

# German Corporate Offices in Transition: From Administrative Backbone to Strategic Partner



# Key insights from the German Corporate Office Study 2025

The role of the corporate office in Germany is changing fundamentally. As governance structures become more complex and expectations increase for supervisory and management boards, the corporate office has become central to effective board work. Rather than serving solely as an administrative support function, it's increasingly seen as a strategic partner that enables focused, well-structured board engagement.

For more than 15 years, Russell Reynolds Associates has [conducted in-depth research](#) on the composition and practices of supervisory and management boards in Germany's largest enterprises. Our new research—the German Corporate Office Study 2025—focuses on the unit that, depending on company structure, supports either the supervisory board alone or both the supervisory and management boards.

Our study, conducted in the first half of 2025, combines qualitative and quantitative insights from surveys, interviews and ongoing advisory work with DAX, MDAX and major privately held companies. The findings reveal **clear patterns that point to the evolving function of the corporate office**, as well as **three distinct corporate office structures**—each with their own benefits and drawbacks.

## Governance by design: Three corporate office structures

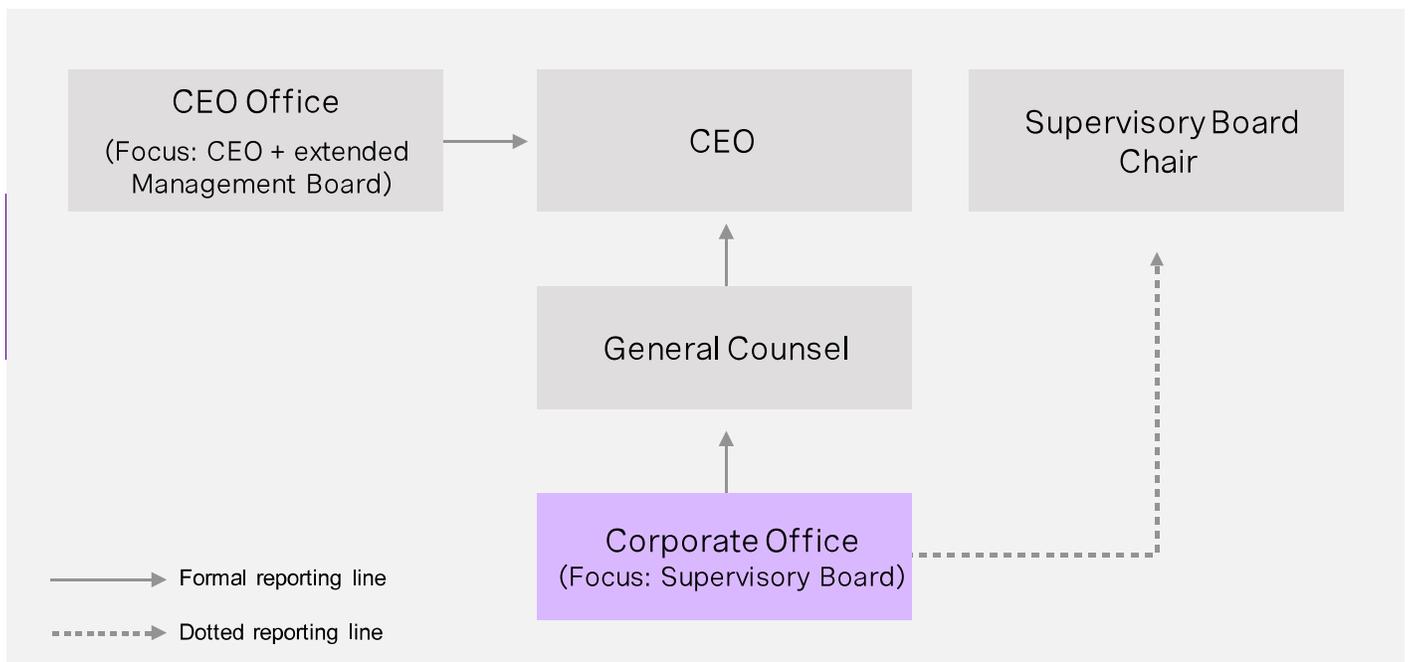
Our analysis revealed three common corporate office designs within DAX, MDAX, and major privately held organizations.

### Model 1: Balancing alignment and independence

The most common configuration provides two distinct support units, one for the management board and one for the supervisory board (see Model 1). In practice, two offices coexist: One serves the CEO and extended management board, typically referred to as the CEO office, and another supports the supervisory board. Both ultimately report directly or indirectly to the CEO. In such setups, the two boards typically maintain a balanced and collaborative working relationship.

