

DAMHURST.

Damhurst In-Depth

The Strategic Bridge

Understanding the Chief of Staff Role

+44 (0) 20 3865 1129
info@damhurst.com
www.damhurst.com

Foreword

We're pleased to share the findings of our latest research into the Chief of Staff role across the UK insurance market. As the position becomes more prominent, it remains one of the most influential – and least clearly defined – roles within senior leadership teams.

Based on in-depth conversations with Chiefs of Staff and industry experts, this research explores how the role operates in practice, the diverse forms it takes, and the strategic value it can deliver.

We are extremely grateful to the leaders, Chiefs of Staff and industry experts who generously shared their time, experiences and perspectives. Their openness has enabled us to capture the realities of a role that is both demanding and diverse, and we hope these insights will support organisations and individuals as they navigate the opportunities and challenges it presents.

What's Inside?

01

Introduction

02

The Damhurst Methodology

03

Data-Driven Insights

04

**Qualitative Insights:
What Our Interviews Revealed**

05

Four Key Chief of Staff Archetypes

06

Conclusions

07

How Damhurst Makes a Difference

Introduction

In recent years, few roles have generated as much curiosity and confusion as the Chief of Staff. The title is increasingly visible across the insurance sector and beyond, yet its meaning remains elusive. Ask ten organisations what a Chief of Staff does, and you are likely to receive ten different answers. Why is that?

The answer, as our research reveals, is that the Chief of Staff is a role shaped more by context than by any job description. For some, it is a strategic partner to the CEO, a trusted confidant, or a catalyst for transformation. For others, it is a stepping-stone for emerging talent, or a crisis manager brought in to steady the ship. The diversity of these interpretations is striking, and it is precisely what prompted our research.

“The Chief of Staff is shaped more by context than by job description.”

Why Does This Matter?

As organisations grapple with increasing complexity, regulatory scrutiny and the need for agile leadership, the Chief of Staff has emerged as a pivotal figure. Yet, the lack of a clear, shared definition creates confusion for boards, executives and aspiring Chiefs of Staff alike.

Without clarity of intent, it becomes difficult to benchmark success, develop capability or fully realise the potential of the role.

This report sets out to address that gap. Using a mixed-methods approach, we combine quantitative mapping of Chief of Staff appointments with interviews across the insurance sector and beyond. Rather than seeking to impose a single definition, we aim to shed light on the realities behind the title and explore the range of archetypes and demands that shape the Chief of Staff role today.

By sharing these insights, we hope to support organisations in making more informed decisions about when, why and how to deploy a Chief of Staff, and to help individuals who are considering the role to understand what it might mean for their own careers. In doing so, we hope to draw attention to the strategic possibility of this role and how it may fit into a corporate or individual's succession plan.

The Damhurst Methodology

Research Design and Rationale

The Chief of Staff role is notoriously difficult to define, with responsibilities varying widely across organisations, sectors and individual leaders. Recognising this ambiguity, we adopted a flexible, mixed-methods research approach designed to capture both the breadth and nuance of how the role is practised today.

Our research combined quantitative market mapping with qualitative interviews. While the quantitative analysis provided a directional view of where and how Chief of Staff roles are formally deployed, qualitative interviews allowed us to explore how the role operates in practice.

Quantitative Mapping

We began by constructing a dataset of organisations with formally designated Chief of Staff roles, drawing on publicly available information such as organisational charts, company websites, LinkedIn profiles, curated internal databases and press releases. To ensure consistency, only roles explicitly titled “Chief of Staff” were included.

As expected, there were limitations: incomplete public data, inconsistency across smaller firms and the constraints of using UK-centric sources. Despite this, the data provided a solid directional view. Headline metrics such as tenure, entry routes and gender distribution helped us establish a factual baseline, even though they could not capture the full complexity of how the role operates in practice.

Qualitative Interviews

To address the gaps inherent in quantitative data, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Chiefs of Staff and senior leaders across the London, Lloyd's and wider UK insurance market. We also spoke with a small number of Chiefs of Staff outside the sector to test whether observed patterns were specific to insurance or reflected wider trends.

