

2026 ACC Chief Legal Officers Survey

KEY FINDINGS



1,049 Participants



20 Industries



43 Countries

01

Executive Expansion Reaches a New Benchmark

The transition from “head lawyer” to “business executive” has reached a structural peak, with a record 84% of CLOs now reporting directly to the CEO. The rapid adoption of the “Chief Legal Officer” title (up to 34%) signifies that for most organizations, the role is now firmly established as a permanent, core member of the company’s highest leadership tier.

03

Macro-Level Risks Overshadow Internal Legal Concerns

CLOs are increasingly focused on external, systemic threats that impact the whole business. Barriers to growth and expansion (20%) are cited as a greater concern than traditional legal issues like litigation or data privacy (4% each), confirming that the CLO’s outlook is now fully aligned with the organization’s market-facing goals.

02

Legal is the Hub for Modern Governance and Risk

The CLO has evolved into the enterprise’s central authority for non-financial risk, with majority oversight of compliance (64%) and the corporate secretary function (62%). This mandate also extends into modern “frontier” risks, including ethics, privacy, and cybersecurity, positioning the CLO as the primary architect of organizational integrity.

04

The AI Revolution is the New Mandate for Leadership

CLOs are pivoting their skill sets to meet perceived executive expectations, with 47% identifying technology and AI proficiency as the primary area their CEO wants them to develop. This reflects a fundamental shift in the required capabilities for modern legal leadership, far outranking traditional managerial skills. This shift is also reflected in team development, where the prioritization of technological fluency for departmental lawyers surged 17 points to 34% in a single year.

05 **AI Adoption Targets Role Evolution Over Headcount Reduction**

Legal departments are moving rapidly from exploration to execution, with 36% already in active deployment of GenAI. However, this is not viewed as a replacement for human talent; 63% of CLOs expect headcount to remain stable, focusing instead on evolving existing roles to focus on higher-value strategic work through AI-driven efficiency.

08 **Board Access is an Entrenched Governance Standard**

Direct access to the board of directors has become a structurally fixed practice rather than a fluctuating trend. With 79% of CLOs now “almost always” attending board meetings, the role serves as a permanent fixture in corporate governance, providing a critical independent perspective to the company’s directors.

06 **Regulatory Concerns Pivot to Geopolitics and Technology**

Legal departments are deprioritizing traditional compliance areas in favor of novel global challenges. Concern over trade and tariffs (30%) and AI regulation (24%) represent the fastest-growing priorities, indicating that CLOs are bracing for a more volatile international landscape and a shifting technological regulatory framework.

09 **External Resources Serve as the Regulatory “Pressure Valve”**

To manage increasingly sophisticated and targeted enforcement, CLOs are maintaining stable internal headcounts while sharply increasing their reliance on external support. Use of outside counsel jumped to 48% and consultants to 27%, signaling that external expertise is the primary tool for handling surges in regulatory complexity.

07 **Influence is Realized Through Proactive Strategy, Not Just Defense**

The CLO has moved decisively beyond a reactive “gatekeeper” role, with 74% of respondents providing proactive strategic counsel. Nearly half of all CLOs report increased depth in board-level engagement, confirming that for many organizations, legal expertise is now integrated into business planning during the inception of projects rather than at the point of crisis.

10 **The Dual Crisis: Resource Scarcity vs. Transformation Demands**

CLOs face a fundamental dilemma: while they are mandated to lead an AI-driven transformation, they are hampered by chronic budget and resource constraints (cited by 35% as the top barrier to success). Consequently, operational efficiency (53%) continues this year as the top strategic initiative as CLOs attempt to use technology to solve the very resource gaps that impede their progress.

QUESTIONS? CONTACT: research@acc.com

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