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# 2025 CEO COACHING AND KITCHEN CABINET SURVEY



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*If you experience any accessibility issues,  
please contact Brian Tayan at [btayan@stanford.edu](mailto:btayan@stanford.edu).*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

**Almost all CEOs (95 percent) rely on professional coaches or a network of informal advisors to hone their thinking on important organizational issues.**

**Advisors are particularly valued for their integrity, insight, and discretion.**

**Relationships with advisors extend over years — even decades — and include trusted family members, former classmates, social acquaintances, and peers at other corporations.**

Half of CEOs use a professional coach, and 82 percent rely on a carefully selected “kitchen cabinet” of friends, acquaintances, and former colleagues to advise on sensitive workplace issues.

“The stigma around asking for help has lifted,” says Professor David F. Larcker, Stanford Graduate School of Business and The Hoover Institution at Stanford University, who led the study. “Whereas historically it might have been seen as a sign of weakness or uncertainty for business leaders to ask for help, CEOs and directors today are much more comfortable — even eager — to canvass friends and engage professional coaches to sharpen their skills, to make sure they have the full range of knowledge to solve thorny organizational problems. The stereotype of the self-sufficient CEO is being replaced by a recognition that no one has to go it alone.”

“Discretion is key,” adds Stephen A. Miles, CEO of The Miles Group, and co-author of the study. “The issues CEOs and directors grapple with are highly sensitive. Business leaders are careful to cultivate professional and informal advisors known for honesty, judgment, and, above all, confidentiality with whom they can discuss a

wide range of topics from assembling the right team, to dealing with difficult constituents, addressing social controversies in the workplace, and maintaining work-life balance. Coaching and feedback from a kitchen cabinet provide a rare space for open reflection.”

“The mainstream adoption of coaching reflects how the role of CEO has evolved from being the ultimate authority in an organization to a leader who leverages external insights to drive better outcomes,” says Professor Amit Seru, Stanford Graduate School of Business and The Hoover Institution at Stanford University. “CEOs are seeking input because they want to move faster, stay sharp, and avoid blind spots. Their success increasingly hinges on who they trust and invite into their inner circle.”

In the spring of 2025, the Stanford Graduate School of Business, Arthur and Toni Rembe Rock Center for Corporate Governance, Governance of Organizations Working Group at the Hoover Institution, and The Miles Group surveyed 90 CEOs to understand how they rely on paid and informal advisors to improve their work performance.



## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY INCLUDE:

### Reliance on Coaching and Advisors is Now the Norm

More than half of CEOs (58 percent) use a professional coach to discuss business, leadership, and self-development — up from one-third (34 percent) a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> An even greater number of CEOs — 82 percent — rely on friends, acquaintances, and personal connections to informally consult on these same issues. Satisfaction with personal advisors is very high, with over 90 percent of CEOs describing them as extremely or very helpful.

“The rise of professional coaching over the past decade is astounding,” says Larcker. “A decade ago, CEOs reported being lonely at the top, with many — through choice or through circumstance — facing the pressure of being final decision-makers without the support and guidance of a coach. CEOs now know that to be the best at their jobs, they need the best possible counsel, above and beyond what the board and paid corporate consultants offer.”

### Leaders Face a Litany of Issues ...

CEOs grapple with a long list of issues, including personal development and productivity, leadership and team development, selecting team members, dealing with difficult employees, strategy and organizational structure, and managing internal and external constituents.

They are more likely to discuss many issues with informal (“kitchen cabinet”) advisors than with professional coaches, including how to balancing work and personal time (+28 percent), mental

health (+22 percent), selecting board members (+28 percent), strategic (+36 percent) and legal/regulatory issues (+34 percent), managing corporate reputation (+32 percent), and dealing with constituents (up to +30 percent).<sup>2</sup>

“Coaching has become strategic, not remedial,” says Miles. “Being a CEO does not mean you have all of the answers yourself. The best CEOs realize they need support — experienced, objective, and confidential advisors — to serve as a sounding board or gain perspective as they think through complex issues.”

### ... And the Network to Advise Them is Extensive

CEOs rely on four informal advisors, on average, for work-related advice. However, some rely on as many as 10 or more. Kitchen-cabinet advisors include former colleagues (73 percent), CEOs of other companies (70 percent), fellow board members at unaffiliated companies (62 percent), and friends through professional associations (42 percent). CEOs also rely on former classmates (30 percent), family members (25 percent), former paid advisors (17 percent), and friends in the nonprofit industry (15 percent).

“We are just beginning to understand how extensive the group of individuals that CEOs turn to for advice is,” says Seru. “CEOs are curating a portfolio of advisors that offer a tailored mix of perspectives drawing on different individuals for strategic clarity, emotional grounding, and political calibration.”

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1 Stanford Graduate School of Business, Rock Center for Corporate Governance, and The Miles Group, “2013 Executive Coaching Survey,” (2013), available at <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/publications/2013-executive-coaching-survey>.

2 Percentages indicate how many more CEOs cite the following factor as an item they discuss with their informal advisors compared to their personal coach. For example, 33 percent of CEOs discuss work/life balance with their informal advisors whereas only 5 percent discuss this with a professional coach, a difference of 28 percentage points. Detailed results are included in the body of this report.

## CEOs Have Long Histories with Their Networks, and Their Advisors Continue to Evolve

CEOs cultivate a personal network over many years. Nearly nine out of ten CEOs (87 percent) have relied on their network of friends and advisors for more than 10 years; almost half (48 percent) for more than 20 years. While the composition of these groups changes over time, most CEOs (76 percent) rely on half or more of the same individuals as they did earlier in their careers.

“Given the sensitivity of workplace issues, it is not surprising to see CEOs return to individuals who have earned their trust over decades,” Larcker says. “Advisors offer confidentiality to think out loud, explore ideas, and pressure-test decisions. The personal integrity of these individuals is essential. How better to gauge trust than by turning to someone you have known personally for a long, long time?”

## Confidentiality is Essential

Kitchen cabinet advisors are valued for their character, judgment, and integrity — in addition to their business expertise. When asked to describe the personal qualities that caused them to seek these individuals for advice, CEOs most frequently cite balance of perspective, active listening, concern for the CEO’s personal welfare, discretion, honesty, lack of bias, and patient demeanor.

“It is not only the information that personal networks have that makes them so valuable, but also their ability to serve as a thoughtful sounding board,” says Miles. “Kitchen cabinet advisors can bring an elevated degree of trust and comfort for CEOs. Personal connections take time to develop, but once formed, are more authentic and exhibit personal concern that amplifies the value of their counsel.”

## Advice Complements, Rather than Replaces, Board Expertise

Board members contribute to CEO development plans, are aware of the progress they are making, and in many cases refer a coach to an executive. Slightly more than a quarter (26 percent) of CEOs receive professional coaching based, at least in part, on the suggestion of their board of directors. Half of the time (48 percent), professional coaches solicit feedback from the board to include in the CEO’s development plan. Approximately half of directors (44 percent) have referred a professional coach to the CEO.<sup>3</sup>

Boards are much less likely to know that their CEO relies on informal advisors. More than two-thirds of CEOs (69 percent) say their board does not know or are unsure whether their board knows that they rely on personal acquaintances for informal advice.

“Boards are essential, but their oversight role can limit open dialogue with the CEO,” says Seru. “That said, boards need to be fully informed of how the CEO is supported — both through professional coaching and kitchen cabinet advisors — to help them better calibrate their own roles and provide more effective oversight.”