These conversations focused on how the role operates in practice, including responsibilities, reporting lines, organisational impact, challenges and career aspirations. All interviews were conducted in confidence, with identifying details anonymised.

Challenges and Limitations with the Process

Engaging Chiefs of Staff was challenging, given their proximity to senior leadership, demanding schedules and the sensitivity of the role. Our sample of 74 Chiefs of Staff across the London, Lloyd's, and wider UK insurance market is significant for a niche role, but it does limit the generalisability of findings. The UK-centric focus introduces potential cultural and structural bias and voluntary participation may have led to some selection bias.

Despite these constraints, the research captured a broad and diverse range of perspectives to offer a considered view of the Chief of Staff role in the UK market.

Adaptive Approach, Triangulation and Reflexivity

Given the diversity of the role, a degree of structuring was needed to support analysis. For clarity, we use the term "archetype" as a practical shorthand for recurring role patterns identified across interviews, while recognising the fluidity of real-world roles.

Findings were triangulated across quantitative and qualitative strands. Quantitative mapping highlighted trends such as internal promotions and sectoral differences, while qualitative interviews brought these patterns to life, revealing the motivations and realities behind the data. Together, this synthesis informed the development of the archetype framework.

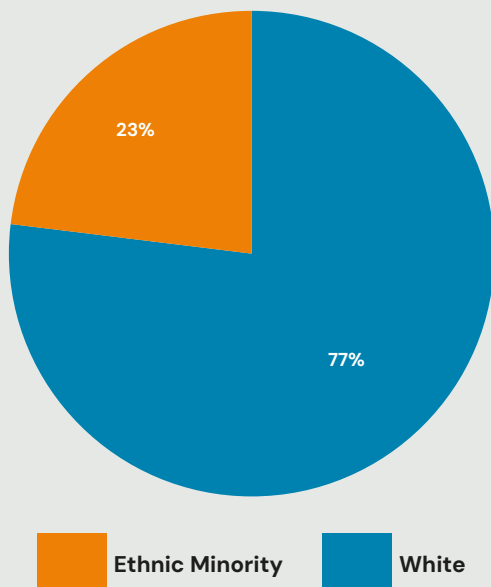
All participants were informed of the research purpose and their right to confidentiality, with data anonymised where requested. While no methodology of this nature is without limitation, the adaptive approach taken reflects our commitment to rigour, transparency and flexibility in understanding what it means to be a Chief of Staff today.

Data-Driven Insights

This section draws on our quantitative market mapping which provided an overview of how Chiefs of Staff are used across the UK insurance market and beyond.

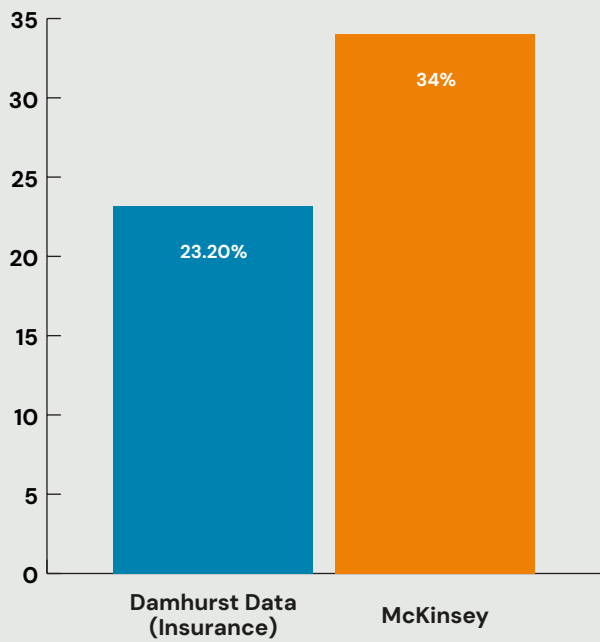
As part of our quantitative analysis, we used McKinsey's Chief of Staff: Anatomy of the Role in Eight Charts as a point of comparison. Based on a study of 250 Chiefs of Staff across industries, it provided a valuable external benchmark, allowing us to sense-check our findings and understand how patterns observed within insurance compared with broader market trends. While our data was gathered independently, drawing on such a comprehensive study added important context and perspective to our analysis.

