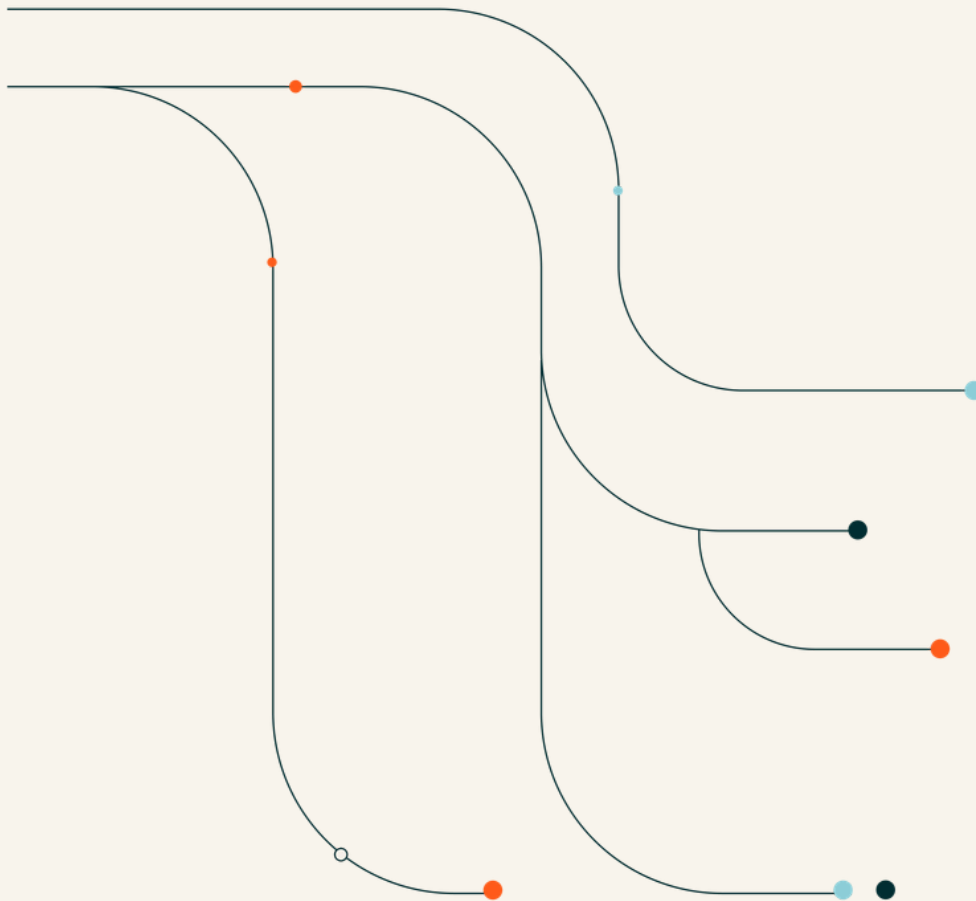


# State of the Operator

Running the company while the  
operating model changes



# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Who We Surveyed .....	4
A Company in Between Operating Models .....	5
The Intensity of the Transition Increases with Scale .....	6
Productivity Expectations Change Before Operations Do .....	7
Metrics Become a Way to Understand the New Model .....	9
When Tools Outpace Operating Rules .....	10
Why Alignment Feels Harder .....	11
The Role Expands Across Boundaries .....	11
Operating Under Uncertainty Becomes Part of the Job .....	12
What Operators Expect Next .....	13
A Changing Definition of Operating Work .....	13
Implications for the Role .....	14
Operating Between Models .....	14
Key Takeaways .....	15

# Executive summary

High-growth companies have not yet found a steady operating rhythm. They are moving from a people-scaled model to one shaped by leverage — AI, automation, and systems that can generate work alongside humans.

