MARLIN HAWK

Going Beyond General Counsel:

Is the Chief Administrative Officer Role the New Pathway for Legal Executives?

Executive Summary

The role and influence of General Counsels (GC) and Chief Legal Officers (CLO) have seen significant expansion in recent years. Executive leaders require GCs and CLOs that can act as business partners and strategic advisors who serve as leaders not only for the legal department, but for the whole organization. As GCs gain prominence within the C-Suite, their mandates have grown to reflect their importance and the breadth of their impact. It is becoming increasingly common for GCs to assume responsibilities for corporate functions beyond their traditional remits of legal and compliance. As their functional responsibilities grow, the GC title may no longer be the pinnacle role for legal leaders within the C-Suite. Instead, some organizations have elevated their legal executive leaders into a broader level role within the executive leadership team: the Chief Administrative Officer.

While the CAO role itself is not necessarily new, what is emerging is the promotion of GCs and CLOs into this role. Of the current CAO population within the Fortune 500, more than 40% come from a legal background. From our research and client work in this space, we see three key drivers for organizations elevating GCs and CLOs into the CAO role: i) it is a key retention tool for GCs and CLOs, giving them greater breadth of responsibilities and a different voice at the leadership table; ii) the CAO role brings together disconnected functions, creates synergies and efficiencies that drive forward complex, enterprisewide projects and initiatives; and, iii) it reduces the number of direct reports into the CEO freeing up their time and management capacity.

Often a rising GC or CLO would naturally take on the CAO role as one of the key functional leaders in the business. The way the executive team views lawyers has significantly changed over time as the role has become increasingly strategic in nature, putting them in an advantageous position to take on the CAO role which requires great leadership, communication and complex problem solving. As an executive position with emerging prominence, the scope and responsibilities of a CAO can lack definition and consistency across organizations. In fact, the CAO archetype that best suits an organization is highly variable and dependent on the needs of an organization, its executive leadership team, as well as its size and maturity.

What makes a legal executive stand out as a viable candidate for the CAO can be found in their corporate experience as well as their standing in the organization. In the very nature of their roles, GCs and CLOs inspire confidence, balance risk, earn respect and elicit trust. They need to have empathy to understand the position of everyone around them, tenacity to build consensus, and drive to steer all parties towards a common conclusion. The GC or CLO has often - in the past - been assumed to be the apex of an in-house legal career. This trend demonstrates a path beyond the GC seat for those with the aptitude and interest to acquire broader business transformation and leadership responsibilities.

Today, just shy of one-fifth of Fortune 500 companies has a sitting CAO; of those, 82% were hired internally. We understand this to be a direct reflection of the three common drivers for hiring a CAO, as outlined above. As the role and its responsibilities become more clearly defined, and the value this position can bring to an organization is effectively articulated, we believe more companies will look externally, as well as internally, for its next CAO. Below we will explore the various CAO archetypes, bring greater clarity to why the CAO role adds value to an organization, and offer a viewpoint on why you will find the right candidate in the legal function.

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Methodology

This research paper references Marlin Hawk proprietary data, which analyzed the CAOs of Fortune 500 companies and large privately held organizations. The objective of this research exercise was to understand the prevalence and scope of the CAO role across 500 of the worlds' largest organizations, as well as the benefit of a corporate structure that includes a CAO.

This is the first annual study for Marlin Hawk in the CAO space and, by analyzing this over time, we aim to offer trends and predictions regarding the evolution of the CAO role. This paper also includes qualitative research gathered by Marlin Hawk from interviews with CAOs working globally and in the US.

Marlin Hawk is a global executive search and leadership advisory firm, aspiring to be the boutique partner of choice at the forefront of transformational change. Our mission is to empower our clients with data and insights to make diverse, inclusive, and impactful hires. Our expertise today is far-reaching across functions, sectors, and geographies; our history is rooted in technology and operations.

The legal, risk and compliance function has been extensively mapped and researched through our worldclass strategic intelligence capabilities and search mandates. The CAO role has been of increasing interest to our legal, risk and compliance partners as a gateway for legal executives to increase their influence within the C-Suite and directly with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO).





Why Might Your Organization Need a CAO?

The context and business drivers behind the appointment of an individual to be the CAO of their company will vary from company to company, depending on the sector, where the organization is in terms of size and maturity and how the CEO and their leadership team is evolving.