Ethnicity of Insurance Chief of Staffs

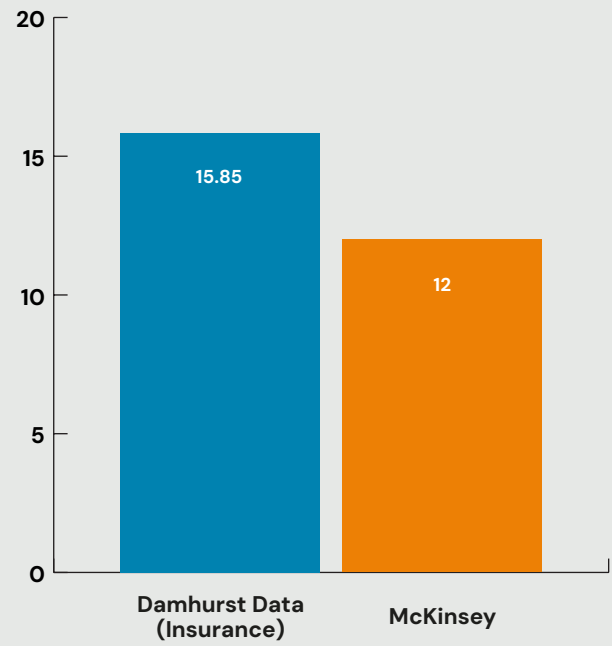


To build our own dataset, we mapped approximately 700 data points across Chief of Staff roles both within and outside the insurance sector, with a primary focus on the London and wider UK insurance market. As with any market-specific analysis, this dataset has limitations, which we acknowledge. Nevertheless, it proved instrumental in highlighting recurring themes, areas of ambiguity and common misunderstandings surrounding the Chief of Staff role.

% External Chief of Staff Appointments: Our Dataset vs McKinsey



Years of Experience Before Becoming Chief of Staff



Comparing the data within the insurance industry reveals a clear pattern: Chief of Staff appointments are more often made internally and typically require a higher level of prior experience. This raises questions about the confidence the industry has in the role. Internal appointments may reflect executive teams' desire for trusted, known quantities and a level of anxiety about the role.

Years of Experience Demanded for Chief of Staff Roles: Insurance vs Other Industries

Other Industries
12 years

Insurance Industry
15.85 years

Chief of Staff roles within the insurance industry also demand significantly more experience: around 32% more on average (15.85 years compared with 12). This suggests a degree of caution in how the role is positioned. In industries with a longer-established tradition of employing Chiefs of Staff, the experience threshold will be lower.

Tenure Comparison (Average Years in Role): Pre-Chief of Staff vs Chief of Staff

Tenure in Chief of Staff
2.40 years

Tenure Before Chief of Staff
3.41 years

This data highlights the inherently transitional nature of the Chief of Staff role. Tenure is around 33% shorter than the average role, reinforcing that this is often a time-bound position rather than a permanent destination. This pattern is most evident within the Transformation and Leadership Accelerator archetypes, where the role is designed to deliver against a specific mandate.

In some cases, once their mandate is complete, the role becomes surplus to requirements. In others, the Chief of Staff may move upwards in the company, therefore departing their post.

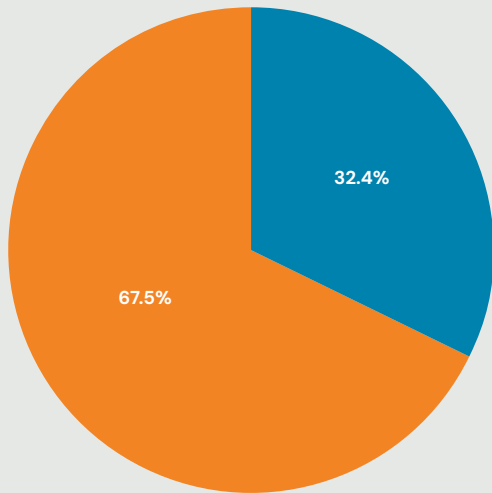
Chief of Staff Functional Backgrounds:



Even when segmenting prior experience into five broad categories, there remains significant variation in background. This suggests that a candidate's professional history may be less predictive of success as a Chief of Staff than more intangible factors. Qualities such as character and the ability to build trusted relationships appear to play a far more decisive role.