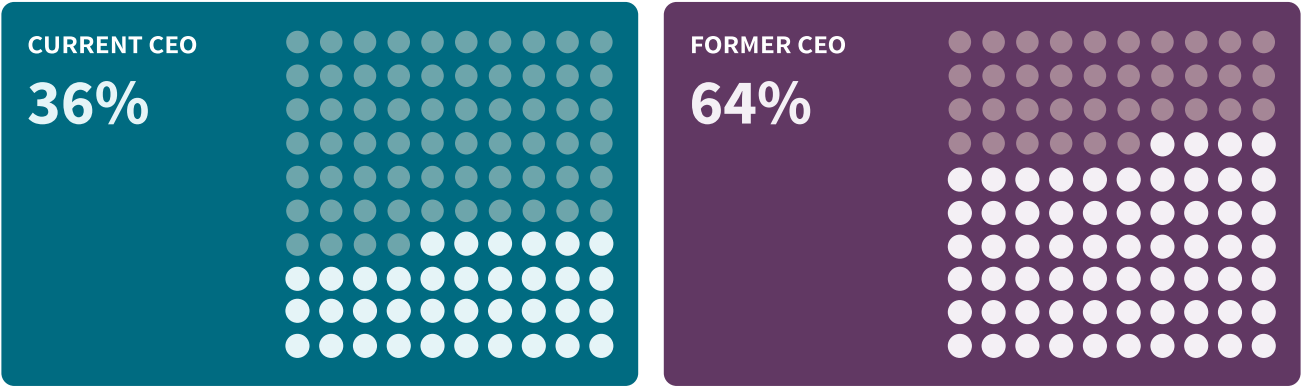
“In moments of uncertainty, from geopolitical shocks to disruptive technologies, this parallel network can help CEOs test ideas and see blind spots the board may miss,” he adds. “Looking ahead, we expect boards themselves will need to think more deliberately about how they, too, broaden their aperture — whether by cultivating their own informal networks or by tapping expertise in emerging domains like AI that are reshaping competitive advantage and governance alike.”

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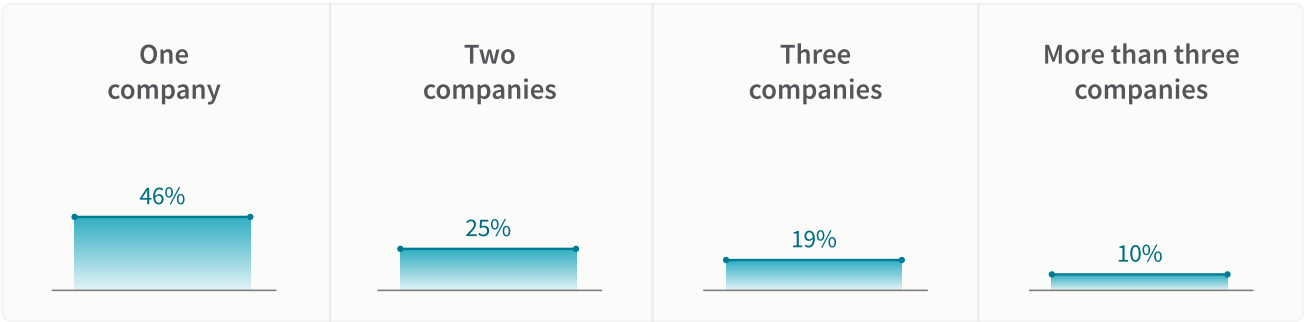
3 See 2025 Director Coaching and Kitchen Cabinet Survey.

# REVIEW OF FINDINGS

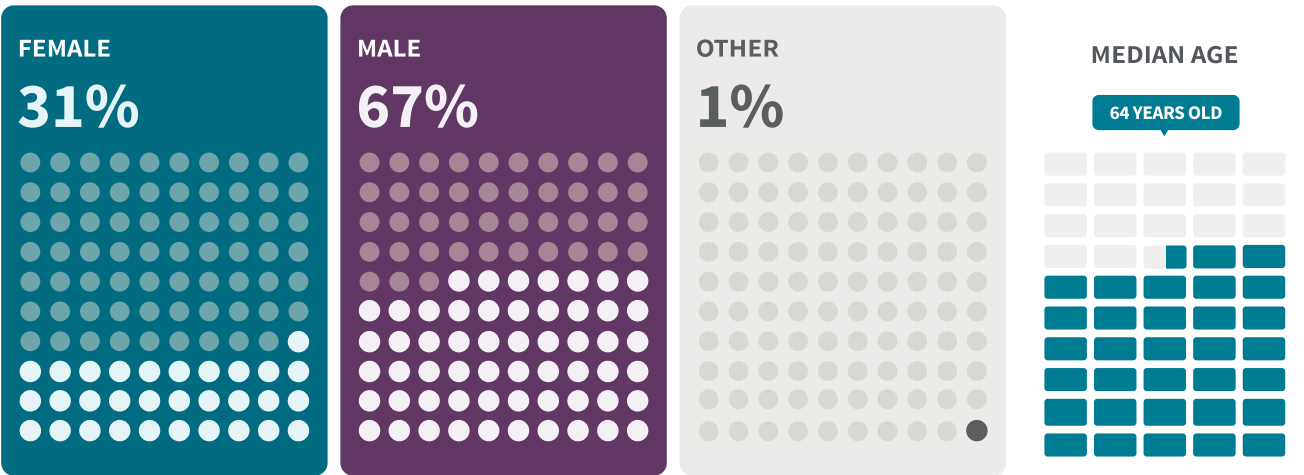
## CEO Experience of Respondents



## Number of Companies Respondents Served as CEO

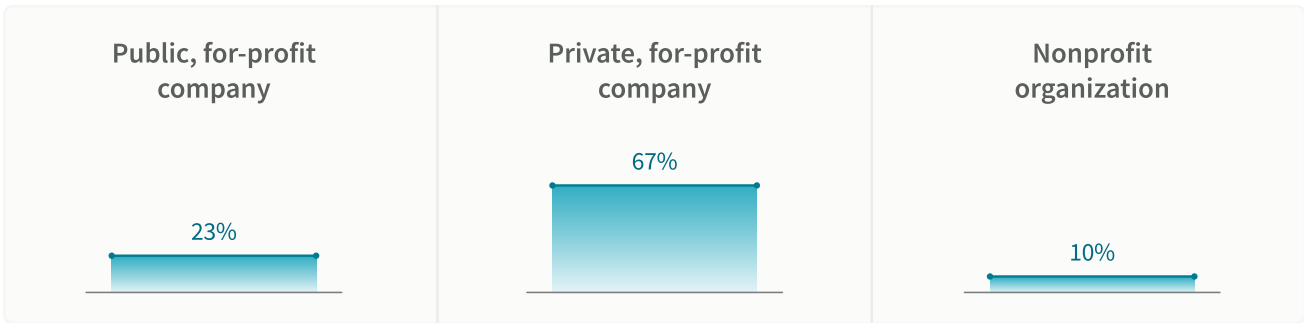


## Respondent Gender & Age

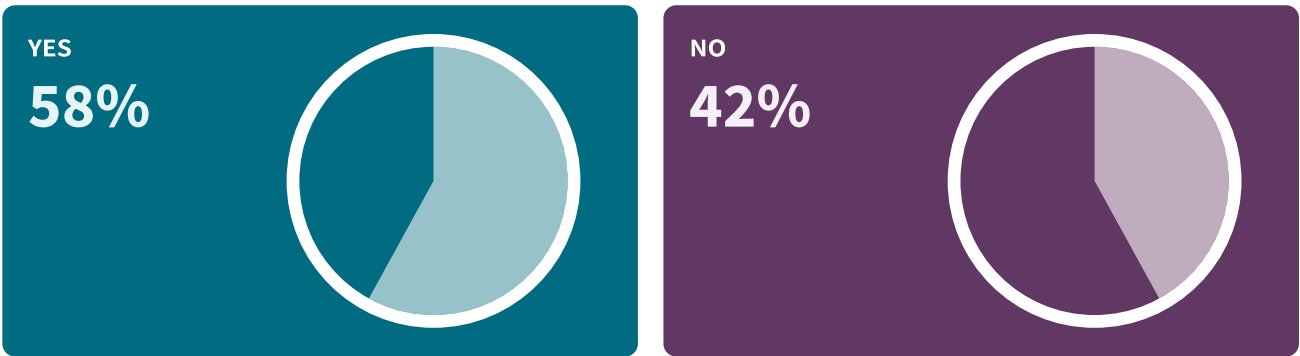


*Respondents answered the following questions from the perspective of their current or most recent job as CEO.*

What was the ownership status of this company?