At the individual level, the organization may need to make a case for role expansion and succession planning of its GC (or equivalent legal executive) as a means of retention of this key leader. Historically, given the remit of such an executive and the specific capabilities required to run a legal department, the GC or CLO was often the final stop ahead of retirement. The landscape has fundamentally shifted with GCs now touching issues ranging across Environmental Social & Governance (ESG), data privacy, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) and cybersecurity - all critical to the success of today's corporation. Elevating your GC to the position of CAO allows them to gain more business leadership experience, with the idea of preparing them as a potential successor to even more senior positions within the organization.

At the leadership level, the appointment of a CAO could

fill a leadership void within the organization. Overseeing various departments such as HR, franchising, marketing, technology - in addition to legal, risk and compliance - means there is someone looking at the 'gray areas' between these otherwise potentially disconnected functions. This can lead to the alignment of strategy, people, and technology and having the right checks and balances in place. Additionally, the CAO's role can be expanded to include strategic business planning and working closely with the CEO on communication and branding efforts. Being the right-hand to the CEO to drive transformational change across administrative functions streamlines the leadership team resulting in fewer direct reports. This reduces the time burden on the CEO as well as improving cross-organization collaboration.

At the organizational level, the CAO's role can evolve based on real-time business needs. What starts out as a position that stitches together multiple siloed functions under one coherent strategy can turn into a task-oriented engine room of the business. The CAO role is a critical position that can help drive business success by providing continuity during times of change and uncertainty.

The CAO Archetype

The CAO archetype is often – although not exclusively - a rising GC or CLO who has the capacity to take on further responsibilities and a broader remit. Human Resources (HR), communications, and strategy are also areas of the business from where the CAO may ascend. However, for the purposes of this paper, the dynamics at play for the CAO to come from a legal background are the focus.

Currently, the CAO position is often considered a catchall role because the contributing factors needed for such a position can vary significantly. The horizontal visibility of the GC or CLO throughout an organization makes them uniquely positioned to bring together functional areas under one umbrella and further sharpen an organization's approach to risk management, compliance, and security. In a state of transformation and high-paced change, it is important to have leaders that can cut across an organization for continuity purposes and be part of strategic discussions when there are large problems to solve, or the company is undergoing a major transformation.

The CAO may have an expanded role beyond the typical mandate of a GC or CLO by having oversight over a range of functions. While there is no clear definition, and the responsibilities can change over time, depending on the company's needs and culture, our research indicates the breadth of functional areas covered by a CAO could include:

RISK MANAGEMENT

In their capacity as GC or CLO, the individual will have advised on the legal aspects of risk management and security issues but, in the role of CAO, they may take on responsibilities including identifying and managing risks to the organization, information security, cyber security and physical security.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND COMMUNICATIONS

While a GC or CLO may have worked in collaboration with communications functions, in some cases the CAO assumes responsibility for communications including government affairs, PR and strategic communications, branding and corporate communicates, internal communications and managing public disclosures.

LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE

While the domain of the GC or CLO, the CAO often still has a heavy focus on compliance and overall oversight of legal affairs, including contracts, regulatory, information security and privacy.

OPERATIONS AND MANAGEMENT

Depending on the size of the organization and how it is structured, the CAO may take on a more operational role including cross-functional coordination and involvement in operational problem-solving, real estate management, facilities management, supply chain management, and potentially assuming functions such as information technology, marketing and brand, and HR.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Increasingly GCs and CLOs are becoming involved in the ESG strategy of an organization. As a CAO, this can be taken a step further by assuming responsibilities for managing corporate social responsibility initiatives, overseeing social compliance, community engagement, philanthropy, and ensuring compliance with local laws and rules for employee treatment.

From our quantitative and qualitative research - in addition to anecdotal insights from our client work in the legal, risk and compliance space - we believe there are four archetypes for the CAO role. These are:

