

**The Complex Role of a Chief Operating Officer**

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This past week, I had the invaluable opportunity to sit down with Rusty Bentley, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of the company I work for, Access Development. During our conversation, Rusty graciously shared insights into his remarkable journey and shed light on the multifaceted role of a COO. As I reflect on our discussion, I am struck by the wealth of knowledge and experience Rusty brings to his position, as well as the profound impacts he has on shaping the operational landscape of our organization.

In this paper, I aim to encapsulate the essence of my interview with Rusty while delving into the intricacies of the role of a Chief Operating Officer. From exploring Rusty's career trajectory to dissecting the day-to-day responsibilities of a COO, this paper will serve as a comprehensive guide to understanding one of the key leadership roles within a company. By intertwining Rusty's personal narrative with broader insights into the profession, I'll share the strategic importance and transformative potential of the Chief Operating Officer in driving organizational success. So, without further ado, let us embark on a journey through the world of executive leadership and operational excellence.

**Job Description:**

The COO can mean many different things and have a variety of responsibilities, depending on the company. According to an article on COO's published in 2021 on Masterclass, "a chief operating officer (COO) is a corporate executive in charge of overseeing the operational functions of a business, which might include staffing, administration, and company strategy." LinkedIn describes the role of the COO as, "...second in command, reporting to the chief executive officer (CEO). While a CEO is concerned with long-term business goals, the COO is focused more on implementing company strategies into daily operations to meet objectives."

Rusty, the Chief Operating Officer of Access Development, is the cornerstone of the company's operational excellence. His role is multifaceted, encompassing a diverse range of responsibilities that are crucial for the smooth functioning of the organization. From overseeing the day-to-day operations across various departments including accounting, IT, sales, member services, and HR, to ensuring strategic alignment with the company's goals and objectives, it's safe to say that Rusty's plate is always full.

**General Career Path:**

In his Forbes article titled "The Making Of A Chief Operating Officer," John Knotts, a Forbes Councils Member, outlines key elements of the career path leading to a COO role. He explains that COOs typically possess a rich operations background, ideally having worked in at least five different companies across various roles and positions. This background may include leadership positions such as director or vice president. Some may even have started as a COO in a smaller company.

Rusty's journey to becoming a COO is a testament to the diverse paths one can take in the corporate world. Starting his career in sales at UnitedHealthcare, Rusty quickly demonstrated leadership potential. When he came to Access, he was able to use his strong sales skills to transition into sales management and eventually into sales management-operations. His ascent up the corporate ladder was marked by dedication, perseverance, and a relentless pursuit of excellence.

**General Education Experience:**

The educational requirements for a career as a COO vary depending on the industry and company. In the same Forbes article as discussed above, "The Making Of A Chief Operating Officer," Knotts explains that strategic expertise is a qualification that a strong COO would

need. COOs are described as architects, instigators, and change champions for company strategy. Therefore, they often hold an MBA or similar qualification in strategic business leadership. Additionally, they possess significant experience in change leadership, possibly supported by a change management certification. While the CEO owns the company's strategy, a strong COO leads its development and execution. Additionally, obtaining certifications in areas such as project management, Six Sigma, or supply chain management can further enhance a candidate's qualifications for COO positions.

Rusty's educational background in accounting from the University of Utah provided him with a solid foundation, but it was his passion for sales and economics that truly set him apart. His double major in economics emphasized the importance of understanding economic principles in his role as a strategic leader.

**Average Salary:**

The average salary for a COO varies based on factors such as the size and industry of the company, the candidate's level of experience and education, and the geographic location of the position. With Rusty's extensive experience and leadership in a company with just about 125 employees, it's safe to assume that his salary would be substantial and commensurate with his level of responsibility and expertise. According to data from PayScale, the median annual salary for COOs in the United States in 2024 is approximately \$147,713, with salaries ranging from \$78,000 to \$251,000 as base pay, with the potential to earn more.

**Career Outlook:**

The career outlook for COOs is generally positive, with strong demand for talented executives who can effectively manage and optimize business operations. As companies continue to focus on efficiency, innovation, and strategic growth, the role of the COO is likely to

remain critical in driving organizational success. Rusty's narrative reflects this optimism, as he has steadily climbed the corporate ladder within his company over the span of 19 years. The company's growth from around 50 employees when he started to just about 125 now indicates opportunities for advancement and career stability.

**Bio of Someone in the Profession:**

As I've discussed through the paper, Rusty's journey from starting in sales to becoming the COO of Access showcases the career trajectory of someone in an executive position within a company. His story highlights the importance of mentorship and influential figures in one's career, citing individuals like Kevin Markham, an executive at his first job in his career, United Healthcare, and Larry Maxfield, the majority shareholder and founder of Access Development, as pivotal in his professional development. Rusty's commitment to continuous learning, adaptability, and strategic thinking has propelled him to the forefront of his industry.