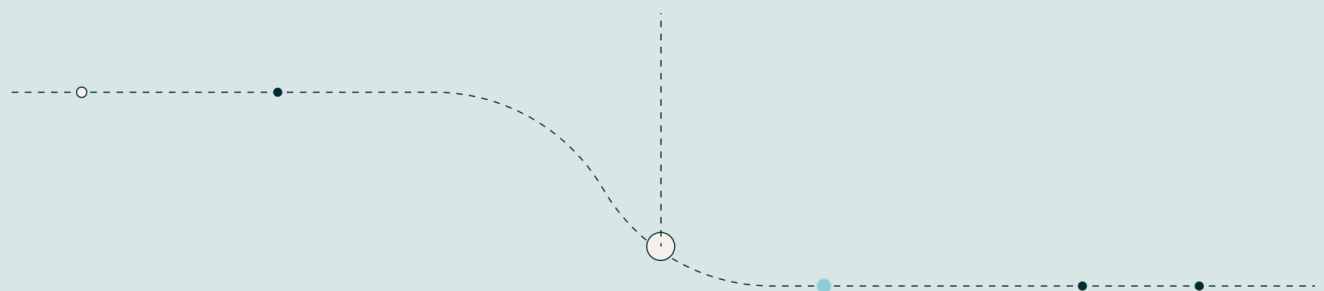
The ambition is clear: produce more output without adding proportional headcount. The mechanics are not. Teams are still learning what productivity means when software drafts analyses, assists decisions, and reshapes workflows faster than companies can standardize them.

This report draws on a survey of 159 operators from the Operators Guild community. These leaders are embedded in high-growth companies who are responsible for finance, operations, and cross-functional execution. Because OG members sit at the center of execution, they see friction in real time, including cautious hiring, rising expectations for efficiency, expanding automation across functions, and increased alignment work as roles blur and ownership shifts.

Companies are not simply layering in tools. They are recalibrating how work happens while still running the business.

Operators are carrying that transition. They are connecting systems that were never designed to interact, defining guardrails for automated output, and helping teams act consistently while the underlying model evolves. The work is less about building static processes and more about maintaining continuity while the operating logic itself changes. This report examines how that shift shows up across priorities, metrics, headcount decisions, tooling, and day-to-day responsibilities, and what it signals about the next phase of operating leadership.

**The job is no longer only to run the machine. It is to keep the company moving while the machine is rebuilt around it.**



# Who we surveyed

This report reflects responses from operators working inside growing companies. The responses come primarily from decision-level operators – the roles responsible for turning company goals into coordinated action.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents hold VP-level or executive positions, with most of the remainder in director-level roles. The largest share sits in finance and operations leadership, alongside a smaller set of chiefs of staff, transformation leads, and other cross-functional roles that exist specifically to connect teams. These positions typically own planning cycles, performance measurement, and execution across departments rather than output within a single function.

That perspective matters. The patterns described here are not observations from the edge of the organization. They come from the layer responsible for deciding how work should be done.

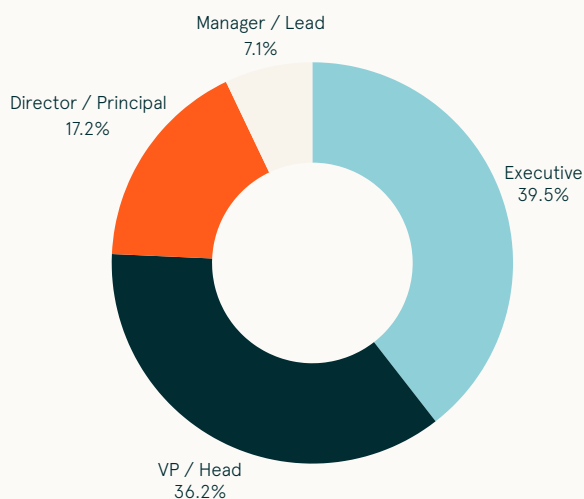
Because of where these operators sit, they encounter structural change early. When expectations about productivity shift, whether due to efficiency pressures, automation initiatives, or hiring uncertainty, the first impact is seen in planning, coordination, and prioritization decisions. Only later does it appear as process change inside individual teams.

## Company Stage

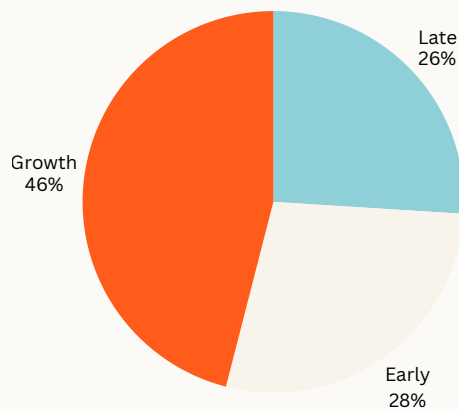
Respondents came primarily from scaling companies rather than very early startups or mature enterprises.