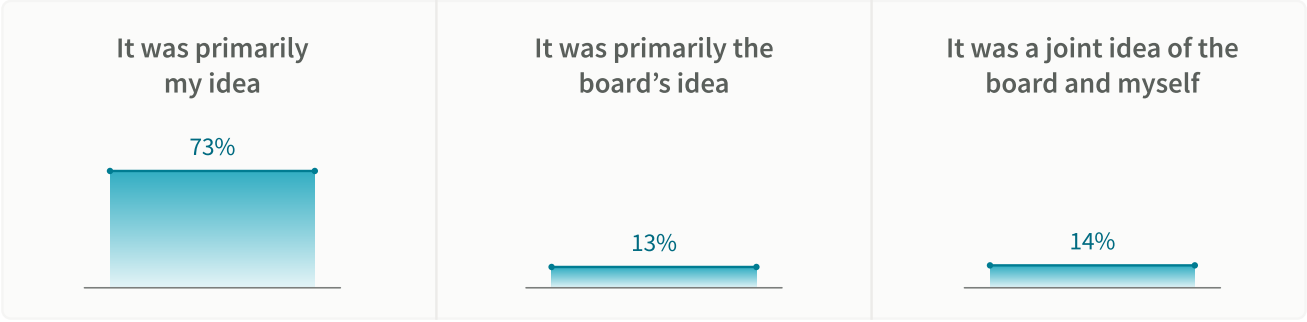
Have you received coaching from a paid professional to support the professional development of your position as CEO?



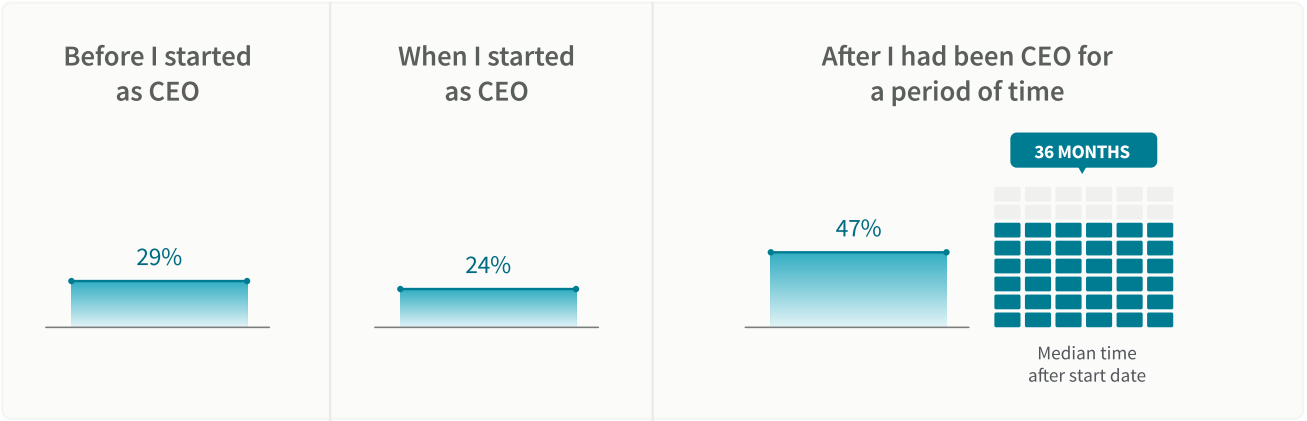
What is the primary profession of this individual?



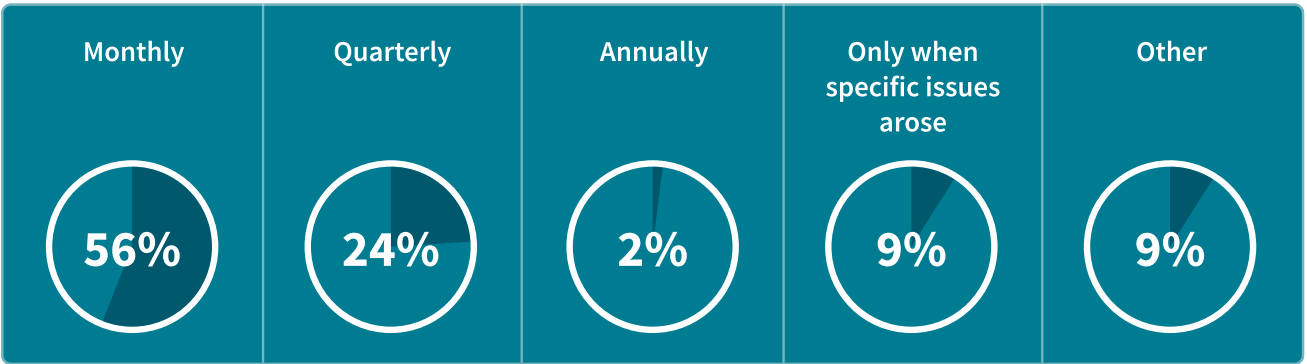
Whose idea was it for you to receive this coaching?



When did you first begin professional coaching sessions with this individual?



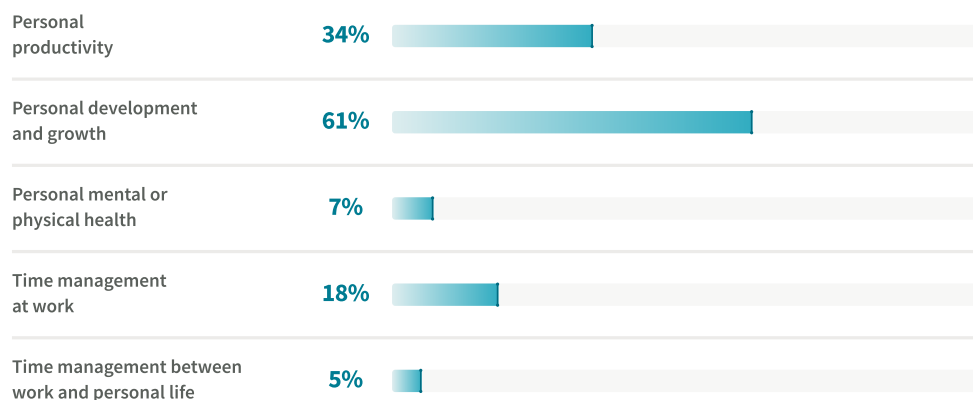
How often did you meet with this individual?