	PURPOSE / FUNCTIONS	RESPONSIBILITIES
THE IDENTITY CURATOR	A broadened remit to include all areas related to a company's reputation and impact. ESG, sustainability, CSR, community impact, EHS, public and government affairs	The CAO plays a crucial role in managing the organization's reputation and building positive relationships with stakeholders. This includes overseeing public affairs, strategic communications, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. By effectively managing the organization's image and engagement with external stakeholders, the CAO helps protect and enhance the company's reputation.
THE RISK MITIGATOR	A broadened remit to include everything related to risk, compliance, and security. Information security, cyber security, internal communications, PR, procurement	With an increasing focus on risk management and compliance, organizations benefit from having a dedicated CAO who can proactively identify, assess, and mitigate risks across various areas of the business. The CAO ensures compliance with legal and regulatory requirements, manages potential risks, and establishes appropriate risk mitigation strategies.
THE MULTI-FACETED ARCHITECT	A broadened remit to include all non- legal administrative functions. Marketing, HR, IT, franchising, partnerships	The CAO role can help align various administrative functions with the organization's strategic goals and objectives. By overseeing multiple areas such as legal, compliance, public affairs, risk management, and operations, the CAO ensures that these functions work in harmony to support the company's overall strategy. The CAO serves as a bridge between different departments and functions within the organization. They facilitate collaboration, information sharing, and decision-making across various teams, promoting a holistic and integrated approach to business operations.
THE INTEGRATED OPERATOR	A broadened remit to include operations and commercial activities where the title is interchangeable with that of the Chief Operating Officer (COO). All centralised and operational functions	In organizations with diverse administrative functions, having a CAO can help streamline operations by centralizing decision-making and coordination across different departments. This centralized approach improves efficiency, eliminates silos, and facilitates effective collaboration between departments. During periods of significant change, such as mergers, acquisitions, or restructuring, the CAO provides continuity and stability. Their cross-functional oversight allows them to navigate complex transitions, maintain business operations, and ensure a smooth integration process.

Which archetype works for an organization will depend on several factors. First and foremost, it will be defined by the need within the organization which is dependent on business size, industry, regulatory environment, bandwidth of the CEO, size of the executive committee, amongst other factors. Secondly, it depends on the business drivers. For a consumer products company, having brand and communications within the CAO office wouldn't make sense; neither would a technology company likely put information and cyber security under the CAO.

On the leadership and people side, there are important questions to consider:

- What needs to be taken off the CEO's agenda?
- Does the executive committee need to be streamlined to drive forward a change mandate?
- How is legal viewed by the CEO and do they think the CLO or GC can take on more?
- How effectively is the legal department functioning and is it the right time for the GC to expand their remit?

The CAO often works closely with the CEO and other senior executives, providing support in strategic decision-making, organizational development, and high-level initiatives. Their broad perspective and expertise across different administrative functions make them valuable advisors and partners to the executive team. But the timing must be right for the individual and the legal team they are currently managing.

Some of our interviewees found the lack of clarity around a CAO's title, remit, role, and responsibilities to be problematic. For any CAO to be effective in their role, there is the need for a narrative about what this role does and how it drives the business versus counterparts within the organization, such as the CLO (a political thought leader who is more about the big picture), the GC (who runs the day to day legal, risk and compliance activities), the Chief Sustainability Officer (an agent of change for environmental, social and governance issues relevant to the business) or the Chief of Staff (right hand person to the CEO solving problems and managing projects).

Other interviewees see this lack of clarity as an opportunity for anyone currently in the role, or for those advocating for a role change in their own organization. It allows for flexibility, creativity and to shape something that is both what the business needs and suited to the individual's skillset. They see the CAO as facilitating execution of a strategy set by the CEO or other lead executive, where the CAO is the liaison and go-between all the functions needed to make things happen. Having freedom around the definition of the role and its responsibilities allows for greater opportunities to have an impact.





Reporting Lines, Roles and Responsibilities

The CAO plays a vital role in the C-Suite, typically reporting to the CEO but sometimes also to the COO, or alternatively the CHRO. The CAO provides the CEO with visibility into various functions without directly managing them, resulting in a smaller number of direct reports.

In larger organizations, the CAO and the COO can be adjacent counterparts on the business side, with the CAO overseeing corporate functions while the COO focuses on business functions. The CAO role emerges from the administrative side of the business, encompassing areas like legal, technology, cybersecurity, and HR, whereas the COO role typically stems from a background in general management and is responsible for operational aspects.

Key skills and competencies for a CAO include effective leadership, the ability to manage diverse departments,

a deep understanding of the business strategy and financial principles, and the trust of the CEO. Problemsolving creativity, organizational advocacy, and influence are also crucial for driving the organization to maintain a competitive edge. As the CAO takes on the broadened role and responsibilities, there may be areas where there are knowledge gaps and work required to gain expertise in those areas. This is most likely in functions such as finance much like a CFO stepping into a CAO role would need to upskill in the areas of legal, risk and compliance.

The CAO acts as an enabler, ensuring that other functions within the organization can work effectively on behalf of employees, customers, and communities. They bring subject matter expertise and add value by identifying areas where their expertise can contribute to building, developing, and leading their functional team.