The consistent characteristic across responses was organizational complexity: companies large enough to have multiple teams and systems, but still actively changing how they operate.

### Seniority level

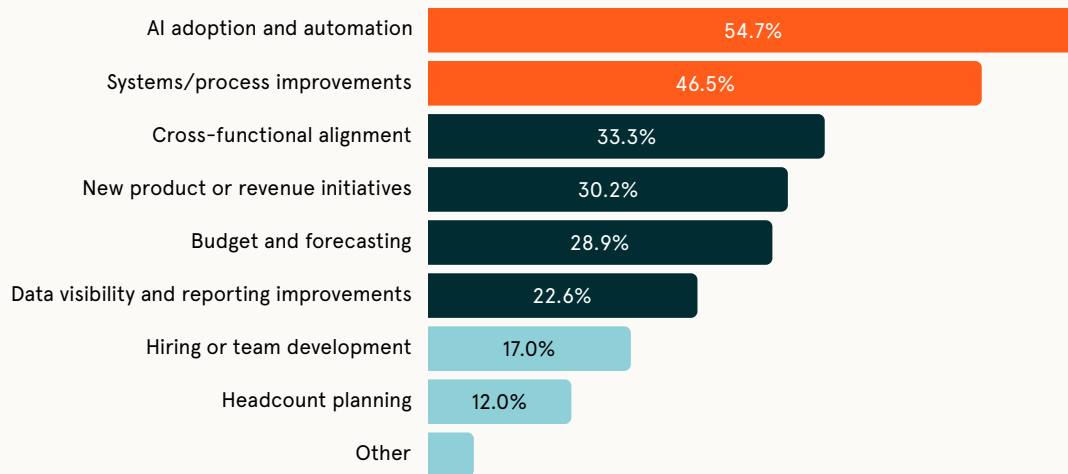


### Stage group



# A company in between operating models

What are your top three **priorities** as you head into the new year?



For most of the past decade, scaling followed a familiar pattern. Companies grew, hired specialists, and introduced processes to stabilize volume. Complexity appeared after expansion, and organizational structure absorbed it.

Today, complexity arrives earlier.

Systems continuously generate drafts, categorize information, update forecasts, and surface insights. The company does not wait for work to accumulate; it reacts to signals as they appear. Teams can act quickly, but they often act differently. A forecast update triggers one reaction in finance, another in product, and another in sales. The organization has activity, yet shared interpretation forms more slowly.

The survey responses reflect this environment. Operators are not primarily expanding organizations. They are helping existing organizations operate coherently while assumptions about how work should be done remain unsettled.

The company is neither manual nor automated. It is operating while becoming something else.

# The intensity of the transition increases with scale

The underlying shift toward AI-assisted work appears across every stage. Roughly half of early and growth-stage operators report AI adoption or automation as a current priority.

At later stages, that rises to more than seventy percent.

This does not suggest earlier companies are unaffected. It suggests that once organizations reach a certain level of complexity, the transition becomes unavoidable. Automation is no longer one initiative among many. It becomes central to how the company maintains coherence.

Earlier-stage teams are navigating the shift. Later-stage teams are restructuring around it.

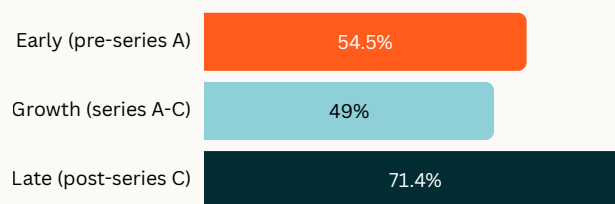
The operating model is changing at every level. Scale determines how urgently it must be formalized.

## COMMON ACROSS STAGES

- Hiring caution persists even as output expectations rise
- Systems and workflow changes remain continuous
- Operators spend more time interpreting how work should happen, not just executing it

The difference is not whether companies are transitioning. It is how visible the transition becomes as complexity accumulates.