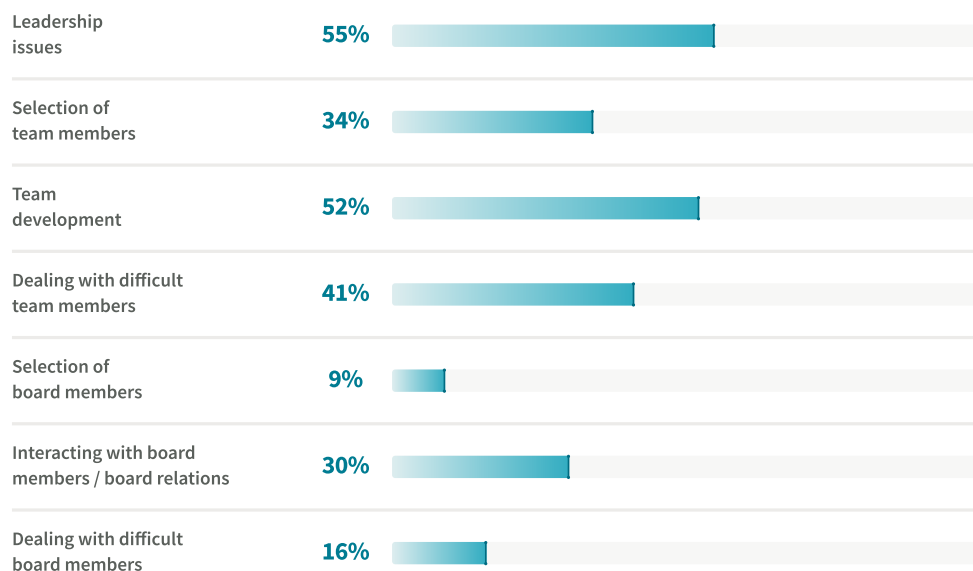


## What are the primary topics you discussed with this coach? (select all that apply)

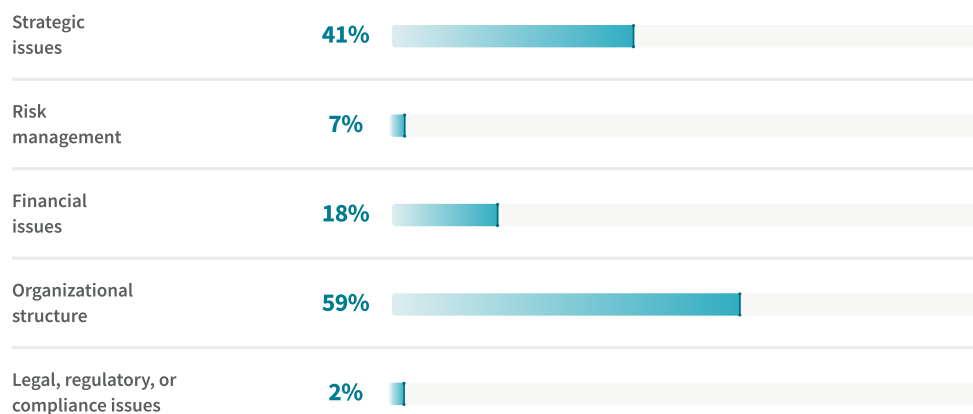
### Self



### Leadership and Team

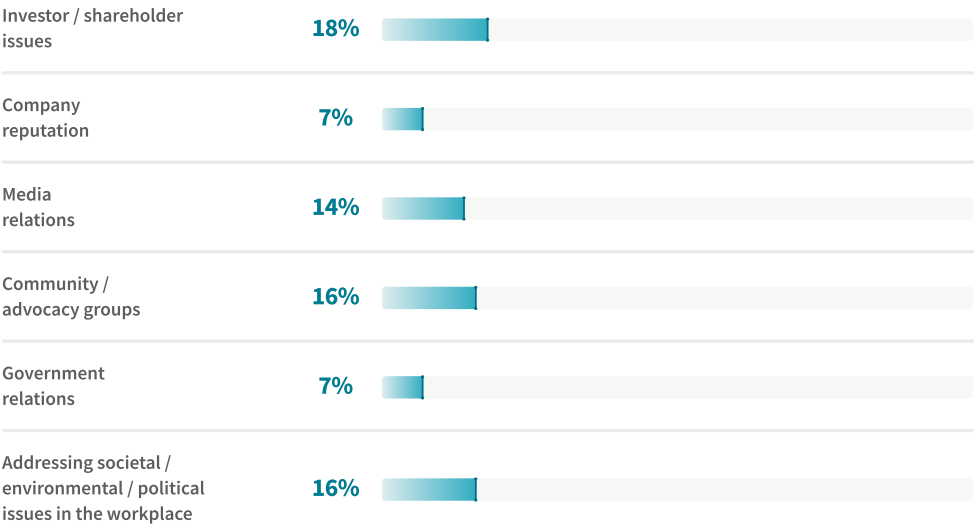


### Business

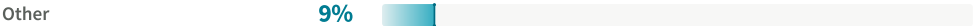


**CONTINUED:** What are the primary topics you discussed with this coach? (select all that apply)

**External and Relations**



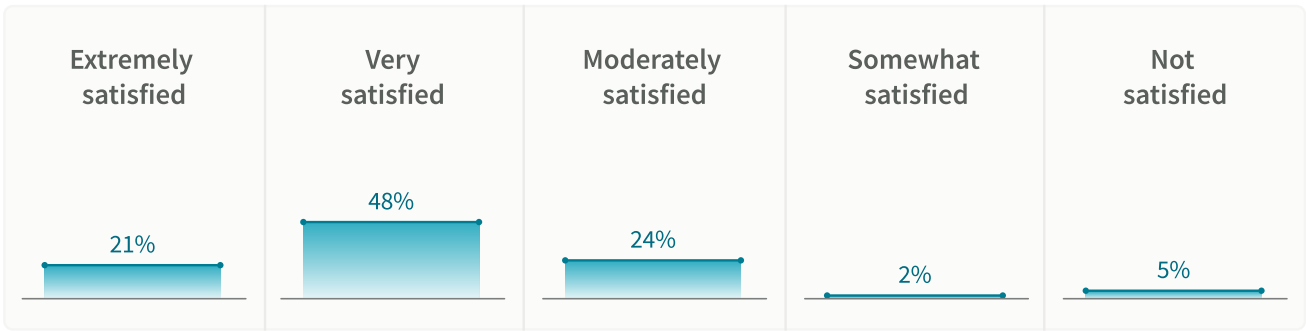
**Other**



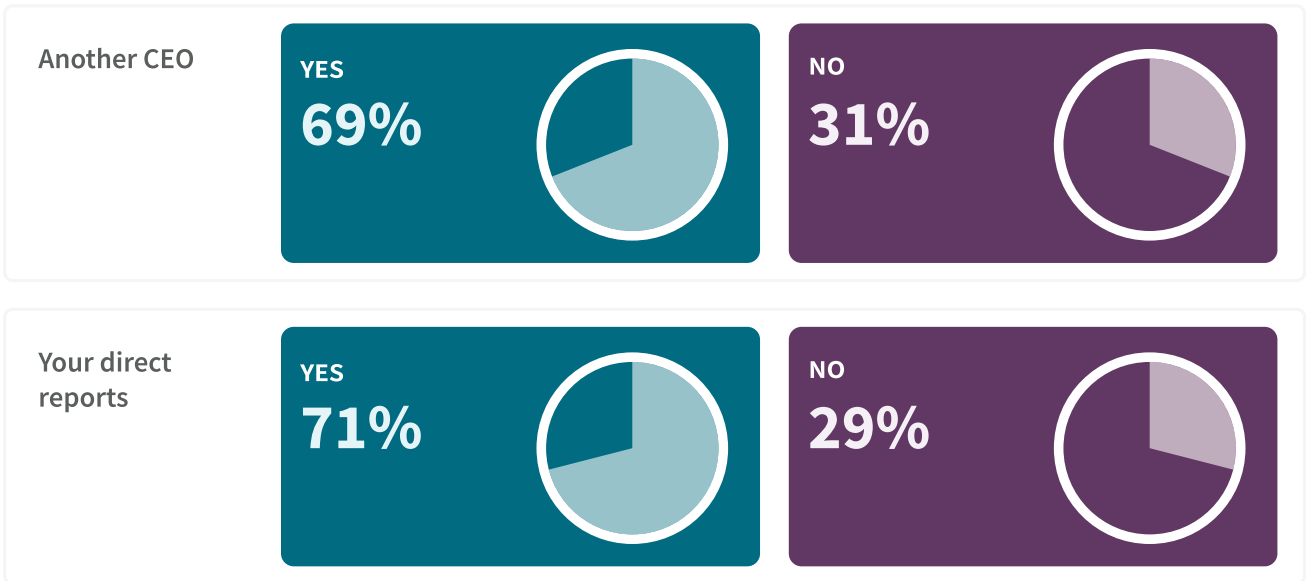
Did your professional coach solicit feedback from your board to include in your development plan?



How satisfied are you with the advice you have received from this professional coach?
















Have you ever referred a professional coach to the following:



## What one issue comes to mind where your coach was particularly helpful in guiding you to a positive outcome?

	Communicating with direct reports
	Constructively dealing with difficult employees or board members
	Creating clarity for every member of the team
	Dealing with complex interpersonal issues in the workplace
	Dealing with multiple, sometimes conflicting, personalities on the leadership team
	Dealing with stress
	Giving me a deeper understanding of my motivations and strengths, and using those to be a better leader
	Giving me broader perspective
	Helping me to lay out options, and look at the pros and the cons
	Holding up the mirror to ensure I was dealing with reality and asking the hard questions
	I was struggling with the thorny issue of reorganizing the leadership team when I knew certain board members would disagree. Coaching helped me hone my message and tailor my approach.
	Independent and critical view of issues
	Interacting with board members outside the board meeting

	Internal management disagreements
	Interpersonal relationships with direct reports
	Leadership behaviors
	Leadership effectiveness, in particular how to build and lead a high performance team
	Personal goals
	Perspective and reframing
	Politics in the workplace
	Setting and meeting stretch goals
	Strategic direction
	Succession planning for the CEO role and C-suite
	Understanding systems thinking and its application to organizations
	Understanding the abilities, values, and interests of my team
	When I became CEO, I thought all CEOs were better at running a company than me. My coach taught me I had a strong grasp of the concepts and helped me work on my leadership style and language.