Succession Planning

The CAO position offers increased retention as it provides opportunities for individuals to take on new roles where pathways to those roles previously did not exist. It allows individuals to expand their responsibilities and reach higher positions beyond niche roles or the ceiling of the GC or CLO. The CAO role is not solely based on organizational needs but also on the capacity and opportunity for individuals to take on more responsibilities, relieving some burden from the CEO. It adds value to the organization and the functions within the C-Suite, providing flexibility in how the role is structured and serving as a steppingstone to other positions.

In that sense, succession planning for the CAO can largely depend on the individual's career aspirations. As the CAO, the expanded role will give the individual insights on ways to develop that could set them on a path of even further growth within - or outside - the organization. This could go in several directions with the CAO developing into the next Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO), Chief Strategy Officer or, even, CEO. In larger organizations, the CAO might be a successor to the COO.

There are capabilities that a CAO will build during their time in this role that make them succession planning candidates for other C-Suite positions. They will improve their leadership skills as they take ownership and responsibility for tasks outside of the "day job" giving them an appreciation of challenges that others may be facing as leaders. Cross-functional accountability will allow the CAO to gain greater insights across the business, allowing them to look more deeply into business drivers and issues. The ability to manage stakeholders across a breadth of functional areas and execute organizational-wide change initiatives will expose the CAO to greater scale, pace, and advocacy. Succession planning also involves considering the team's structure and support, as well as the need for a top-class legal department. The CEO's perception of the sitting GC's or CLO's capabilities will influence whether they step into the CAO role. The CAO position is a hybrid role, and organizations are increasingly recognizing the need for such positions. However, upward mobility and recognition can be challenges, and the title may diminish the role's value and impact, meaning not all GCs or CLOs would necessarily want to walk this path.

Can the CAO be appointed externally when there is such a large emphasis on understanding the business and the importance of the relationship with the current CEO? Our research of the Fortune 500 suggests of the sitting CAOs, less than 20% were hired into the role from outside of the organization. Regarding the selection of CAOs, there is naturally a consideration between internal and external candidates, as there is with any C-Suite position. While an external candidate can bring different expertise and learning experiences, an internal candidate who is a known commodity and has an established network within the organization holds an element of trust. The CAO role requires handling confidential and sensitive information, such as layoffs or business exits, which necessitates seniority and an elevated level of trust.

While it may be true today that the majority of CAOs in the Fortune 500 are hired from within the organization, we understand this is a direct reflection of the drivers behind the creation of this role – a retention tool for top legal executives, a need to bring cohesion to disparate functional groups and a way to streamline direct reports into the CEO. As the role evolves and the value it brings to the corporate ecosystem is more defined, it becomes more likely to look outside – as well as inside – for your next CAO.

18%

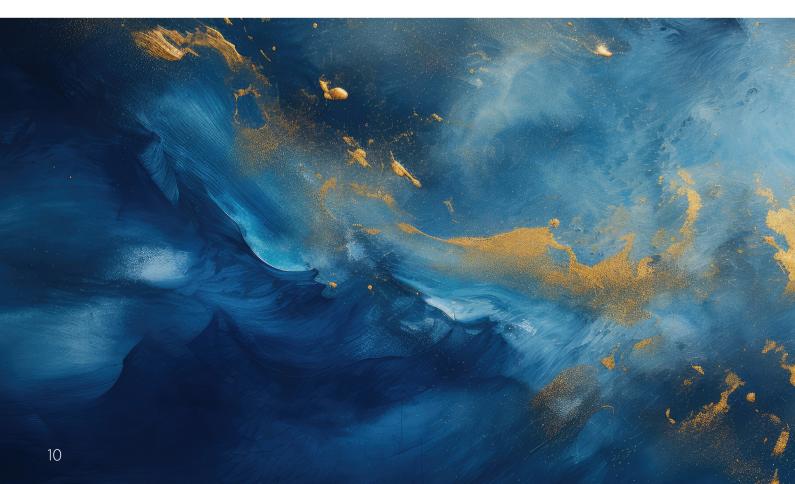
of CAOs from Fortune 500 companies were hired externally

Hiring For Your Next CAO

A legal background prepares individuals for the role of CAO in several ways. Lawyers possess analytical skills and a 360-degree view, allowing them to ask important business questions and consider the consequences of actions. Their experience as problem solvers equips them with an understanding of what can go wrong and the impact of poor decision-making. Lawyers are adept at engaging in robust discussions from various perspectives to arrive at the right decisions. They are often change agents who analyze and implement change effectively, inspiring confidence in clients and teams. The focus of balancing risk with business goals characteristic of a CLO's or GC's remit also emphasizes the importance of being well-prepared, earning respect and followership from others.