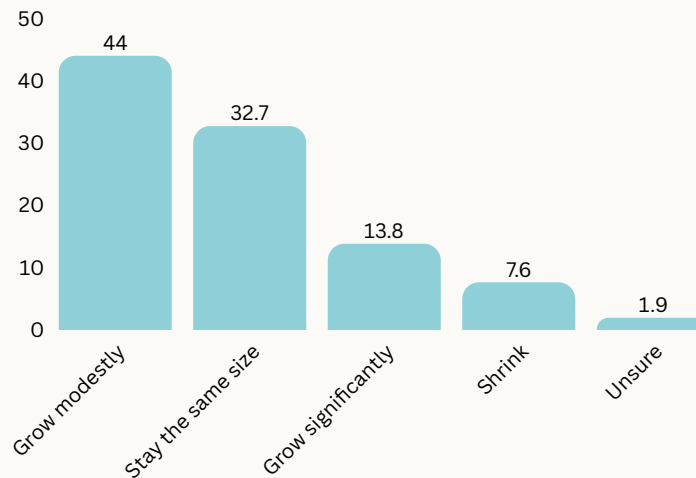
### Operators reporting AI adoption as a priority



Percentage selecting AI adoption as priority by stage

# Productivity expectations change before operations do

How do you expect your **team to change** in the next 12 months?



The underlying question has shifted. Rather than assuming increased output requires more people, organizations are evaluating whether it can be achieved through process changes, automation, or clearer coordination across existing teams. Productivity gains are expected, but the mechanism is still uncertain.

The survey results show a clear ordering of priorities. Operators most frequently selected AI adoption, strategic planning, and systems improvement as current focus areas, while hiring and headcount planning ranked near the bottom.

*"We're planning capacity around assumptions about leverage, not people."*

*~ Controller, Series B Company*

Growth remains an objective, but expansion of structure is no longer the first response to demand.

That pattern appears again in staffing expectations. More than 75% of respondents reported they expect their teams to grow only modestly – or not at all – this year. Companies are not pausing progress. They are pausing structural commitments while they determine how work should be produced.

This changes the nature of planning conversations.

Instead of forecasting hiring needs and then designing workflows around them, teams first examine which tasks require human judgment, which can be automated, and which disappear once workflows are reorganized. Only after that interpretation do staffing decisions follow.

Operators increasingly carry that analysis. They assess where automation reduces effort, where it redistributes effort to another team, and where it introduces oversight work.

*“Leadership expects more output, but no one wants to commit to headcount until we see what AI actually replaces.”*

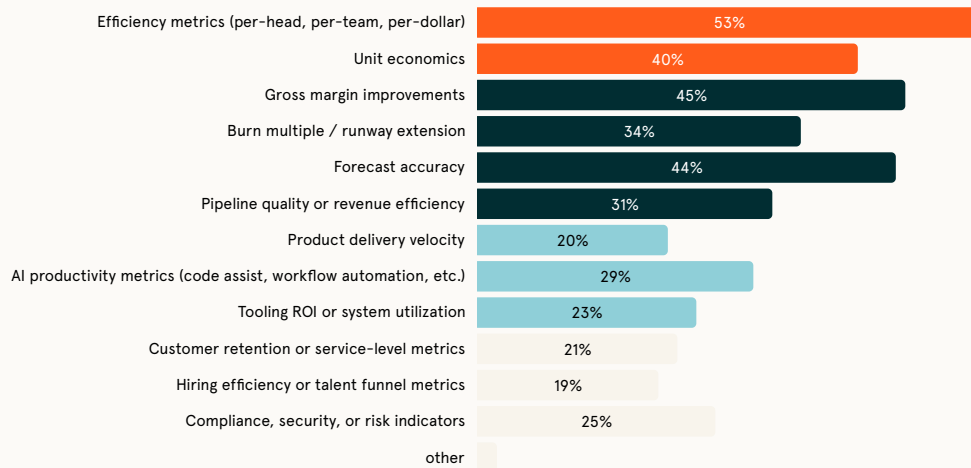
*~ Head of Finance at a Series A Company*

Headcount decisions, therefore, depend less on workload volume and more on understanding how work behaves inside a changing operating model.

In practical terms, the company is learning how it will scale before expanding the structure built to support it.

# Metrics become a way to understand the new model

What **metrics** are you now being asked to own or influence?