## Informal Advisors (“Kitchen Cabinet”)

*The following questions relate to personal advisors, friends, and acquaintances who are not paid professionals and who respondents go to on an informal basis to solicit advice on work-related issues.*

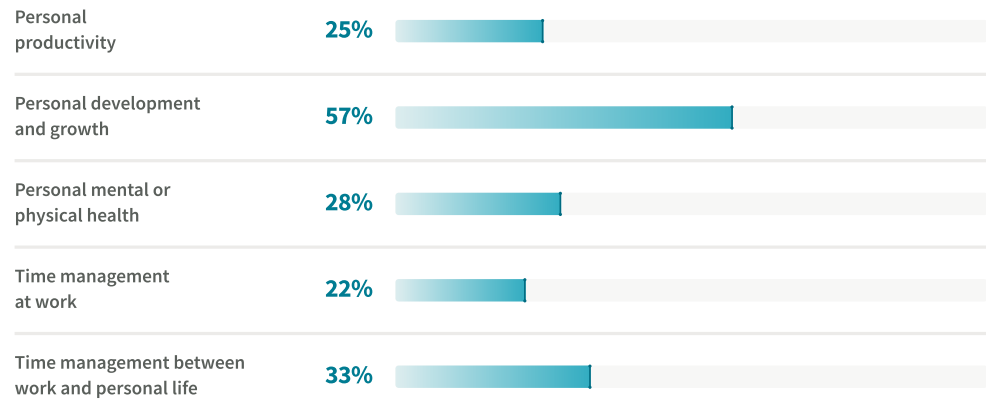
As CEO, have you solicited advice on work-related issues from personal advisors, friends, and acquaintances who are not paid professional or employed by your company?