## Model 1: Corporate office focused on the supervisory board, reporting to the general counsel

### Model 1: Simplified organization chart



Source: Russell Reynolds Associates proprietary analysis, n = 40 companies surveyed

When the corporate office supports the supervisory board, it usually operates under the general counsel, who acts as a buffer in the reporting line to the CEO. A dotted reporting line to the supervisory board chair is often added. This limited proximity to the CEO helps the office that supports the supervisory board remain objective and autonomous while maintaining access to essential management information.

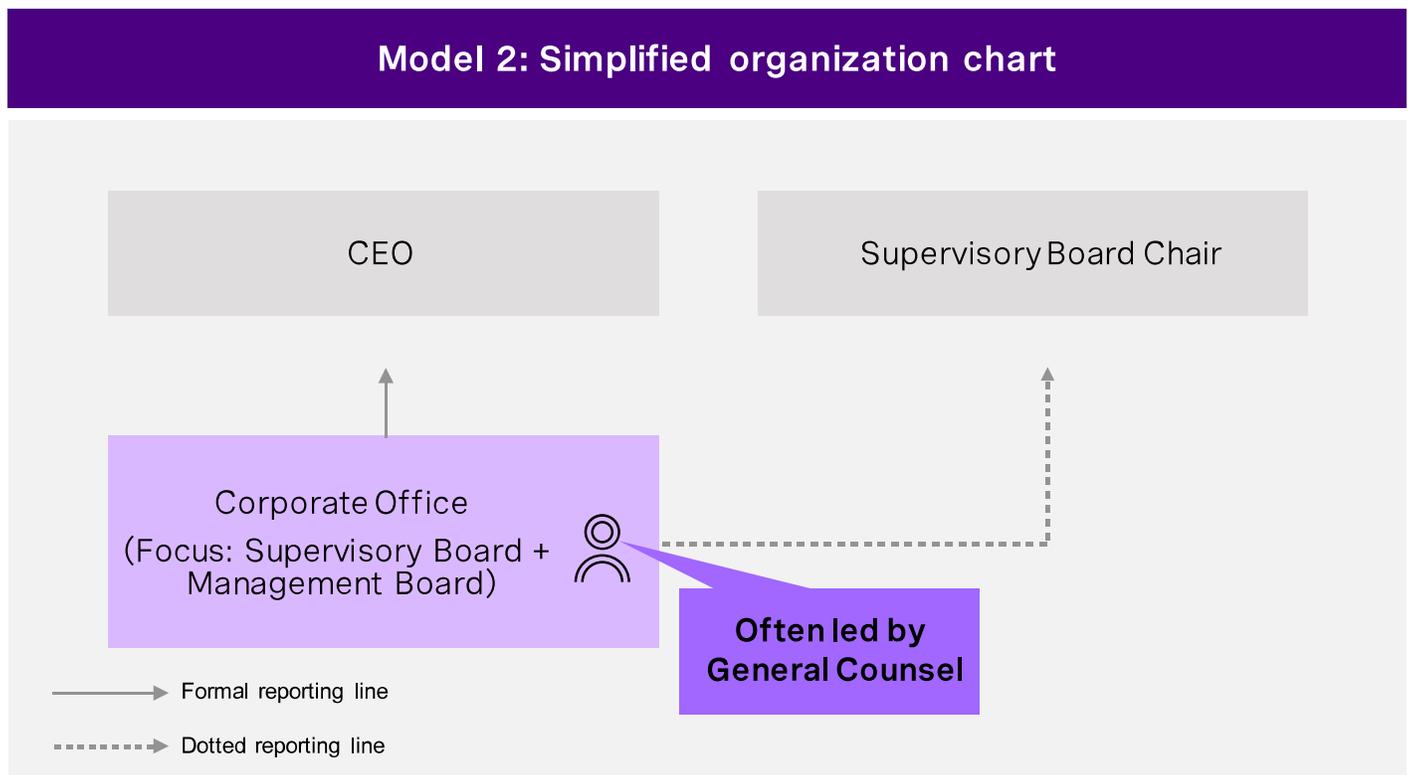
Most of these offices are staffed with three to four full-time employees, predominantly with legal backgrounds (around 60%), complemented by business and other expertise. Such a makeup highlights the emphasis on legal governance capabilities supported by broader operational skills.