Performance metrics reinforce the same transition.

Efficiency per head, margin improvement, forecast accuracy, and unit economics were among the most emphasized measures. Delivery velocity and hiring efficiency ranked lower. The change is subtle but meaningful. Companies are not abandoning growth – they are trying to understand how predictable growth is in a partially automated environment.

When workflows change, historical benchmarks lose clarity. A forecast may update faster but depend on unfamiliar inputs. Productivity may increase in one team while creating downstream work in another. Output rises, yet the relationship between effort and result feels less stable.

Metrics, therefore, serve a different purpose. They are not only measuring performance. They are helping organizations determine whether the emerging operating model behaves consistently.

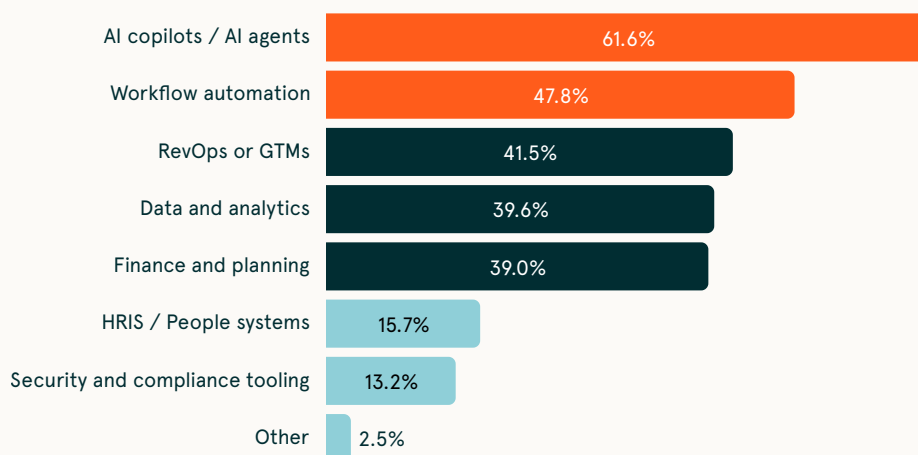
*“Forecasting used to be finance’s job — now it requires agreement across the whole company.”*

*~ Head of FP&A, Series C Company*

Operators increasingly participate in that interpretation. Reporting shifts from presenting numbers to explaining what the numbers represent under new conditions. The conversation becomes less about “how did we do” and more about “what does this now mean.”

# When tools outpace operating rules

Where are you planning to **invest in tools or systems** in 2026?



Automation initiatives appeared in nearly every response, yet operators rarely described clean implementation. Instead, they described evaluation, standardization, and translation.

Organizations are experimenting across multiple layers at once: workflow tools, copilots, reporting assistants, support automation, and forecasting systems. Each introduces a useful capability but also changes how teams interpret information. One group may trust automated categorization immediately, while another treats it as draft guidance. The same output produces different behavior.

*“Every team is using a different tool, so the real work is deciding which outputs we trust.”*

*~ Sr. Director, Sales Ops, Public Company*

Operators increasingly manage these temporary operating rules. They define when teams act automatically, when they confirm manually, and how exceptions are handled while the company learns what works. The work resembles maintaining continuity during a migration, neither removing the old system nor fully relying on the new one.

**Tool adoption is less about installation and more about collective understanding.**

# Why alignment feels harder

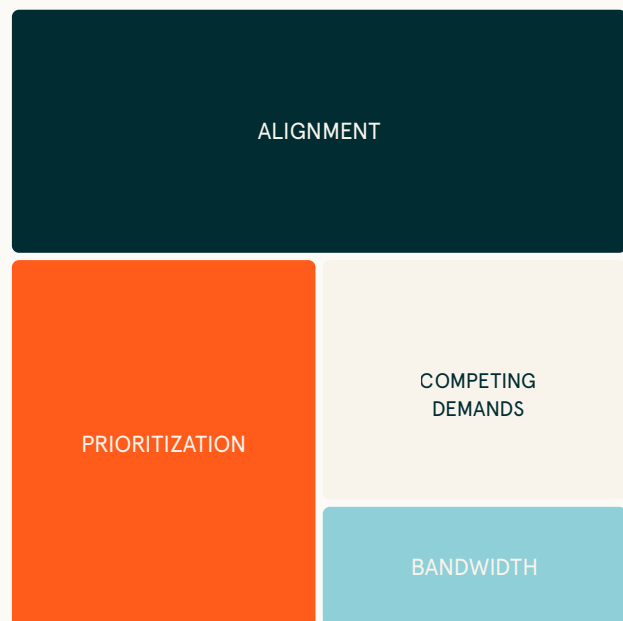
When asked about the hardest part of their role, operators most frequently mentioned alignment, prioritization, bandwidth, and uncertainty rather than lack of resources. The responses point to a shared experience: the difficulty lies not in completing the work but in coordinating reactions to it.