As GCs, lawyers have a unique perspective on enterprise risk management and a broad portfolio encompassing legal, business, and risk aspects. This cross-functional perspective enables them to provide valuable legal guidance and engage across the entire organization. Lawyers excel at negotiation and mediating between opposing sides, facilitating collective progress and buyin. The ability to run day-to-day operations and drive organizational transformation is crucial for the CAO role. A legal background fosters critical thinking, communication skills, and a broader perspective, making lawyers wellThe expectations and scope of the CAO position can vary widely, even within the same industry, making it a challenging role to fill and requiring a balance of strengths and areas for development in the candidates' skill sets. The critical competencies that a GC would bring to the CAO role can be summarized as:

- Analytical Skills and Different Perspectives: A legal background equips individuals with analytical skills and a 360-degree view of situations. Lawyers are trained to ask critical business questions and consider the potential consequences of actions. They are skilled at seeing things from multiple perspectives and evaluating the long-term implications.
- Understanding the Impact of Bad Decision Making: Lawyers, particularly those with a background in litigation, have a keen awareness of what can go wrong and the impact of poor decision making. They are not afraid to ask tough questions and hold people accountable to ensure the right results are achieved
- In-Depth Discussion and Conflict Resolution: Lawyers are accustomed to engaging in robust discussions and considering different perspectives to arrive at the best decisions. Disagreements and healthy debates are seen as valuable in reaching the right outcomes.



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- Change Agents: Lawyers are often change agents who possess the analytical skills and confidence to analyze situations, implement changes, and see them through. Their ability to inspire confidence in clients and teams is an asset.
- Analytical Approach and Preparedness: Lawyers are trained problem solvers who understand the importance of being well prepared to evaluate and resolve critical issues. This helps them inspire confidence and gain followership, as their thoroughness and attention to detail are respected traits.
- Broad Perspective and Risk Management: As GC individuals gain a broad perspective of the company from both a business and risk management standpoint. They manage enterprise risk and act as business partners, overseeing legal, risk, and compliance matters across multiple areas such as people, IT, and products.

- Unique Lens and Cross-Functional Perspective: GCs have a unique perspective on the risk appetites of various business units. They have a broad portfolio to manage and monitor, compared to business line heads who may have more siloed responsibilities.
- Critical Thinking and Communication Skills: A legal background fosters critical thinking and strong communication skills, which are valuable assets in the CAO role. While not specific to a legal background, these characteristics contribute to success.
- Previous Experience and Horizontal Visibility: A background in the legal department gives GC's a horizontal view of the organization and understanding the consequences of decisions made across different areas. As a GC, they had developed culture-building initiatives and had demonstrated leadership qualities.

Impact on the Legal Team

The appointment of a GC or CLO to the role of a CAO can bring about changes in the reputation of the legal team within the organization. A legal department can often be seen as an arbiter or referee, but with a legal executive stepping up into a CAO role and running other business functions, that perception can change. There can be a shift in understanding and connection between lawyers and the business, leading to more synergies and a change in how legal is perceived. It strengthens the relationships between the legal department and other functional areas, leading to stronger collaborations towards business solutions.

The GC or CLO is there to assess risks and the need to assess cost-benefit calculations when making decisions; they understand risk tolerance is crucial for making informed and commercially reasonable choices that drive the business forward. This experience of the risk landscape of the business positions the GC or CLO well for the CAO role.

The most effective legal departments are integrated within the business, acting as collaborators and partners who help to solve problems and make the business stronger. Legal executives with oversight and responsibility for other functions can help to strengthen the reputation of the legal team within the business, because legal will acquire increased visibility an impact throughout the organization. They are now viewed as collaborators and partners, playing an enabling role, and helping to solve problems to make the business stronger. The legal department's reputation is reflected in their earlier and proactive involvement in providing advice and problem-solving, rather than just addressing issues after they have occurred. They are sought after for advice on non-legal matters, serving as a trusted partner and providing frameworks for decision-making. The approach has shifted towards collaborative guidance, with legal actively involved in marketing-related matters and seen as instrumental in structuring things appropriately. The appointment of the CAO has created headroom and opportunities for growth within the organization. It has shown that there is no ceiling for growth above the GC position and has allowed legal professionals to envision career advancement within the organization. It has allowed for the promotion and development of individuals in the legal team and created more pathways for career growth. The attraction of talent is based on the promise of a seat at the table, being seen as respected business partners, and investing in the success of the organization.