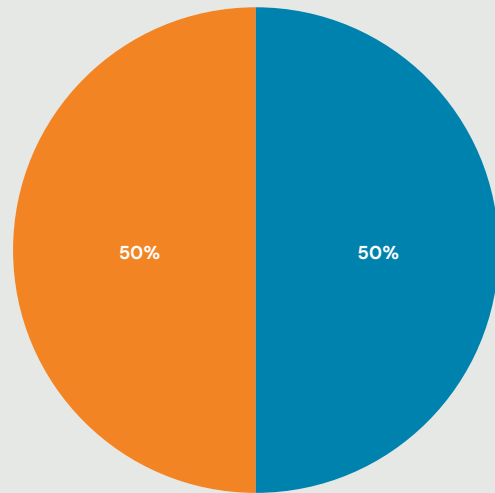
“Tenure is around 33% shorter than the average role, reinforcing that this is often a time-bound position rather than a permanent destination.”

Gender Breakdown of Insurance Chiefs of Staff



Women Men

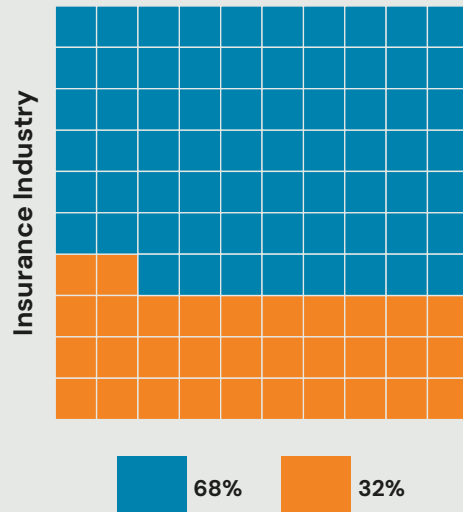
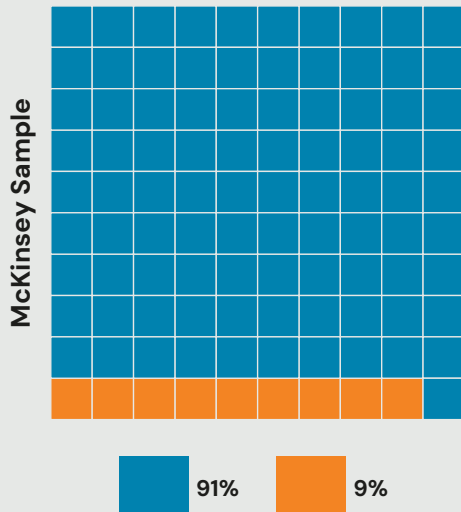
Approximate Gender Breakdown of Chiefs of Staff from McKinsey Report



Women Men

While the ethnicity breakdown of insurance Chiefs of Staff broadly mirrors the wider industry, there is a positive skew towards female Chiefs of Staff. This suggests that the Chief of Staff position may serve as a valuable pathway to C-suite opportunities in an industry that has historically been male-dominated.

Number of Roles Held by Chief of Staff Simultaneously Overall vs Insurance



Single Role

Multiple Roles

Compared with the McKinsey study, Chiefs of Staff outside insurance are much more likely to focus solely on the role. In fact, only 9% hold other positions simultaneously, compared with 32.5% within insurance. This disparity raises important questions about the position in the insurance market. It may indicate that the role does not yet carry sufficient weight for ambitious professionals to take it on independently, or that linking it to a functional or more traditional role can help to validate it within the executive team and wider company.