As workflows evolve, teams operate with slightly different assumptions about how much work software handles, how quickly decisions should follow, and who owns edge cases. None of these assumptions are final, yet decisions still need to be made daily.

Alignment therefore becomes ongoing rather than periodic. Instead of agreeing on a plan and executing, teams repeatedly recalibrate while executing. Operators spend more time reconciling interpretations so work can continue without interruption.

The organization is functioning during adaptation, and adaptation produces coordination work.

What is the **hardest part** of your role?



*"Cross-functional alignment is the hardest part of my job right now."*

*~ Vice President, BizOps, Series C*

## The role expands across boundaries

Operators also described expanding scope across finance, data, operations, and go-to-market functions. The shift does not necessarily appear in titles, but it does appear in responsibilities. Questions arrive that belong partially to several teams and fully to none.

This reflects how value increasingly emerges from interaction. Pricing decisions affect onboarding load, support behavior affects revenue recognition, and automation affects forecasting confidence. A single workflow rarely stays within one domain.

Operators become connective tissue. They translate implications so decisions remain coherent across contexts. The role involves less ownership of a function and more stewardship of shared understanding.

**The company's structure changes gradually, but the operator's perspective changes immediately.**

*"We'll spend the next year defining what still requires human judgment."*

*~ Sr. Director, Business Ops, Series D*

## Operating under uncertainty becomes part of the job

Across responses about newly added scope, a pattern appears: operators are determining how much the organization can rely on evolving capabilities. They validate outputs, define usage expectations, and decide when humans intervene.

This work differs from implementation. Implementation assumes a finished process. Here, the process is forming while in use. The company wants to benefit from improved leverage, but it cannot pause operations until the leverage is perfect. Someone must decide when "good enough" becomes operational.

Operators often fill that role. They turn emerging capability into dependable behavior by defining temporary norms that allow teams to act consistently.

The job includes running the business and stabilizing change at the same time.

# What operators expect next

Looking ahead, respondents expect to spend more time clarifying boundaries between human judgment and automated assistance. They anticipate deciding where autonomy is appropriate and where oversight remains necessary.

This reflects a progression already underway. Early phases involve experimentation. Later phases involve standardization. The company gradually moves from “try tools” to “define rules.” Operators expect their work to follow that path – less coordination of experiments, more definition of norms.

The role, therefore, evolves from helping teams navigate change to helping organizations formalize it.

*“My job used to be improving processes. Now it’s making sure the company behaves consistently while everything keeps changing.”*

*~ VP, Business Ops, Series B*

## A changing definition of operating work

Taken together, the findings describe a shift in the nature of operating work.

Previously, operations primarily ensured execution within a known structure. The challenge was organizing the effort efficiently. Today, the structure itself is evolving as work continues. The challenge becomes maintaining consistent behavior as assumptions change.

Operators increasingly help organizations interpret new capabilities, align responses across teams, and sustain momentum during adaptation. The job requires practical judgment more than additional output.

The company learns a new way of working while still needing to work.

# Implications for the role

This transition reshapes how operators create value. Impact comes less from accelerating tasks and more from clarifying decisions. Shared definitions reduce friction more than additional reporting. Consistent interpretation prevents repeated debate. Establishing temporary rules allows teams to move forward even before permanent ones are in place.

This transition reshapes how operators create value. Impact comes less from accelerating tasks and more from clarifying decisions. Shared definitions reduce friction more than additional reporting. Consistent interpretation prevents repeated debate. Establishing temporary rules allows teams to move forward even before permanent ones are in place.