This model requires clear structural boundaries. The disciplinary reporting line via the general counsel to the chief executive officer requires clear delineation of confidential management board matters that fall within the remit of the supervisory board. In this context, the general counsel plays a central coordinating role in safeguarding the independence of the supervisory board, while simultaneously ensuring appropriate and transparent information flows.

## Model 2: Efficiency through shared support

In this configuration, a shared corporate office supports both the supervisory and management boards (see Model 2). Teams typically are larger — around five to six full-time employees — reflecting the unit's dual mandate. Office members usually have a legal (around 50%), business (around 40%), or similar background. Leadership responsibility often lies with the general counsel, but that can vary depending on company size and governance culture.

### Model 2: Corporate office supporting both the supervisory and management boards



Source: Russell Reynolds Associates proprietary analysis, n = 40 companies surveyed

This model's primary advantage is stronger alignment between the two boards, supported by faster information flow, more coherent material preparation and greater process efficiency. Avoiding duplicate structures and centralizing administrative support also is cost-efficient.

However, the dual mandate can blur lines of accountability and create workload pressure. When management and supervisory priorities diverge, the corporate office must carefully maintain neutrality. Clear responsibilities, disciplined communication and mutual trust between the chair and CEO are essential. One former general counsel said:

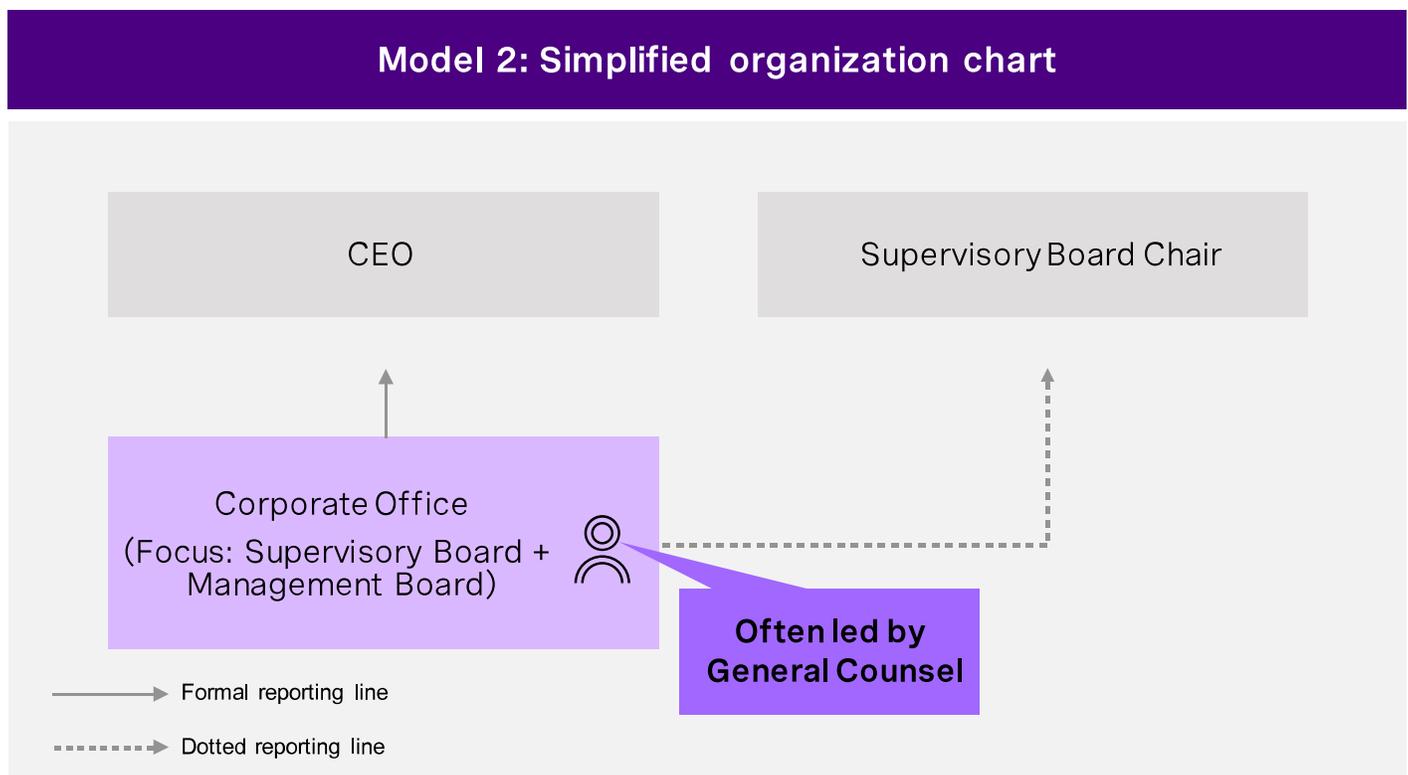
"At times, I shake my head in disbelief that — over the course of my 25-year tenure — I managed to move trustfully between the worlds of the CEO and the supervisory board chair without causing major damage or taking things personally (even though it was close at times)."