Qualitative Insights: What Our Interviews Revealed

The qualitative research explored how the Chief of Staff role operates beyond formal job descriptions, drawing on interviews carried out with current and former Chief of Staffs within the UK insurance market. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with Chiefs of Staff, we sought to capture how the role operates in practice, its strategic significance, its challenges and how it evolves within different organisational contexts. These conversations generated candid, first-hand insights that take the analysis further than quantitative data alone.

“Responsibilities vary widely by organisation and leader, ranging from strategic partner to operational coordinator.”

Emergent Themes

Several consistent themes emerged from the interviews, reflecting both the opportunities and the inherent complexity of the Chief of Staff role:

Strategic Bridge:

- Chiefs of Staff frequently serve as the connection between senior leadership and the wider organisation. They translate executive priorities into actionable plans, ensuring alignment across functions while maintaining visibility on progress.

Career Accelerator:

- For many, the role is seen as a stepping stone into broader leadership responsibilities. It offers exposure to decision making at the highest level and enables individuals to develop strategic judgment and organisational insight.

Role Ambiguity:

- Despite its growing prominence, the Chief of Staff role remains loosely defined. Ambiguity emerged as the most notable and poignant from our research with many Chiefs of Staff citing this as the biggest challenge of the job. Responsibilities vary widely by organisation and leader, ranging from strategic partner to operational coordinator. While this lack of standardisation can create uncertainty, it also allows for flexibility and tailoring. Many interviewees noted the absence of a formal job description as a defining feature of the role.

Complexity and Scope:

- Interviewees consistently highlighted the challenge of managing urgent operational or administrative demands while thinking about long term strategy. The absence of clear boundaries often blurs the scope of the role, requiring exceptional judgement and prioritisation skills.

Four Key Chief of Staff Archetypes

The Chief of Staff role has evolved significantly within the UK corporate landscape, yet it remains widely misunderstood. Based on outreach and conversations with Chiefs of Staff across the London, Lloyd's and the wider UK insurance market, our research reveals four distinct archetypes that illustrate the diversity of this position. While each profile serves a unique organisational purpose, they differ markedly in scope, influence and strategic impact.



The Executive Support Archetype

This archetype reflects one of the most common misconceptions about the Chief of Staff role. In some organisations, long-serving and highly trusted managers or executive assistants are rebranded as Chief of Staff – often as a mark of recognition or reward, rather than a reflection of strategic capability.

The Executive Support-type Chief of Staff remains fundamentally administrative, closely aligned to the executive assistant role but with elevated trust, access and organisational visibility. Responsibilities typically centre on diary management, event coordination and logistical oversight. Working in close proximity to the CEO, these individuals are entrusted with highly confidential information, requiring absolute discretion. However, their influence on organisational strategy is minimal. Unlike other archetypes, they are not expected to possess deep industry knowledge or experience in people management. Instead, appointments are predominantly a result of their acknowledged efficiency, discretion, trust and organisational awareness.

While this profile can be highly effective in supporting the CEO's operational efficiency, it does little to advance broader organisational objectives. It is, therefore, critical to distinguish this role from the strategic or transformational Chief of Staff profile, to avoid perpetuating misconceptions that dilute the value of the position.

The Transformation / Crisis Management Archetype



The Transformation / Crisis Management archetype often goes hand-in-hand with the concept of a 'career' Chief of Staff: a professional who moves between organisations to address specific challenges within a defined timeframe. These individuals are typically appointed during periods of uncertainty, disruption and heightened complexity. This may include mergers, acquisitions, integrations, leadership transition, transformation programmes (such as internal model change, culture, or cost reduction initiatives), regulatory interventions or financial distress.

Compared with other Chief of Staff profiles, the mandate here is usually clear and time-bound. It is to stabilise the organisation and implement strategic solutions swiftly. Often appointed from outside the business, these individuals bring objectivity and fresh perspective, allowing them to navigate complex issues without being constrained by internal politics. They are, in essence, organisational fire-fighters who are highly skilled at diagnosing problems, facilitating decision making, working across functions and executing turnaround strategies.