Operators increasingly influence outcomes by helping the organization understand what its own tools, metrics, and workflows imply. They maintain continuity across shifting assumptions so planning, hiring, and execution remain connected.

The role becomes the place where change becomes usable.

## Operating between models

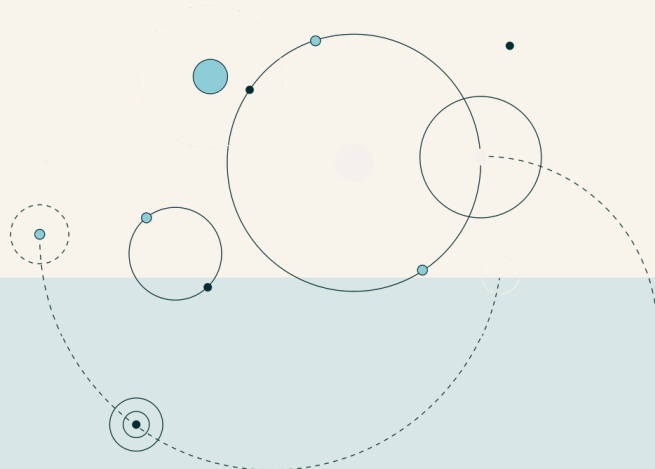
The survey does not describe a single new operating model. It describes a period between models.

Companies expect leverage but are still learning how to achieve it. They experiment with automation while continuing daily operations.

In that environment, the most important work often involves making evolving systems understandable and actionable for the people who depend on them.

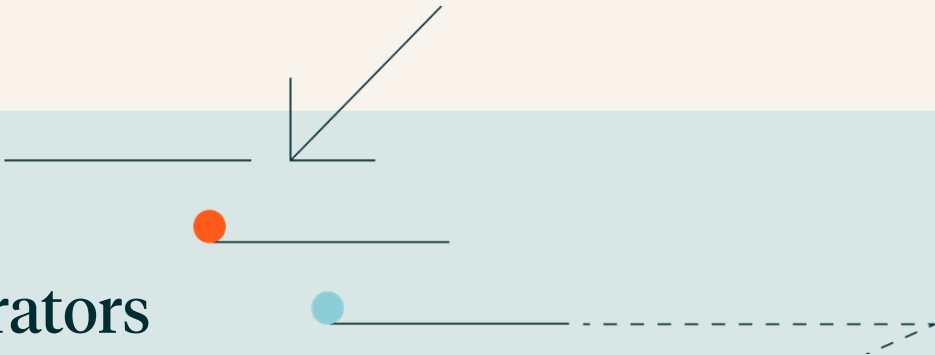
Operators sit closest to that responsibility. Rather than simply running established processes, they help organizations function while processes evolve. The role shifts from managing execution within a stable structure to maintaining coherence as the structure evolves.

Scaling in this phase depends on shared understanding. As the next year unfolds, operators will likely spend less time coordinating experiments and more time defining the norms that replace them.



## Key takeaways

- High-growth companies are operating in a transition period where expectations for leverage are rising faster than operating norms can stabilize.
- Operators increasingly maintain continuity while workflows, tools, and decision rules evolve around them.
- Productivity conversations now shape headcount decisions, with hiring delayed until teams understand whether leverage comes from people, systems, or coordination between them.
- Efficiency metrics are used to assess how the new operating model performs, not only to evaluate performance.
- Tool adoption creates temporary ways of working, and operators standardize behavior so teams can act consistently before permanent processes exist.
- Alignment challenges stem from multiple valid interpretations existing at once, rather than from a lack of effort or resources.
- The role is expanding across functions because outcomes depend more on inter-team interaction than on execution within a single team.
- The hardest part of the job is sustaining shared understanding while the organization changes, not completing operational tasks.
- Over the next year, operators expect to spend more time defining when humans act, when systems act, and how teams trust the difference.
- The role is shifting from managing execution within a fixed structure to supporting the company's operations as the structure itself is being rewritten.



The best operators  
aren't working in  
isolation.

Neither should you.

**Operators Guild** is a **membership community for senior operators** at high-growth companies – the people responsible for turning ambitious goals into coordinated execution.

Members get access to peer conversations, research, and a network of leaders navigating the same challenges in real time. If you're doing this work, you shouldn't have to figure it out alone.

[Apply for Membership](#)