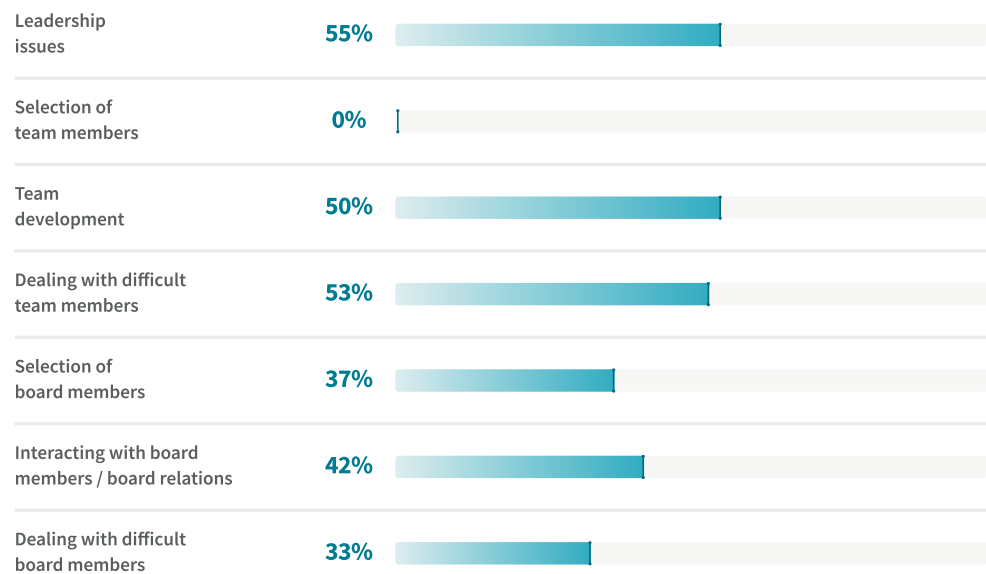


## What are the primary topics you discussed with these individuals? (select all that apply)

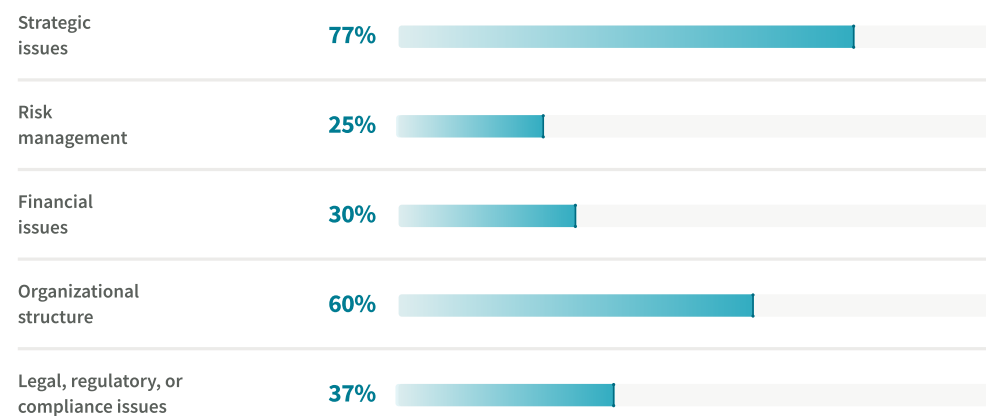
### Self



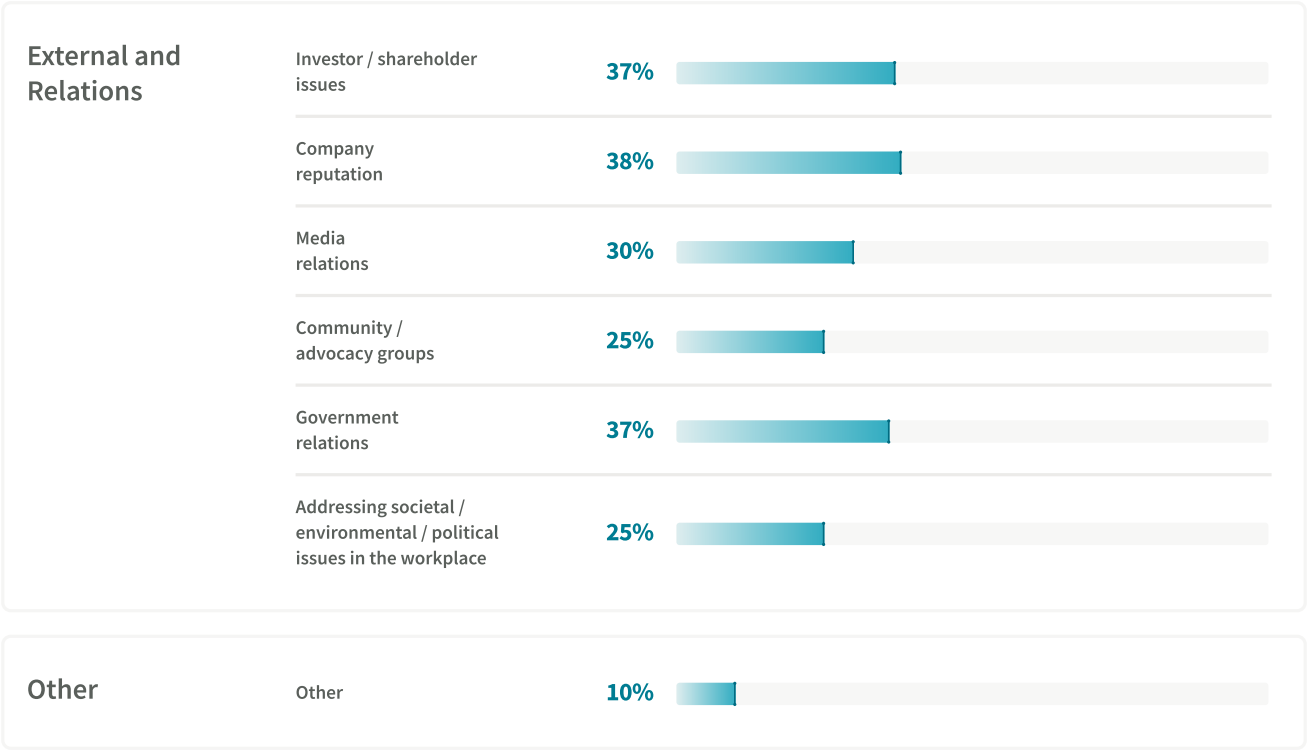
### Leadership and Team



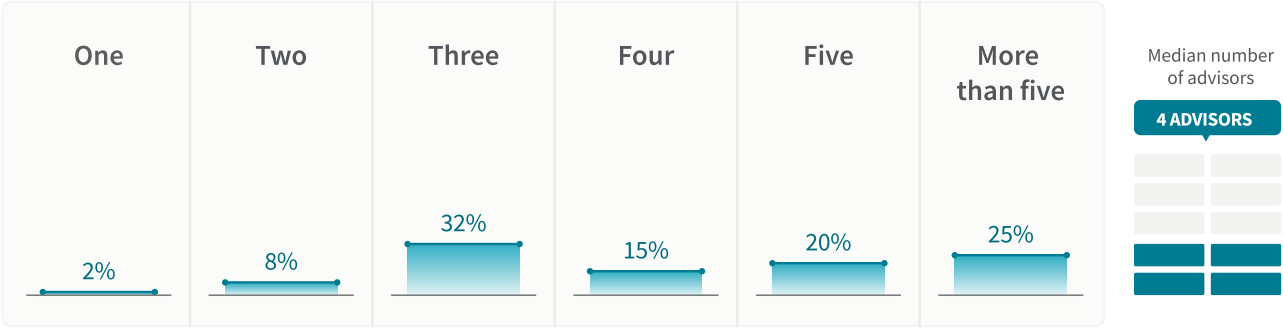
### Business



**CONTINUED:** What are the primary topics you discussed with these individuals? (select all that apply)

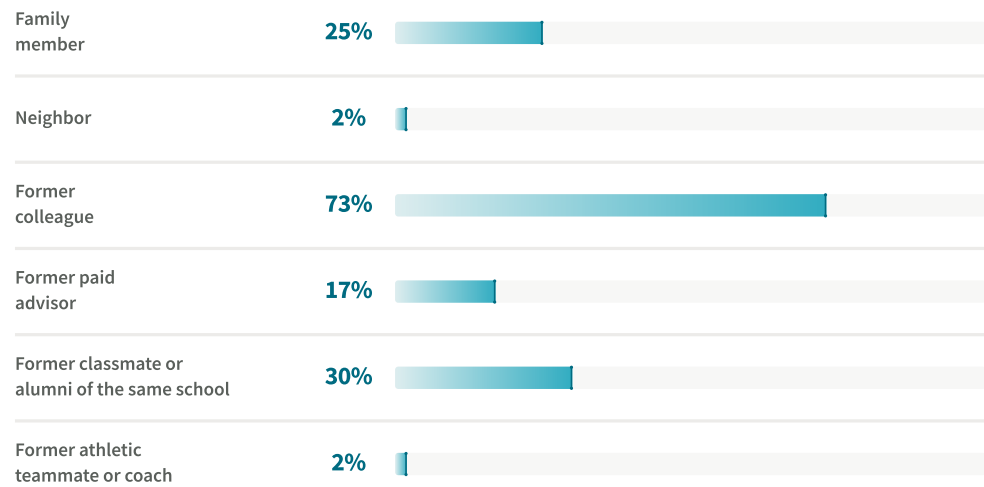


During your time as CEO, approximately how many individuals would you consider to be included in this group of informal advisors that you approach on a periodic basis to discuss these types of issues?

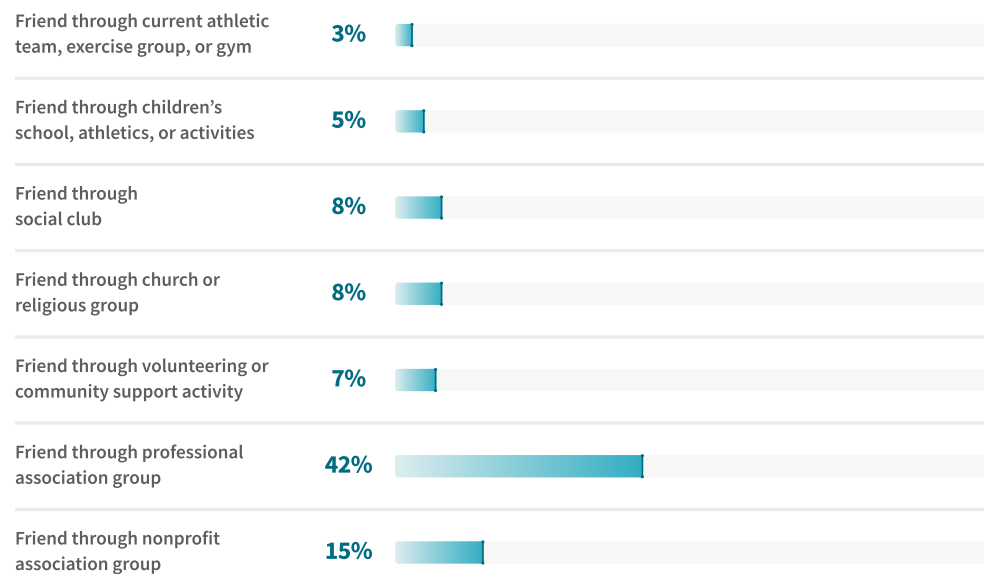


## What is your personal connection to these individuals? (select all that apply)

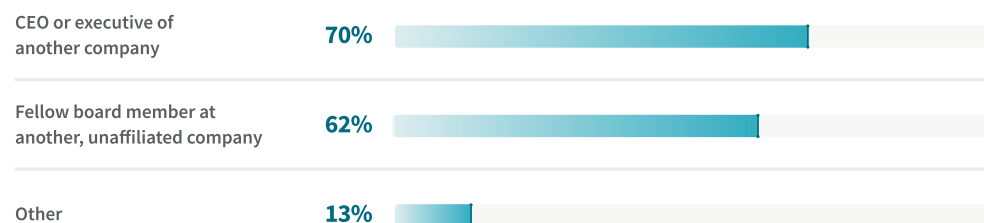
### Family and Acquaintances



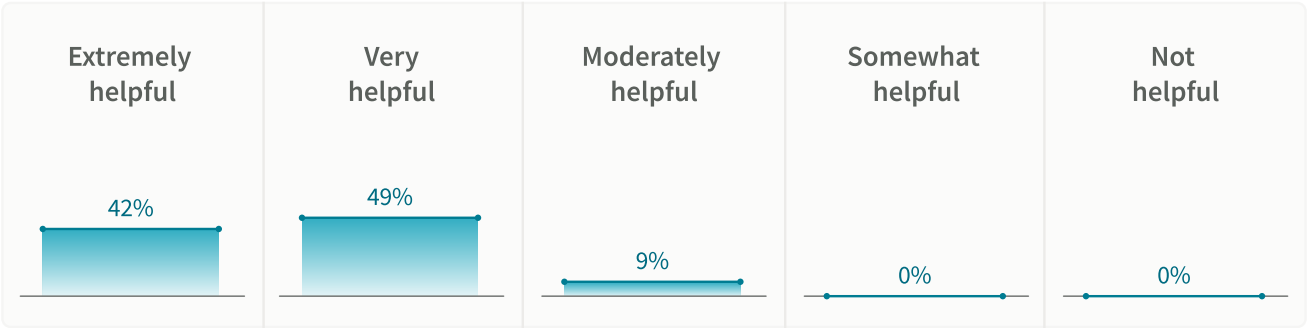
### Other Friends



### Work



How helpful is the advice you have received from these individuals?





