## Model 3: Strengthening corporate office independence

In this less common model (see Model 3), there's full separation between the office supporting the CEO and extended management board and the one supporting the supervisory board. Each unit has its own structure, responsibilities and reporting line, providing the highest degree of formal independence.

The supervisory board's corporate office typically is staffed with only three to four full-time employees, predominantly with business or strategy backgrounds. A chief of staff to the chair often serves as the primary contact and ensures coordination of all supervisory board activities. Both offices rely on the company's legal department as required, which reduces the requirement for dedicated legal expertise within the two units.

### Model 3: Completely separate support structures for the supervisory board and the management board



Source: Russell Reynolds Associates proprietary analysis, n = 40 companies surveyed

The model's strength lies in its institutional independence, minimizing conflicts of interest and reinforcing the supervisory board's oversight role. However, full separation can complicate coordination and limit access to operational insights. When the chair and CEO collaborate with openness and trust, disciplined communication helps mitigate these challenges.

No model is more suitable than another. Model 2 emphasizes synergy and close alignment between supervisory and management board agendas. Model 3 and, to a lesser extent, Model 1 ensure(s) greater autonomy for the supervisory board's function. Ultimately, the governance culture and working relationship between the two boards determine which configuration is most effective.

# Key trends shaping the corporate office's work

Our study identifies three overarching trends reshaping German governance practices. These developments appear across companies and sectors, signaling the continued professionalization of the corporate office.

## 1. Evolving role: From administration to strategic partnership

Corporate offices are evolving well beyond their traditional administrative remit, reflecting a clear rise in their strategic importance. We identified three ways these offices function. The models are not mutually exclusive; in practice, most corporate offices span all three dimensions as their responsibilities expand.

The **administrative backbone** safeguards the integrity of board operations with planning, documentation and compliance oversight. The focus is on accuracy, continuity and regulatory adherence, providing the operational discipline that effective board work depends on.

The **operational anchor** represents a higher level of maturity. Here, the corporate office integrates people, content and processes; it refines materials, coordinates reporting cycles and manages communication across the company. This model emphasizes quality, alignment and implementation.

The **strategic partner** is the most advanced form. Here, the corporate office is a trusted adviser to the chair and supervisory board on governance topics such as succession planning, committee design, executive compensation, board evaluations and coaching international board members. In this model, the office also supports stakeholder management and serves as a bridge between the supervisory and management boards.

