FORTUNE COO SUMMIT

COO Summit Summary

THE OPERATING MODEL IS CHANGING. In 2026, the COO role is being reshaped by the pressure to deploy AI at scale while managing volatility across technology, labor, and geopolitics. As businesses confront a more complex operating environment—one defined by rapid advances in automation, uneven productivity gains, supply-chain disruption, and rising expectations from customers and employees alike—the COO remit is expanding again. Against this backdrop, Fortune held its third annual COO Summit in Scottsdale, AZ, bringing together senior leaders for networking, insightful panel conversations, and interviews with COOs, CEOs, and other executives navigating this shift firsthand. Together, the conversations made clear that COOs are no longer just executing strategy; they are redesigning work, rebuilding resilience, and helping determine what leadership looks like in the next era of enterprise performance. Together, we explored these key trends:

- **Scaling AI and automation responsibly**
- **Resilience, disruption, and growth under pressure**
- **Leadership development and the COO-to-CEO path**
- **The expanding mandate of the modern COO**

SCALING AI AND AUTOMATION RESPONSIBLY

AI HAS MOVED BEYOND the pilot phase, but the Summit made clear that scaling it inside real organizations is harder than the hype suggests. Speakers repeatedly emphasized that the challenge is no longer whether companies will use AI, but whether they can operationalize it with enough clarity, trust, and managerial discipline to create real value.

Cognizant CEO Ravi Kumar S warned that many enterprises are still measuring the wrong things, arguing that "for the last two years, how you consumed tokens, how many tokens you consumed was a vanity metric ... I don't think you should equate this to the number of paid hours. I don't think you should equate this to productivity," he stated.

Amid intense debate about AI-driven job losses, Kumar S also pushed back on the idea that the AI era is purely subtractive, especially for early-career talent. He noted that Cognizant hired 20,000 entry-level graduates last year and expects that number to grow, even as AI reshapes task bundles across roles. "There was a little bit of fearmongering from reading about the fact that there's going to be a collapse of jobs. I think there will be more jobs." For COOs, that stance underscores a broader Summit theme: the real work is redesigning roles and development paths, not abandoning the next generation of workers.

Jason Kidd, COO of Chipotle, shared one of the Summit's clearest examples of practical impact: the company's AI hiring assistant, Ava Cado, has cut time-to-hire from 12 days to four, with about 30% of interview scheduling now happening after hours. Yet Kidd stressed that the goal is not labor elimination, but better allocation of human time: "Everything we've added from an AI standpoint—we've reinvested those hours into the restaurant," he commented.

Other executives focused on the harder work of redesigning how people and machines operate together. Eric Kelleher,

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>
> **RAVI KUMAR S**
> CEO OF COGNIZANT

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president and COO of Okta, said companies remain in denial about the most difficult part of the AI transition: changing the way managers think about labor, budgets, and org charts. He argued that enterprises must move beyond headcount planning and start designing work that explicitly includes digital workers alongside human ones. "We evolve from workforce planning to work planning," Kelleher said.

The Summit also surfaced how uneven adoption remains, even in companies deep in the AI business. Nike's Executive Vice President and COO Venkatesh Alagirisamy described the risk of "speed without clarity," even as Nike's internal learning platform logged 20,000 digital courses taken and 3,000 live training sessions in the past year. Olivia Nottebohm, COO of Box, said that when her company looked at internal usage, the tools were there but the skills were not, prompting a companywide effort to ensure employees were not left behind. Across sessions, the message was consistent: AI may be powerful, but its success depends on operating redesign, human judgment, and relentless capability-building.

RESILIENCE, DISRUPTION, AND GROWTH

OPERATIONS LEADERS are now managing in permanent disruption. Conversations at the Summit reflected a world in which tariffs, component shortages, geopolitical conflict, and demand shocks are no longer episodic events, but the normal backdrop of the job. Brittany Bagley, who serves as both COO and CFO of Axon, captured the mood succinctly: "There's just sort of one thing after the next."

That shift has practical consequences. Jackie Zhu, senior vice president and North America supply chain officer of Schneider Electric, described how disruption has become systemic across sourcing, manufacturing, logistics, and customer delivery—forcing operators to build for speed and flexibility rather than lowest cost alone. Schneider Electric now runs real-time footprint modeling to reroute trade flows away from high-tariff paths when policy changes, sometimes overnight, while Axon has rebuilt its supply chain around resilience even as memory chip prices rose 4x to 6x in recent months. Leaders stressed that this new environment demands both operational agility and emotional steadiness: customers may never see the labor required to preserve continuity, but the supply-chain team is carrying that load every day. The operating insight was clear: resilience now means scenario planning, optionality, and the willingness to spend more upfront for flexibility later.