Their presence, however, can provoke mixed reactions internally. In times of financial pressure, the appointment of a Chief of Staff may be perceived as an unnecessary expense or even a sign of deeper organisational fragility. Yet, when the mandate and authority is clear and widely understood as focused on diagnosis, execution and delivery at pace, this archetype can be highly effective and, in many cases, has been instrumental in guiding organisations back to stability.

The Trusted Confidant Archetype



The Trusted Confidant archetype represents one of the most strategically significant expressions of the Chief of Staff role, aside from those holding multiple formal positions. These individuals often rise through the ranks of the organisation, developing a deep understanding of its culture, people and strategy. Their close proximity to the CEO positions them as a sounding board and trusted adviser, often functioning as a de facto Deputy CEO.

Trusted Confidants usually have deep organisational and sector knowledge, and they frequently hold a seat on the Executive Committee or Board, enabling them to influence decisions at the highest level. Their responsibilities are fluid, encompassing project leadership, operational oversight and strategic counsel. Tenure in this role is typically longer than average, and market commentary suggests that many individuals act as Chiefs of Staff informally for extended periods before the role is formally recognised.

The success of this archetype hinges on trust, proximity to the CEO and clarity. Ambiguity regarding their remit can create tension within the C-suite, particularly if peers perceive them as a “spy” or an extension of the CEO’s authority. Striking the right balance of being influential without undermining other executives is critical to the success of this role.