What one issue comes to mind where personal advice was particularly helpful?  
Please describe.

- Board selection
- Career advancement
- Dealing with different constituents
- Dealing with different board members
- Dealing with difficult leaders
- Dealing with male/female differences in workstyle
- Dealing with underperforming executives
- Decision to cancel a new product development program
- Ethical issue in the workplace
- Financing issues
- Hiring the right people

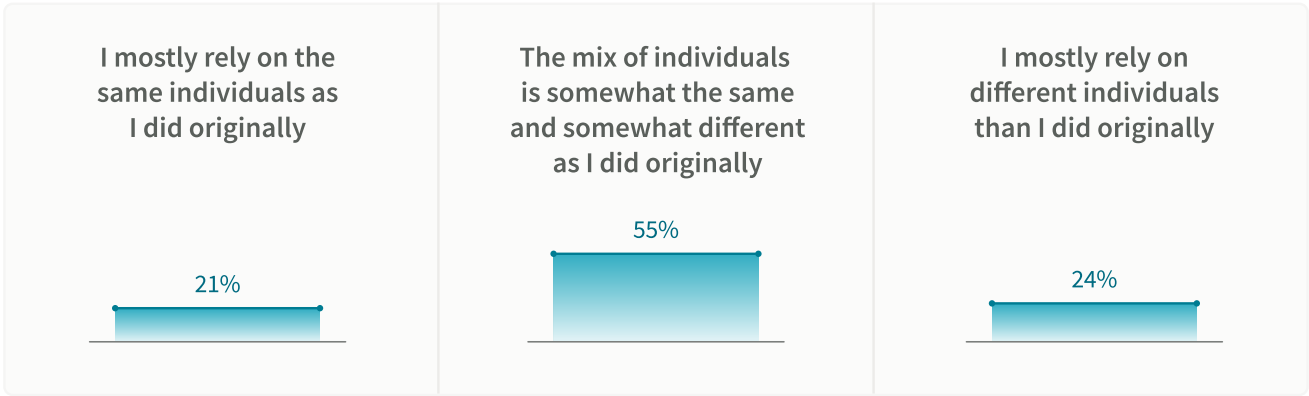
- How to wear different hats as CEO
- Leadership styles, communication, listening, and power
- Legal challenges from a difficult employee
- Negotiating my compensation
- Organizational change, development, and scaling
- Product abuse, potential misuse of our product by customers
- Relocating employee families after a disaster
- Risk management issues
- Time management
- Workplace culture

What personal qualities do these individuals have that caused you to select them as informal advisors? Please describe.

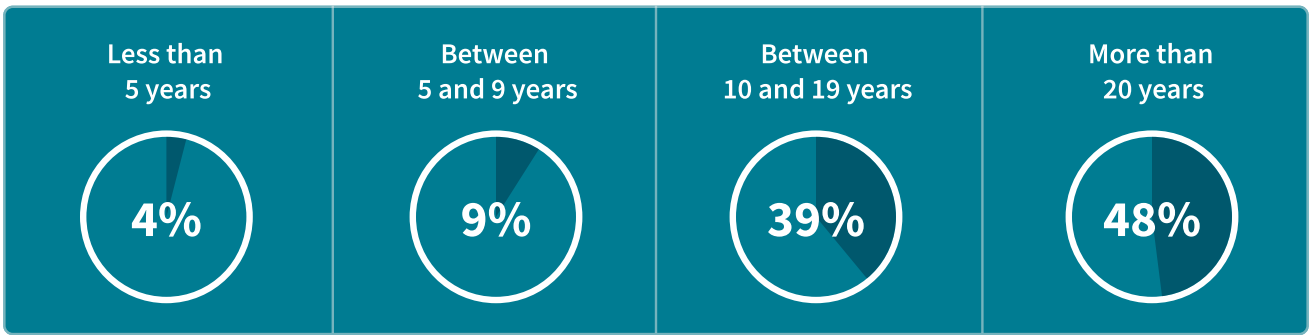
 Active listening	 Concern for my welfare	 Integrity
 Balanced perspective	 Direct communication	 Leadership qualities
 Business judgement	 Discretion	 Not biased
 Candor	 Distance from the day to day	 Patient demeanor
 Character	 Experience in the C-suite	 Personal and professional accomplishments
 Common experience	 Frankness	 Strategic thinker
 Compassion	 Humility	 Thoughtful
 Competence	 Industry experience	 Trust
 Confidentiality	 Insight	



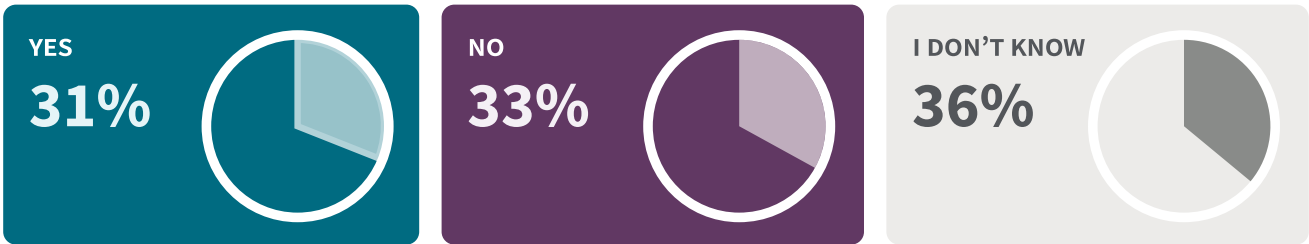
How has the composition of this group changed over time?



How long have you used informal advisors for advice?

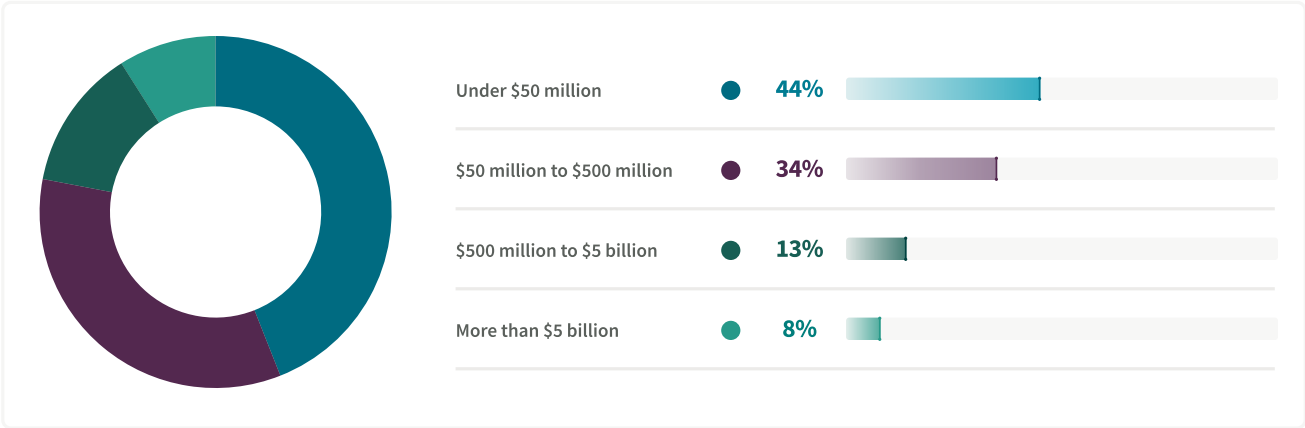


Did your board/fellow board members know that you relied on these individuals for advice?