Growth, meanwhile, is coming from companies that use technology to absorb friction for both customers and employees. At Rakuten International, COO Adrienne Down Coulson described an AI agent inside Slack that answers questions about the platform's 17 million members in roughly 20 seconds, replacing what had often taken weeks of cross-functional back-and-forth. Tom Maguire, vice president and head of operations at Instacart, said AI is raising customer expectations around speed and personalization, especially in real-time substitutions and service quality. Together, these examples suggested that in 2026, growth is increasingly tied to how fast organizations can simplify complexity without passing that burden on to the customer.

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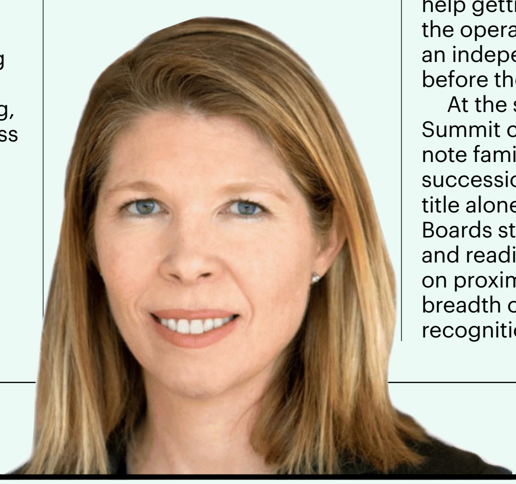

RETHINKING LEADERSHIP

THE COO-TO-CEO PATH remains real, but Summit speakers were careful to distinguish access from inevitability. Dennis Woodside, CEO and president of Freshworks, told attendees that if you hold the COO title, it often implies that the board and CEO see you as potentially on the path to the top job—but he also argued that ambition must be made explicit and matched by excellence in the current role. His advice was practical: say out loud that you want to be CEO, ask for help getting there, and use the operating seat to build an independent point of view before the opportunity arrives.

At the same time, the Summit carried a cautionary note familiar to every succession conversation: the title alone guarantees nothing. Boards still make the final call, and readiness depends less on proximity to power than on breadth of judgment, pattern recognition, and the ability

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to lead through ambiguity. Speakers repeatedly returned to the idea that leadership development must move at least as fast as the environment itself, which now changes under executives' feet.

That is why practical learning habits surfaced so often in the conversations—getting hands-on with new technology, pressure-testing assumptions with peers, and using forums like the Summit to widen perspective. Woodside urged leaders to stay close to real business problems rather than abstractions, arguing that the companies seeing real value from AI are those with business leaders deeply engaged in solving concrete operating issues. In a year when many executives are being asked to question whether the skills that made them successful still apply, the leadership advantage may come less from certainty than from learning agility.

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF THE MODERN COO

THE COO ROLE IS expanding across strategy, culture, technology, and finance. If one thread connected the Summit's most compelling discussions, it was that COOs are increasingly the executives asked to integrate fragmented systems—human and digital, financial and operational, strategic and tactical. Bagley's blended role as COO and CFO of Axon illustrated how tightly finance and operations are now linked in a world of tariff whiplash, volatile input costs, and rapid resource reallocation. Okta's Kelleher, meanwhile, described a remit that stretches from operating reviews to budget design to cultural change, as he pushes managers to think not only about headcount but also about the total mix of labor and automation.

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> COO AT U.S. SOCCER

Other sessions reinforced that the modern COO is increasingly a chief transformation officer in all but name. At IBM, Joanne Wright, senior vice president of transformation and operations, described a two-year end-to-end transformation that delivered a 30% improvement in the company's operating model—roughly $4.5 billion—by starting with the blank-page question of what the company could stop doing, not simply what it could digitize. At U.S. Soccer, COO Dan Helfrich described using AI to help scout between 50 million and 70 million teenagers globally, while still relying on human evaluators for the judgment calls machines cannot yet make. These examples showed the COO as translator and orchestrator: the executive who can turn new tools into new systems and new systems into institutional advantage.

In today's era of disruption and opportunity, the Summit showed that COOs are more than second-in-commands. They are strategic partners, culture shapers, operating architects, and, increasingly, the leaders preparing to steer their companies into the future. As organizations confront AI deployment, labor redesign, geopolitical risk, and rising performance expectations all at once, the modern COO is becoming not just central to execution, but central to enterprise leadership itself.

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