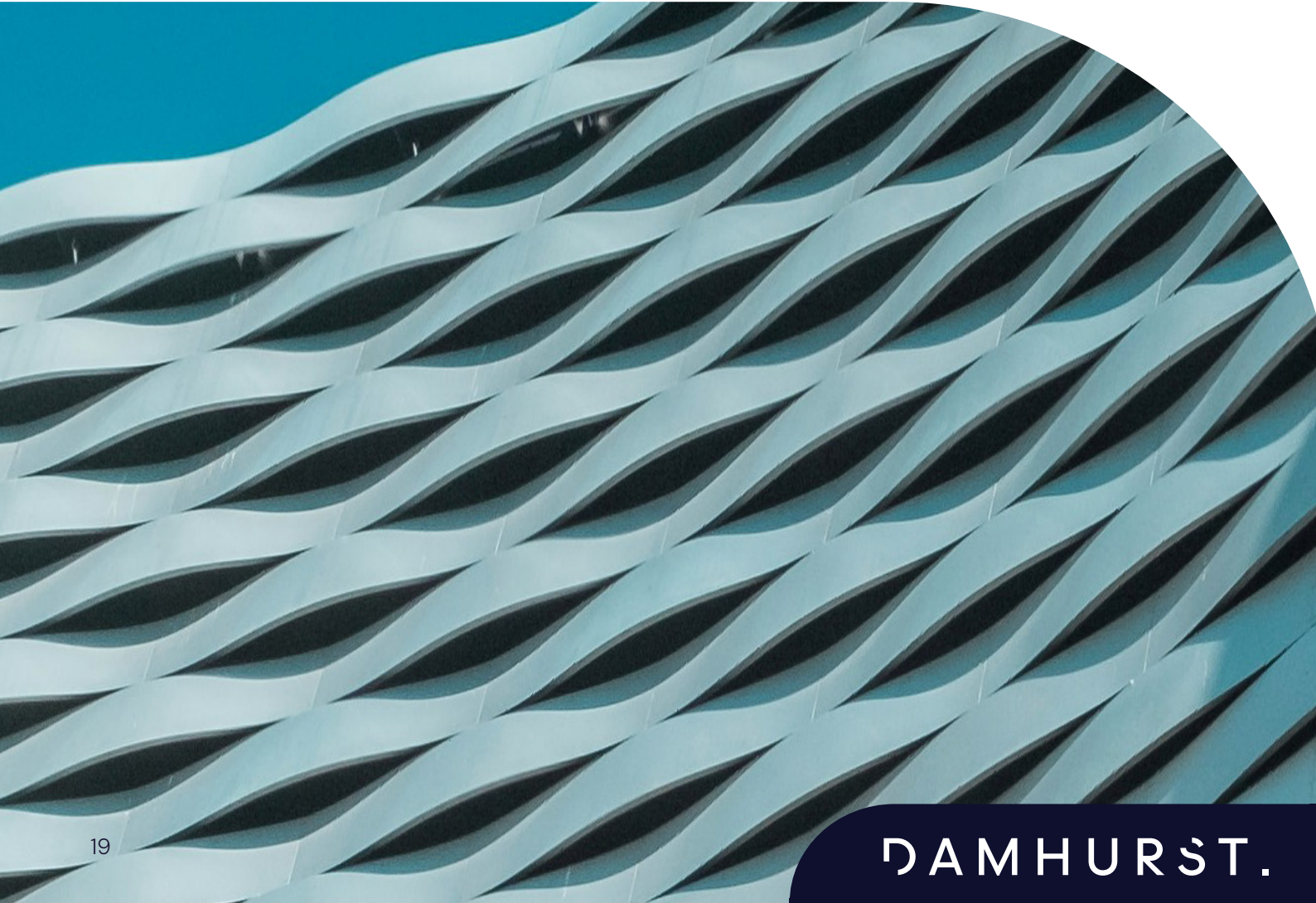
The Leadership Accelerator Archetype

The Leadership Accelerator archetype positions the Chief of Staff role as a developmental platform for high potential future executive leaders. Designed to retain ambitious individuals and strengthen succession planning, it offers exposure to strategic decision-making and senior leadership without the immediate risk of a full executive appointment.

In many cases, the role is given explicit tenure and a clear pathway to future leadership positions. It acts as a 'trial run' for C-suite responsibilities, allowing organisations to test readiness while giving individuals invaluable, real-world experience. For the company, this approach mitigates the risk of losing top talent to competitors and builds a stronger leadership bench. For the individual, it accelerates career progression and broadens perspective.

The benefits of this model are clear. It injects fresh thinking into executive strategic discussions whilst lowering the risk and retaining talent. However, success depends on careful structuring and transparent communication to avoid unrealistic expectations or role ambiguity.

When used intentionally and with the right individuals, this iteration of the Chief of Staff role lays out a powerful, low-risk tool for succession planning – and a powerful tool to prepare the next generation of executives.





**“The value of the role lies not in the title itself,
but in the clarity behind why it exists.”**



Conclusions

Our research makes one thing clear: the Chief of Staff role can be a powerful operational and strategic asset — but only when it is deployed with intent. The value of the role lies not in the title itself, but in the clarity behind why it exists and what it is designed to deliver.

Any one of the archetypes identified in this research can be effective in the right context. Success depends on the organisation's context, the CEO's leadership style, the work to be done and the talent available. Making a deliberate choice between one of the above is therefore not a question of seniority or status, but of intent.

Organisations that are explicit about the purpose, authority and success measures of the Chief of Staff unlock far greater impact. It can become a powerful enabler of leadership effectiveness and organisational clarity. Where intent is unclear, the role risks creating ambiguity, tension and unmet expectations.

As one Chief of Staff reflected: "The role only works when everyone understands why it's there." At Damhurst, we see this time and again. The Chief of Staff is not a universal solution, but when used deliberately, it can be one of the most effective tools an organisation has.



Damhurst's Advice

1. Be explicit about the archetype you are subscribing to and why it fits your context.

Choose the version of the role that best solves your organisation's needs.

2. Define what success looks like and the timeframe for achieving it.

Set clear, time-bound expectations so progress can be measured.

3. Set the role at the right altitude so expectations and decision rights match the mandate.

Ensure the remit and level of influence align with what the organisation requires.

4. Create the conditions the role needs to deliver value.

Provide access, trust and clarity so the role can operate effectively.

5. Focus the role on organisational impact rather than proximity to senior leaders.

Judge success by outcomes delivered, not just closeness to the CEO.