While doing research for this paper, I stumbled across a woman named Rebecca Simmons on LinkedIn. She has a PhD, MBA, and is a Chief Operating Officer at a company called Riverlane, where she navigates the intricate realm of quantum computing. In her post, titled, "How I Lost and Found Myself in the COO Role," she candidly acknowledges the dynamic nature of the COO role, shaped by the evolving needs of the company and the broader industry landscape.

Initially drawn to the role as a proactive "doer," Simmons found fulfillment in diving into a myriad of tasks, ranging from administrative duties to strategic decision-making. However, as Riverlane's footprint expanded, she found herself transitioning towards a role focused on fostering collaboration and alignment across various functions and offices.

In her own words, Simmons shares, "I've learned that I no longer need huge swathes of work to feel happy and sustained." Embracing her role as a connector, motivator, and strategic thinker, she steers the company towards its objectives while entrusting day-to-day operations to her capable team. Simultaneously, she eagerly embraces opportunities for external partnerships and international expansion.

It can be seen that Simmons' narrative offers a personal insight into the dynamic journey of a COO, marked by adaptation, self-discovery, and a relentless pursuit of organizational excellence. Her story serves as a reminder of the importance of flexibility and continuous growth in leadership within today's ever-changing business landscape.

**Pros:**

In discussing the pros, Rusty offered three valuable insights. Firstly, he emphasized the privilege of having a seat at the decision-making table, highlighting the opportunity to contribute insights during high-level discussions and influence company direction. This allows him to understand the broader context of company operations and effectively influence decisions. Additionally, Rusty explained that his participation in executive and board meetings continually provides him with valuable insights into the company's workings, including its successes and challenges. This comprehensive understanding enables him to make informed decisions and devise effective strategies. Lastly, Rusty highlighted his significant professional growth, from a regular employee to an executive role, demonstrating his dedication and expertise. His increasing levels of involvement reflect the company's recognition of his contributions and his commitment to continuous improvement.

**Cons:**

On the other side of the spectrum with the cons of his job, Rusty highlighted two significant challenges. Firstly, he explained that as the COO overseeing a large team, it is challenging to have individualized interactions with each team member. This limited direct engagement can hinder his ability to deeply understand their perspectives and concerns, which he values greatly for effective leadership. He also expressed a desire for more hands-on involvement, reminiscent of his earlier roles where he worked closely with smaller, dedicated teams. In his current position, the focus on managerial tasks often detracts from his ability to engage in the collaborative problem-solving he enjoys, leading to a shift in focus away from the interpersonal aspects of his work.

**Keys to Success in the Business World**

Success in the COO role, as outlined in the article, "Second in Command: The Misunderstood Role of the Chief Operating Officer," from the Harvard Business Review, is underpinned by "the level of trust between the two individuals" - the CEO and COO. This trust is deemed "more crucial here than in any other business relationship," emphasizing its paramount importance. COOs must embody "true respect" for the CEO's strategic leadership, ensuring alignment with the organizational vision. This necessitates "check[ing] their egos at the door," as highlighted by the need for "an ego in check" to navigate the complexities of the role effectively. Additionally, COOs must maintain "an eye on execution," as CEOs rely on them to oversee implementation while focusing on broader strategic initiatives. Clear communication is imperative, with CEOs tasked with providing "real authority" and fostering an environment where the COO's voice is valued. By adhering to these principles and cultivating a trust-based

partnership, COOs can navigate the challenges of their role and drive organizational success in today's dynamic business landscape.

Success in an overall business career, according to Rusty, hinges on two pivotal factors: understanding people and consistently demonstrating commitment and hard work. In the end of our interview, he emphasized the significance of grasping human dynamics, advocating for being a "good person" and comprehending individual motivations and challenges. He explained that an important aspect of business he's learned from the company's founder, is the importance of valuing people over numbers. He also heavily emphasized the indispensable nature of showing up and following through, highlighting the value of unwavering commitment and diligence.

**My "Fit" with This Career:**

My assessment of how well-suited I am for a career as a COO depends on my personal strengths, interests, and career goals. I am naturally drawn to the opportunity to lead and influence strategic decision-making, drive operational excellence, and make a meaningful impact on the success of an organization, all of which are in that role. I am going to school to get a potential economics degree, but I firmly know I want an MBA. However, I also recognize the challenges and demands of the COO role, including the need for resilience, adaptability, and a willingness to continuously learn and grow. I need the experience before I can even level up to that job. Overall, while I believe I have the potential to excel in a COO position, I would need to carefully consider the demands and responsibilities of the role to ensure it aligns with my personal and professional aspirations. If you're so close to the top of the company in the COO role, I would view it as a potential stepping stone to the CEO role.



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