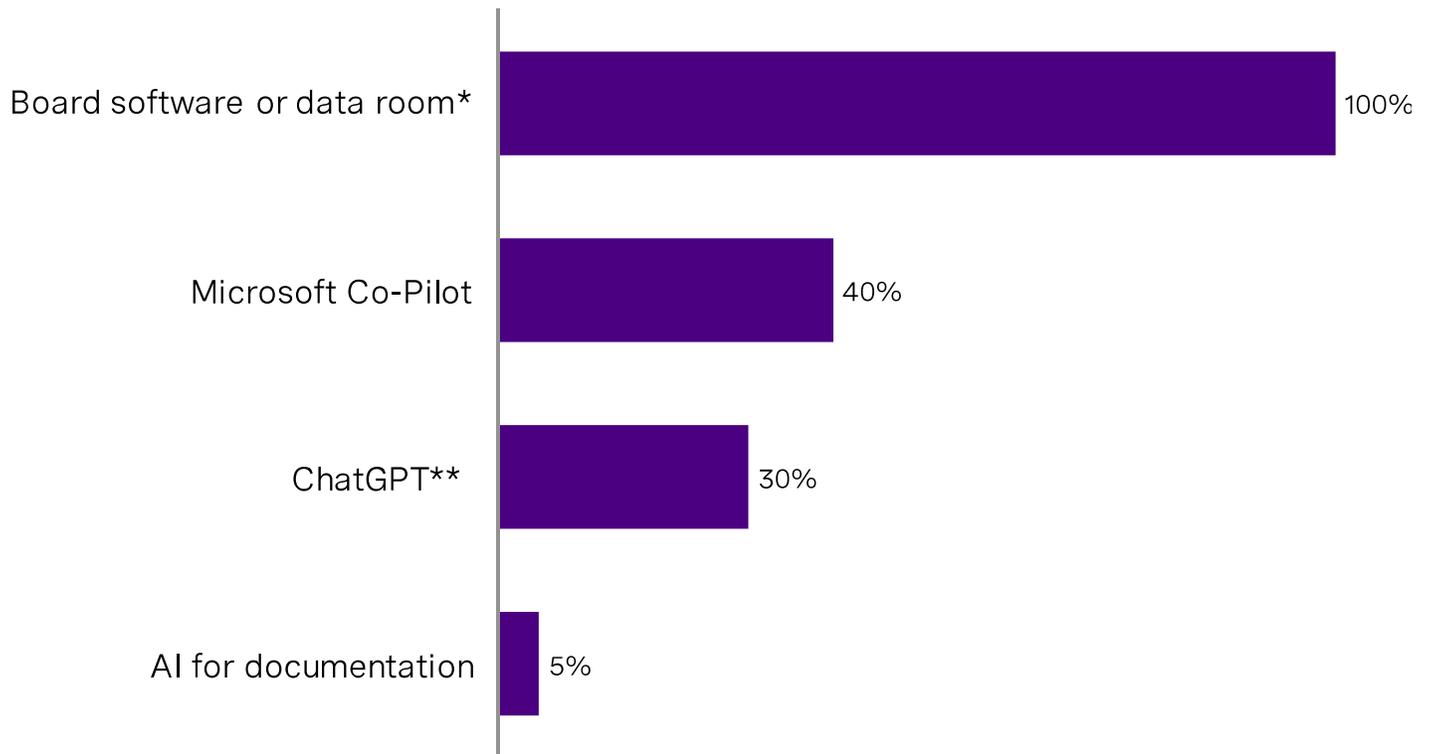
While around 80% of corporate offices still operate primarily in an administrative or coordinating mode, the trend toward strategic partnership is clearly accelerating. This reflects a growing recognition that corporate offices can contribute not only to process quality but also to the effectiveness of governance – supporting supervisory boards in moving from a purely formal compliance focus toward a more strategically oriented understanding of their role.

## 2. Digitalization and AI: Established foundations, cautious adoption

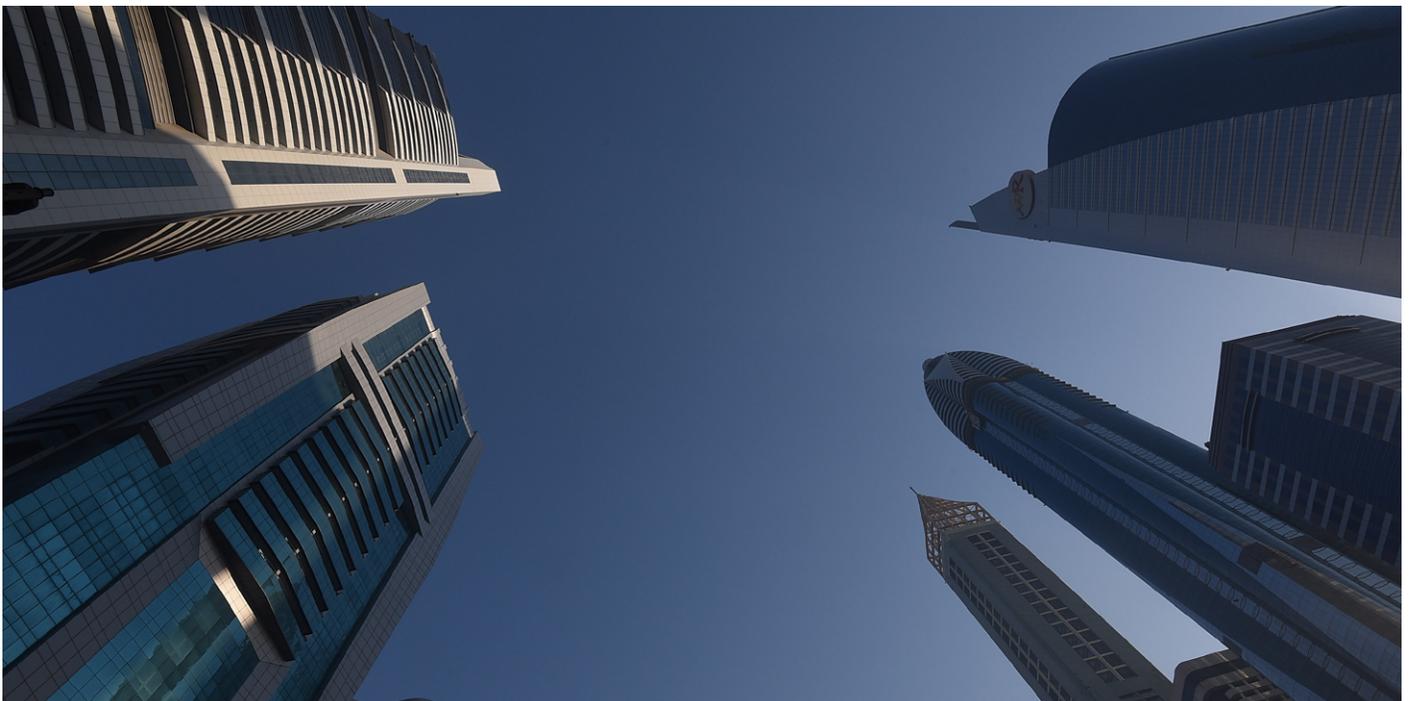
As corporate offices expand in scope, digitalization has become a key driver of effectiveness. The transition from paper-based processes to digital tools is largely complete: all surveyed corporate offices report that they now use board software or secure digital data rooms to support supervisory board operations.