With this new pathway emerging, we asked our interviewees how it might change the hiring criteria for the legal team. There remains an emphasis on soft skills, where real-world business experience is valued, and a desire for candidates with a diverse skill set and the ability to adapt to new challenges. Hiring is focused on bright individuals with potential, the ability to think analytically and transition from a legal mindset to a business mindset. Risk assessment and a willingness to take calculated risks are essential, combined with flexibility and curiosity, and an openness to new challenges and opportunities.

While the need for legal generalists remains, the emergence of the CLO or GC as the CAO will likely allow legal professionals to explore other interests and engage with the business as partners and colleagues. Lawyers are assigned to different business lines and act as mini-GCs for those areas, fostering a collaborative and proactive approach to legal matters. This in turn further highlights the legal team's vital role in the organization's growth and elevates their position as business partners rather than mere legal advisors.

Advice to the Next Generation Attorney

To position themselves for roles beyond the legal team, the next generation of attorneys should focus on the following key areas:

- Improve your business acumen to expand beyond just a legal lens: developing business-oriented skills and gaining experience in business transactions to understand the bigger picture and the real drivers behind the business. Developing a wellrounded background and experience, including both litigation and transactional work, provides a broader perspective and helps in managing business relationships and assessing risks.
- Increase your network and become an expert at stakeholder management: building relationships and connections is crucial for success.
- Create learning opportunities for yourself at every junction: saying yes to opportunities that may be uncomfortable or challenging, allowing for growth and continued learning. Raising one's hand for additional responsibilities and seeking new experiences is essential for career advancement.
- Become an effective and valued agent of change: the ability to gather information from various sources is valuable in a constantly evolving environment.

- Being a jack of all trades is better than being a master of one: maintaining a wide range of experiences early in one's career is recommended to gain diverse skills and competencies. Pursuing a generalist approach to education and exploring different disciplines can address knowledge gaps and weaknesses.
- Hone your skills of self-reflection and awareness of blind spots: being aware of personal strengths and weaknesses is important for being a good business partner and understanding how to add value to the business rather than simply accumulating legal skills. Being a lawyer-statesman and facilitating business strategy while managing risks are key aspects of rising within a company.

The next generation of attorneys should strive to become valuable business partners. Having a broad perspective, adaptability, and a focus on continuous learning and growth are essential to position themselves for roles beyond the legal team. As the GC becomes a more integrated member of the executive team, we can expect to see more GCs and CLOs making an even more lasting impact at the C-Suite level by moving up the ranks into the role of CAO, COO and even CEO.



Interviewees

We would like to thank all of those who contributed to the content of this article, some of whom have graciously consented to be listed below:

Alan McKenna, Chief Legal & Administrative Officer, Wahlburgers

Andrew T. Wise, Chief Administrative Officer, State Street

Anthony Joseph, Chief Administrative Officer & General Counsel, White Castle Management Co.

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• Previously: Executive Vice President, General Counsel & Chief Administrative Officer, Allscripts

Deborah Steiner, Executive Vice President, Chief Administrative Officer, General Counsel, Chief Compliance Officer & Corporate Secretary, RR Donnelley

Hannah Gordon, Senior Advisor to the President, San Francisco 49ers; Chief Executive Officer, Hannah Gordon Advisors
Previously: Chief Legal and Administrative Officer, San Francisco 49ers

JoAnn Neale, President & Chief Administrative Officer, Major League Soccer & Soccer United Marketing

Katie Rowen, Chief Legal & Sustainability Officer, Vontier

• Previously: Senior Vice President, Chief Legal & Administrative Officer, Vontier

Kyle Cavanaugh, President, Administration, National Basketball Association

 Previously: Vice President, Administration, Duke University and Health System; Senior Vice President, Administration, University of Florida

Linda Rutherford, Chief Administrative & Communications Officer, Southwest Airlines

Mike Burgoyne, Chief Legal and Administrative Officer, Fry Cook & Cashier, Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers

Peter Bragdon, Executive Vice President, Chief Administrative Officer, General Counsel and Secretary, Columbia Sportswear Company

Robert Villaseñor, General Counsel, Corporate Secretary & Chief Administrative Officer, MoneyGram International

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