Postscript: **A Personal, Military Observation**

This is the perspective of a senior figure (Commander) within the Royal Navy

This paper strongly resonates with my own experience of Chief of Staff roles in military and ministerial environments, where clarity of purpose, authority and intent is fundamental rather than optional. Many of the dynamics described here mirror long-established practice in those settings.

From that perspective, the military provenance of the role offers a useful additional lens. In particular, the function performed by Principal Staff Officers, supporting four-star commanders and senior ministers, closely aligns with the core responsibilities outlined in this paper. These roles succeed not because of rank or title, but because they are built on deep trust, clear mandate and genuine empowerment from the principal.

In my experience, the effectiveness of a Chief of Staff is determined by organisational context, leadership style, a shared understanding of why the role exists and what it is accountable for delivering. Where that clarity exists, the role becomes a powerful enabler, aligning people, priorities and resources at pace. Where it does not, ambiguity and unmet expectations quickly emerge.

The paper's emphasis on intentional design is therefore particularly compelling. Deliberately defining authority, boundaries and measures of success is what allows the Chief of Staff to absorb complexity, reduce friction at the top of the organisation, and free the principal to focus on decision-making and external leadership.

It is encouraging to see this level of rigour increasingly reflected beyond the military, as Chief of Staff roles continue to professionalise. The underlying lesson remains consistent: when everyone understands why the role exists, it works – and when they do not, it doesn't.

How Damhurst Makes a Difference

At Damhurst, we play a critical, strategic role in enabling organisations to make high-quality leadership appointments by offering structured insight, independent perspective and deep market understanding.

The choice of Chief of Staff archetype ultimately comes down to clarity of intent: what does the CEO or organisation genuinely need the role to deliver? This is where we can add real value by helping organisations to make that intent explicit.

We work closely with boards and executive teams to:

Clarify the strategic purpose of leadership roles

We help organisations define when and why a Chief of Staff role should exist. We challenge leaders to be explicit about the problems the role is intended to solve, identify the archetype that is genuinely required and ensure it aligns with short and longer-term objectives and strengthens leadership architecture.

Design the role profile

Where a Chief of Staff role is appropriate, we support the design of a clear and robust role profile. This includes defining mandate, scope, reporting lines and measures of success, ensuring expectations are aligned from the outset.

Map future leadership capabilities

We work with clients to identify key leadership roles, behaviours and styles required to deliver the business strategy, including how the Chief of Staff can best contribute to strategic decision-making and organisational continuity.

Assess internal talent objectively

Using structured interviews and psychometric tools, we provide evidence-based insights into readiness, potential and development needs of relevant internal talent. Consistent evaluation ensures fair and transparent decisions.

Benchmark against the market

Our rigorous market analysis helps organisations understand how their leadership capability compares with peers, informing decisions around internal appointments and development versus external hiring and complementing internal assessment with robust market benchmarking.

Support leadership development

Our leadership practice delivers tailored executive development, including one-to-one coaching and targeted skills and behavioural development, ensuring individuals are well prepared for future roles.

Design robust succession frameworks

Our frameworks are systematic, practical and built for board approval. They ensure succession planning goes beyond compliance and becomes a living, valuable asset that supports organisational resilience and future leadership needs.

Address leadership gaps thoughtfully

Where internal succession or development cannot meet future requirements, we manage confidential executive search mandates to identify external talent, ensuring appointments are strategic and culturally aligned, and complementary to the existing leadership team.

Let's Talk

If you'd like to discuss the findings of this report in more detail, or explore how Damhurst can help you define, assess, and develop a Chief of Staff role in your organisation, please get in touch.

DAMHURST.



James Cooper

Director, Search

JCooper@damhurst.com

+44 (0) 20 3398 0351



Simon Beale

Director, Board Services

SBeale@damhurst.com

+44 (0) 20 4566 9833



Rhiannon Harfoot

Director, Leadership

RHarfoot@damhurst.com

+44 (0) 20 3865 1129



info@damhurst.com



+44 (0) 20 3865 1129



www.damhurst.com