While software solutions and secure data rooms are now firmly embedded in board work, artificial intelligence is currently used primarily to enhance the personal efficiency of corporate office members rather than to support core boardroom processes. Around 40% of corporate offices are exploring Microsoft Copilot applications in their day-to-day work, and approximately 30% use proprietary AI tools such as ChatGPT for administrative tasks. By contrast, only about 5% use AI for meeting documentation or automated minute-taking in actual board meetings. Overall, our study finds that AI adoption is still focused on individual efficiency rather than formal board processes.

Figure 4: Use of digital tools in the daily work of corporate offices



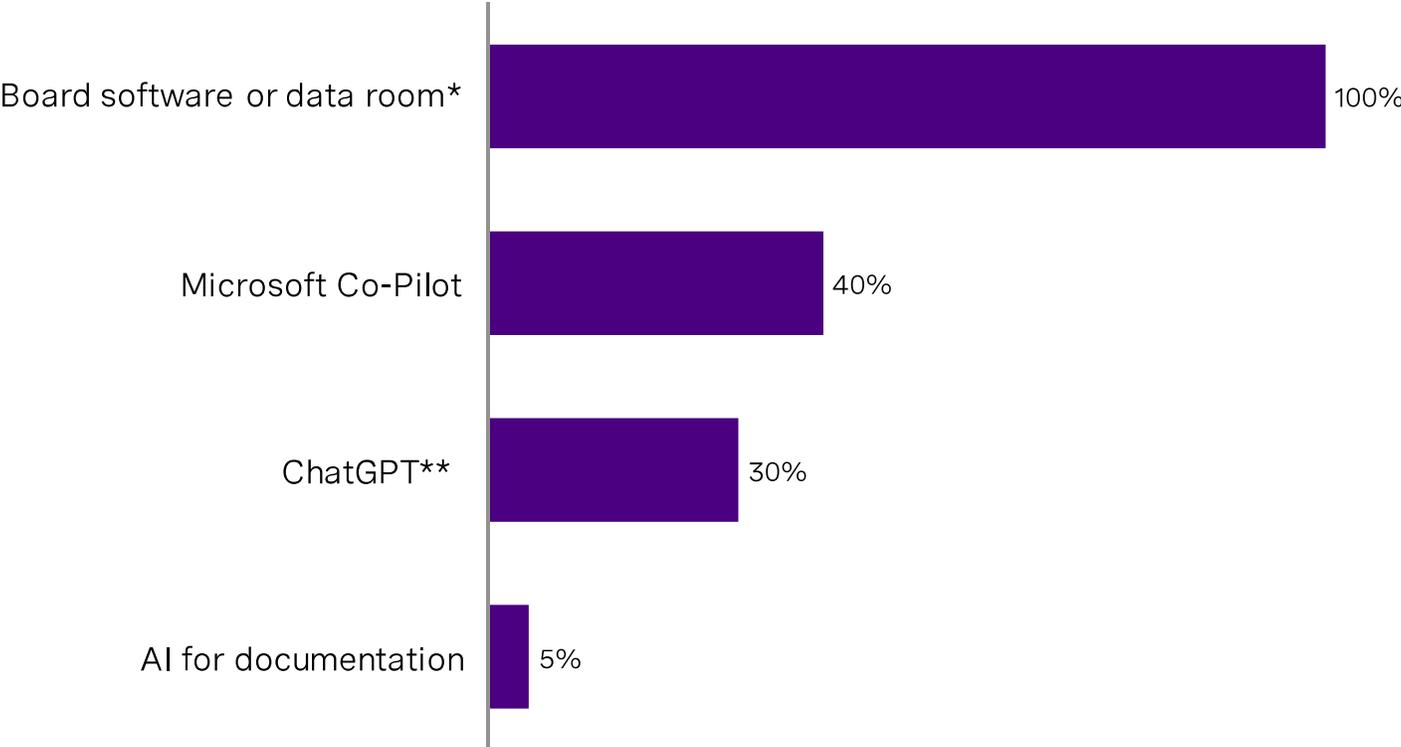
Source: Russell Reynolds Associates proprietary analysis, n = 40, multiple responses possible; \*Primary use of Brainloop, Diligent, Boardwise, Boardvantage and idgard. Most corporate offices use these tools primarily for document sharing and do not use their AI components, etc.; \*\* Could be either self-developed or licensed from OpenAI.



