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The Shortlist Series:
Succeeding in Private Equity.

What makes a standout Chief Operating Officer?

With 28 years of experience in recruiting executive and non-executive directors for PE-backed businesses, Directorbank supplemented team knowledge with opinion from its network of PE investors and high-achieving Board directors. We then paired this with Assessio's rigorous, science-backed approach to leadership assessment - including personality and work values questionnaires - to uncover the deeper personality traits, competencies and motivations behind standout candidates.

Assessio is a pioneer in evidence-based leadership assessment, combining decades of validated psychometrics with cutting-edge technology and deep business context.
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What makes a standout PE COO?

In a mid-market PE-backed business, the Chief Operating Officer is where the investment thesis meets reality, and the gap between those two things is usually the COO's problem to close. It falls to the COO to turn the growth plan into a working operating system, translating ambition into the structures, accountability and daily execution that move the numbers. They sit closer to the margin, the people and the day-to-day reality of the business than almost anyone else. This means they are usually the first to spot issues, and it falls to them to bring it to the Board's attention and see it through to resolution.

So, what separates those COOs who thrive in PE-backed environments from those who don't?

With 28 years of experience in recruiting Board level directors for PE-backed businesses across the UK and Germany, the team at Directorbank Executive Search supplemented their own knowledge with opinion from our network of PE investors and Board directors.

Here's a summary of the top 5 findings.

1/
They must be comfortable owning outcomes, not just processes.
In a large corporate, operational leaders can often manage through layers - setting direction, monitoring metrics, handling problems. In a PE-backed business, there's nowhere to hide. The COO is expected to own delivery personally, move fast when things aren't working, and make difficult calls without the comfort of consensus. That extends to risk: spotting the legal, financial and operational exposures before they become Board-level problems and building the accountability structures that let the organisation run without the COO in every room.

2/
They bridge the Boardroom and the shopfloor.
The PE COO occupies an exposed, dual-facing role - accountable upwards to the Board and investor for hitting the operational milestones that underpin the investment thesis, and accountable downwards to the teams doing the hands-on work. That dual accountability demands a rare blend: enough strategic credibility to hold the room with investors, and enough operational authenticity and communication flair to retain the trust and motivation of the wider workforce.

3/
They know how to drive change without destroying culture.
PE timelines are short and the operational improvement agenda is usually significant - cost reduction, margin expansion, process transformation, systems improvement, headcount restructuring. The best COOs can move at pace without haemorrhaging the experience, values and institutional memory that make the business worth buying in the first place.

4/
They've managed complexity before the infrastructure existed.
Mid-market businesses often have good people held back by poor systems, weak processes and underinvestment in operational capability. The COO often needs to fix the foundations and accelerate performance simultaneously - embedding the KPIs, reporting rhythms and management systems that let everyone see, and own, how the business is performing. Candidates who've only ever operated in well-resourced environments find it harder to thrive here. The ones who do have usually built something from relatively little.

5/
They understand what 'exit-ready' operations look like.
A business that runs well is not the same as a business that presents well in a sale process. The best PE COOs think ahead. They know that operational discipline, clean reporting and demonstrable scalability are what acquirers and future investors are really buying. They build with that end in mind, even when the exit feels distant.

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Personality Traits, Competencies and Role Requirements

Operator, integrator, multiplier – the standout PE-backed COO doesn't just keep the business running, they build the engine that lets it scale. In a high-growth, high-pressure environment, they are the CEOs right-hand and the person the PE investor trusts to turn ambition into disciplined execution.

But which competencies, skills, and personality traits set apart a standout COO in a PE-backed environment?

To dive deeper, we paired 28 years of experience recruiting board-level directors for PE-backed businesses with Assessio's rigorous, science-backed approach to leadership assessment, including personality and work values questionnaires, to uncover the deeper traits and competencies behind high-achieving candidates.

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DEFINING PERSONALITY TRAITS

▶ Strategic thinking
Uses industry trends to anticipate future scenarios and develop effective strategies. Articulates a compelling vision and links strategic goals to daily work.

▶ Planning and organising
Effectively plans, coordinates and prioritises work for oneself and others. Manages time and other resources to maximise productivity, ensuring tasks are completed successfully.

▶ Ensuring accountability
Provides direction by clearly communicating performance expectations. Holds oneself and others accountable to meet set objectives.

▶ Analytical thinking
Understands a complex and ambiguous problem by breaking it down into smaller pieces and analyses information in a logical and systematic manner.

▶ Business acumen
Capable of using internal insights and situational knowledge of trends and competitors to evaluate the impact of business decisions. Quickly takes advantage of new opportunities.

▶ Leading teams
Demonstrates a desire to lead, takes on a role as a group leader, builds a strong team identity, and settles disputes without escalation.

CORE COMPETENCIES

Strategic Partnership – A demonstrated ability to work closely with founders or executive leadership, complementing their strategic vision with operational expertise, with evidence of partnerships that have resulted in business growth and enhanced operational capacity.

Culture Building and Accountability - Experience in creating a positive, collaborative and high-performance work culture, with a history of establishing processes and behavioural expectations that foster accountability throughout an organisation.

Risk Management - Strong knowledge and experience in identifying potential legal, financial and informational risks to the business and developing strategies to mitigate these, with a history of creating and implementing risk management plans that protect the organisation while facilitating its growth.

Process Optimisation and Automation - Demonstrated expertise in identifying inefficiencies, designing workflows, and implementing systems that improve productivity and effectiveness across various functions, with familiarity in the latest tools and technologies that enhance business processes.

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Data-Driven Decision Making - Experience in developing and utilising KPIs and other metrics for monitoring business performance, spotting issues and making informed decisions, with proficiency in interpreting complex data to drive strategy and problem-solving.

Management Systems Development - Strong ability to design, implement, and oversee clear management systems that clarify roles and objectives, enhance productivity, and ensure accountability, with a track record of enabling all team members to understand and align with the operating plan.

Operational Leadership and Planning - Extensive experience in managing operations, planning, and execution in a fast-paced startup environment, with a proven track record of translating business strategy and vision into actionable operational plans and driving their execution.

KEY ROLE REQUIREMENTS

Resilience
Keeps emotions under control, maintains high performance levels under pressure and recovers quickly from setbacks and disappointment.

Technological mindset
Understands technological trends, demonstrates skills in using modern technologies and applies technical solutions to increase efficiency or solve problems.

M&A integration and due diligence
Operates as a credible voice in buy-side due diligence and leads the integration of acquired businesses, harmonising systems, processes and culture post-completion.

Conceptual thinking
Can see patterns within complex information and present a simple and understandable explanation. Creates new and useful explanations to existing problems.

Value creation plan execution
Translates the investor's 100-day plan and value creation thesis into a concrete operational roadmap, with milestones tracked rigorously against the investment case.

Organisational scaling and talent architecture
Designs and rebuilds the organisation as the business scales, right-sizing teams, closing capability gaps, and instilling a performance-based culture ahead of need.

"The best COOs don't wait for the plan to arrive fully formed. They build the system that turns vision into daily execution - and make accountability feel like momentum, not pressure."

If you're thinking about your leadership team or your personal career ambitions, we'd welcome a confidential conversation.

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AssessioAI

AssessioAI is an innovative leadership assessment platform that equips organisations with the clarity and confidence needed to make smarter decisions in hiring, succession planning and leadership development. Combining decades of validated psychometrics with business context, the platform offers more data, sharper insight, and AI-driven guidance. Above all, it helps to decrease risk through improved hiring efficiency, reduced bias, and the greater likelihood of candidate success in a role.

AssessioAI is part of the Assessio Group.

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