, human-interaction tasks. That distinction allows even smaller firms to scale operations without entirely upending their workforce framework.

The Rising AI Skills Gap

While according to the Blickstein Group survey, investment in technology is a top-two priority for COOs, there are still some obstacles in implementing AI-based systems. Here’s how we are seeing clients implement AI. Some forward-thinking firms are already addressing this gap proactively. They are establishing onboarding programs specifically designed to train cross-functional teams on AI deployment and building in-house AI centers of excellence. These centers focus not only on ensuring compliance and integration but also on teaching staff to adapt as advanced AI technology evolves.

Firms Supplementing the AI Gap

For companies unable to hire talent with advanced technical backgrounds, partnerships with external vendors have acted as a stopgap measure, as revealed by the report. Some firms rely on third-party AI service providers to develop and deploy tailored systems into their workflows. For example, we have been seeing clients use AI to speed up their client intake and billing processes. Others have self-reported increasing their IT budgets to focus on targeted hiring of AI-specific project managers or developers. These efforts reflect the growing recognition that effective AI integration doesn’t just require a cutting-edge platform; it needs human intelligence to guide its role in an organization responsibly.

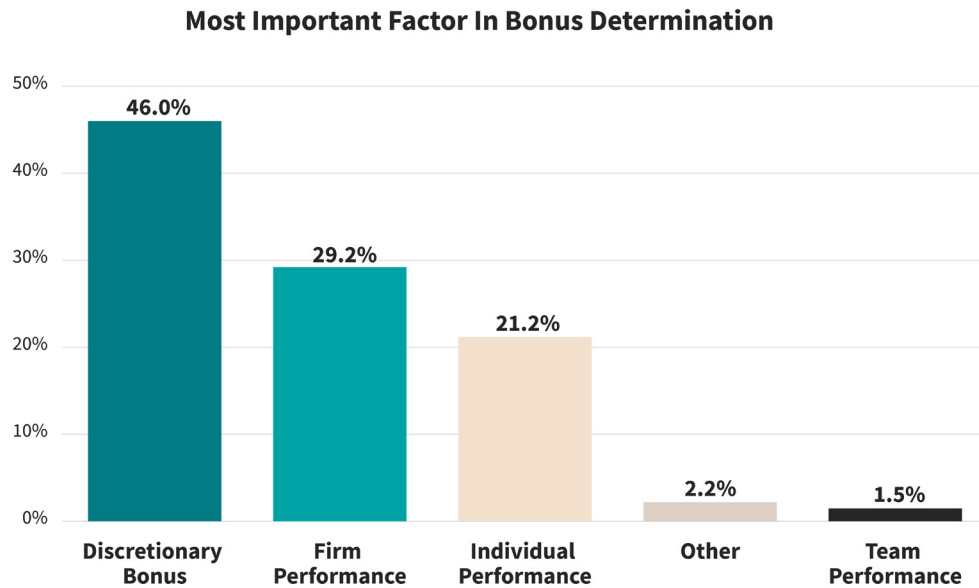
The Human-Tech Balance in 2025

At its core, the story of AI’s role in business is a story of balance. While AI bridges certain gaps—including screening applicants or automating repetitive functions—enterprises must still rely on human ingenuity to drive cultural transformation and oversee long-term strategy. The combination of focusing on upskilling employees, adopting agile AI solutions, and working with outsourced vendors offers strategic benefits that align talent management and technological adoption.

For firms instituting this balance, 2025 will be less about choosing between humans and technology and more about learning how to lift both to their optimum potential.

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Approximately 15% of total cash compensation is paid in the form of bonuses, and the survey provides insight into how those bonuses are determined. While individual performance and firm performance both factor heavily, the most common response (46%) was simply that the bonus is discretionary. It is also worth pointing out the very small percentage whose bonus is based primarily on team performance. Firm performance and individual performance are much more important factors.



Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2025 Blickstein Group Law Firm COO Survey paints a picture of operational leaders who are strategically focused on talent, technology, and long-term growth. They are navigating cultural resistance to change and grappling with persistent pain points like e-billing compliance. While firms are cautiously optimistic—evident in steady IT budget increases and measured experimentation with GenAI—these investments are not yet translating into significant revenue shifts or workforce reductions.

However, despite these forward-looking initiatives, compensation for COOs and other senior administrators has not grown, at least when compared to inflation. Median total compensation rose just 5.6%, while the Consumer Price Index for 2024 was 2.9%. This modest growth suggests that many COOs are not experiencing much of an increase in real income, even as their responsibilities—and the complexity of law firm operations—continue to grow.



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