Barriers to broader AI adoption in the core boardroom processes (see Figure 5) remain significant: data protection concerns, skepticism among employee representatives, and lack of familiarity or training.

Despite these challenges, interest in AI is rising, particularly when it offers clear efficiency gains, such as structured searches within data rooms, automated recordkeeping, and real-time information support during board discussions.

**Figure 5: Key barriers to AI adoption in core boardroom processes**



Source: Russell Reynolds Associates proprietary analysis, n = 52, Participants provided multiple answers during interviews, meaning some responses may come from the same individual

Regulators and professional bodies are beginning to address the use of AI in the boardroom in greater detail. The German Corporate Governance Commission’s [most recent practice](#) paper outlines potential next steps, including the use of AI-enabled dashboards drawing on company data to enhance meeting preparation and execution.

Acceptance is likely to grow as legal clarity increases—particularly through the European AI Act, which will come fully into effect in 2026—alongside greater practical experience and targeted training, notably for AI applications that improve the preparation and documentation of supervisory board meetings.

### 3. Agenda management: From consolidation to strategic design

In an environment of increasing complexity, agenda management has become a core instrument of effective governance. Structuring the supervisory board agenda is no longer a procedural exercise but rather a strategic discipline that determines how the board allocates its attention, manages time and ensures continuity between supervisory and management board deliberations.

We identified three types of corporate office involvement in this process:

Around 30% of corporate offices operate primarily as **consolidators**, focusing on procedural completeness, compliance, and disciplined documentation. About half act as **orchestrators**, coordinating input from across the organization to build cohesive agendas and ensure alignment between the management and supervisory boards. The remaining 20% function as **shapers**—the most advanced type—taking responsibility for the entire meeting cycle and establishing the board's strategic rhythm.

Shapers align committee and plenary agendas, introduce forward-looking themes and ensure dedicated time for strategic dialogue. Many boards now reserve time for strategy discussions not only in regular meetings but via dedicated formats such as off-sites or workshops. This progression illustrates how agenda management has evolved from administrative coordination to strategic design, turning what once appeared purely procedural into a decisive driver of governance quality.

## Putting insights into practice: Priorities for German chairs and corporate office leaders

The findings point to several practical ways corporate offices can contribute more effectively to supervisory board work, both in how they're positioned and how they operate.

### For supervisory board chairs

Effective governance starts with a close and trust-based collaboration between the supervisory board chair and the corporate office. Chairs benefit from viewing the corporate office as integral to the governance setup and actively shaping the corporate office's role. This requires a clear mandate that defines responsibilities and boundaries, combined with the understanding that many leading organizations now position the corporate office as a strategic partner rather than a purely administrative function.

In addition, the corporate office can help supervisory board chairs manage growing complexity. By working together on agenda design and forward-looking planning of meeting cycles, and by leveraging additional formats such as workshops or off-sites, chairs can ensure that strategic topics receive the time and attention they require.