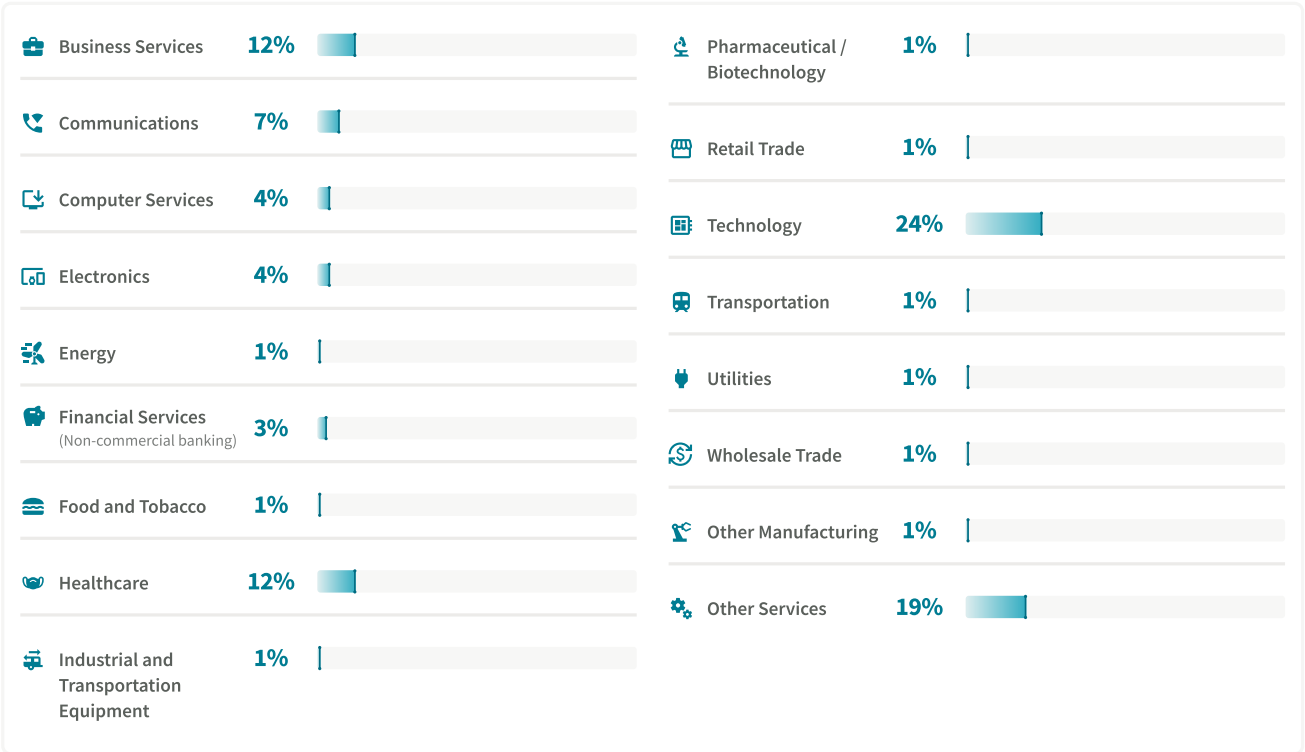


# Company Information

## Revenue of Company



## Industry of Company





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## METHODOLOGY

In spring 2025, the Corporate Governance Research Initiative at Stanford Graduate School of Business, Arthur and Toni Rembe Rock Center for Corporate Governance, Governance of Organizations Working Group at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and The Miles Group conducted a survey of 90 current and former CEOs of both public and private organizations to understand how they rely on professional coaches and informal advisors to inform their thinking on work-related issues.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### David F. Larcker

David F. Larcker is the James Irvin Miller Professor of Accounting, Emeritus, at Stanford Graduate School of Business; director of the Corporate Governance Research Initiative; distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution; and senior faculty of the Arthur and Toni Rembe Rock Center for Corporate Governance. His research focuses on executive compensation and corporate governance. He presently serves on the Board of Trustees for Allspring Funds. He is coauthor of the books *The Art and Practice of Corporate Governance*, *A Real Look at Real World Corporate Governance*, and *Corporate Governance Matters*.

Email: [dlarcker@stanford.edu](mailto:dlarcker@stanford.edu)

X: [@stanfordcorgov](https://twitter.com/stanfordcorgov)

Full Bio: [gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/faculty/david-f-larcker](https://gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/faculty/david-f-larcker)



### Stephen Miles

Stephen Miles is the founder and CEO of The Miles Group, advising top CEOs, COOs, and executive teams around the world. He is a recognized authority on CEO succession and C-suite performance, and co-founder of the New CEO Program at the University of Melbourne. He works closely with the Stanford Graduate School of Business on research related to board and executive dynamics. A frequent contributor to Forbes, Bloomberg, and Harvard Business Review, Stephen also hosts the *C-Suite Intelligence* podcast. His books on leadership are widely read by senior executives navigating high-stakes environments. Stephen's global approach to coaching is shaped by his experiences living in Kenya, South Africa, Iraq, Argentina, Canada, and the U.S.

Email: [smiles@miles-group.com](mailto:smiles@miles-group.com)

Podcast: [C-Suite Intelligence at miles-group.com/podcasts](https://miles-group.com/podcasts)

Full Bio: [miles-group.com/teams/stephen-miles](https://miles-group.com/teams/stephen-miles)



## Amit Seru

Amit Seru is the Steven and Roberta Denning Professor of Finance at Stanford Graduate School of Business; a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR); and a research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). His research focuses on corporate finance with an emphasis on financial intermediation and regulation, technological innovation and incentive provision, and financing in firms.

Email: [aseru@stanford.edu](mailto:aseru@stanford.edu)

Full Bio: [gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/faculty/amit-seru](https://gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/faculty/amit-seru)



## Brian Tayan

Brian Tayan is a member of the Corporate Governance Research Initiative at Stanford Graduate School of Business. He has written broadly on the subject of corporate governance, including boards of directors, succession planning, compensation, financial accounting, and shareholder relations. He is coauthor with David Larcker of the books *The Art and Practice of Corporate Governance*, *A Real Look at Real World Corporate Governance*, and *Corporate Governance Matters*.

Email: [btayan@stanford.edu](mailto:btayan@stanford.edu)

Full Bio: [gsb.stanford.edu/contact/brian-tayan](https://gsb.stanford.edu/contact/brian-tayan)



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## ABOUT US

### Corporate Governance Research Initiative

The Corporate Governance Research Initiative at Stanford Graduate School of Business focuses on research to advance the intellectual understanding of corporate governance, both domestically and abroad. By collaborating with academics and practitioners from the public and private sectors, we seek to generate insights into critical issues and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Our research covers a broad range of topics that include executive compensation, board governance, CEO succession, and proxy voting.

[gsb.stanford.edu/cgri](https://gsb.stanford.edu/cgri)

### The Rock Center for Corporate Governance

The Arthur and Toni Rembe Rock Center for Corporate Governance is a joint initiative of Stanford Law School and Stanford Graduate School of Business. The center was created to advance the understanding and practice of corporate governance in a cross-disciplinary environment where leading academics, business leaders, policymakers, practitioners, and regulators can meet and work together.

[rockcenter.stanford.edu](https://rockcenter.stanford.edu)

### The Governance of Organizations Working Group at the Hoover Institution

The Governance of Organizations Working Group at the Hoover Institution brings together scholars, industry practitioners, and policymakers to engage in constructive and open debate about the logical consistency, treatment of evidence, and policy implications of proposed reforms to the regulatory systems that impact corporations. It also generates and disseminates research investigating the optimal conditions that allow corporations to sustain their crucial role in contributing to American economic growth and innovation.

[hoover.org/research-teams/governance-organizations-working-group](https://hoover.org/research-teams/governance-organizations-working-group)

### The Miles Group

TMG, part of Council Advisors, is the leader in strategic talent development services. They help boards, CEOs, CHROs, and C-suite executives tackle their toughest leadership challenges—building stronger leaders, more effective teams, and high-performing boards. Their work spans executive coaching, assessment, succession planning, board effectiveness, and strategic team off-sites. By stripping back the superfluous and focusing on what truly matters, TMG enables leaders and organizations to accelerate growth and create lasting impact.

[miles-group.com](https://miles-group.com)



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## CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information on this report,  
please contact:

Elizabeth Lee  
Associate Director of Communications

Stanford Graduate School of Business  
Knight Management Center  
Stanford University  
655 Knight Way  
Stanford, CA 94305-7298

[eslee123@stanford.edu](mailto:eslee123@stanford.edu)