## For corporate office leaders and teams

Corporate offices are moving beyond a purely reactive role, deliberately aligning the function with the needs of the supervisory board. The corporate office can help sharpen its role and clarify its value to the board by taking on selected additional responsibilities, such as supporting executive compensation topics, multi-year competency-based succession planning for the supervisory board, or translating insights from annual board self-evaluations into concrete follow-up. In many organizations, agenda management is seen as the most visible contribution of the corporate office; adopting a more active, shaping role in agenda management can significantly increase impact.

This evolution also places new demands on capabilities. Beyond legal and administrative expertise, digital skills, strategic thinking and intercultural competence are becoming increasingly important, especially when supporting internationally composed boards. Developing these capabilities helps ensure that corporate offices can operate effectively beyond process support.

Digitalization and AI also are part of this shift. Corporate office leaders are well-placed to drive the structured and responsible use of digital and AI-based tools, supported by targeted training and clear principles. Done well, this can reduce the administrative workload while improving the quality of preparation and documentation for supervisory board work.

## Looking ahead: The corporate office as a marker of governance maturity

Overall, our study makes clear that the role of the corporate office in supervisory board work has changed in a lasting way. It's no longer just an organizational support unit but important for quality and effective governance. What matters most is not formal structure but clarity of mandate, the right capabilities and close alignment with the supervisory board chair.

In this sense, how a corporate office is positioned and used is increasingly a marker of governance maturity. Organizations that define the role clearly, invest in the right skills and embed the office closely into supervisory board processes are better equipped to ensure effective board work — even with continuously increasing expectations and complexity.

# Authors

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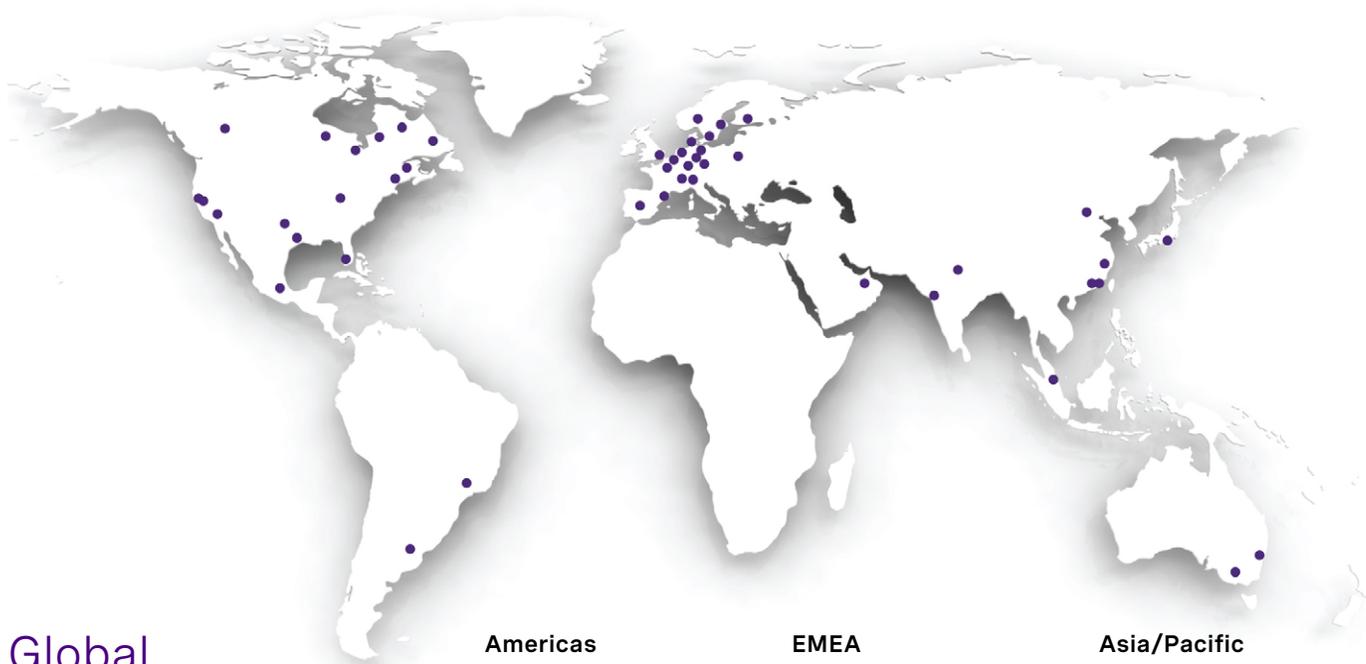
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