ANDREWS PARTNERSHIP

NOVEMBER 2026



CORPORATE AFFAIRS FUNCTION DESIGN

Built to lead

What high-performing corporate affairs functions have in common, and how to build one that is clear, connected and set up for success in 2027.

INTRODUCTION

Function design is now a strategic priority

"Retaining talent, maintaining headcount and not being downsized."

Corporate affairs leader, financial services, on their challenge for 2026

"Being able to maintain a high level of service with stretched teams fighting for their worth over AI."

Communications leader, Europe

From structure and governance to resourcing and capability, the design of your corporate affairs function could determine how well it builds influence, creates business value and responds to a changing environment.

Drawing on our global function design work across a range of industries, this report sets out the factors that help corporate affairs leaders build functions that are clear, connected and positioned to succeed.

The external environment facing corporate affairs teams in 2026 is more complex and consequential than at any point in recent memory, and this has a direct bearing on function design. The organizations best placed to respond are those whose functions are built for speed, coherence and strategic reach, not those running on inherited structures designed for a different era.

Functions that can show their strategic value are better placed to secure the support, resources and senior access they need to deliver their mandate. In our recent global survey of reputation leaders, the pressure on teams came through clearly.

A well-designed, well-evidenced function is considerably harder to cut.

Leaders who can't defend their structure, resourcing and remit against peers may be more exposed than they realize. The sections that follow set out what the strongest functions do differently, and where to start.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What high-performing functions have in common

Across our global function design work, five characteristics consistently set effective corporate affairs functions apart.

01	Senior “anchor” leadership	Leaders with the credibility and influence to connect stakeholders, functions and business priorities.
02	Clear decision rights	Named owners for key decisions and escalation routes that have been tested, so teams can act quickly under pressure.
03	Structured collaboration	Deliberate ways of working across functions and between global and local teams, so coordination doesn’t depend on personal relationships.
04	Shared measures of impact	KPIs that track outcomes, such as influence on business decisions and risks averted, as well as output and activity.
05	Foresight as a core capability	The ability to anticipate geopolitical, regulatory and reputational shifts and bring that intelligence into strategic decisions.

IN THIS REPORT

01 Central and local
02 Reporting lines
03 The China exception
04 The senior anchor leader
05 Creating or strengthening a function
06 Governance
07 Foresight
An ongoing discipline

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SECTION 01 CENTRAL AND LOCAL

The shifting balance between central and local

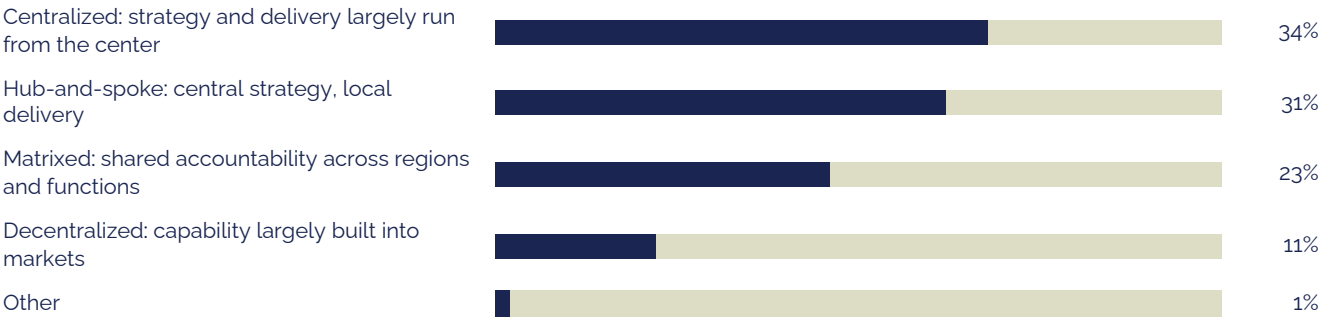
24%

of functions are becoming more centralized. Only 10% are moving toward greater decentralization.

Ask corporate affairs leaders whether their function should be fully centralized or decentralized, and most will tell you the answer is neither.

Our survey data confirms that no single model dominates. What the data does show clearly is the direction of travel, and it points toward the center.

HOW FUNCTIONS ARE DESIGNED TODAY



HOW FUNCTION STRUCTURES ARE CHANGING



Source: Andrews Partnership Global Leadership Survey 2026.

The case for centralization is well established. Geopolitical complexity and cross-border regulatory pressure call for coordinated responses. We have also seen global corporate affairs units created, and markets moved to separate reporting lines, because of political sensitivities.

Local agility and ownership are still essential, though. Functions that are too remote from the audiences they serve lose credibility with local stakeholders.

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SECTION 01 CENTRAL AND LOCAL, CONTINUED

The best functions are deliberately hybrid

The most effective functions we have benchmarked keep ownership of local relationships in market and move strategy and shared assets to the center.

STAYS IN MARKET	MOVES TO THE CENTER
Regulators	The overall strategy
Trade bodies	Narrative and policy positions
NGOs	A single set of KPIs
Local media	Briefing and reporting templates
Product recalls	Even AI prompts, built once and used everywhere
Budget	

9

months for one global program, sent to more than 100 markets, to land, simply because no one tested it locally first.

The regional layer is the translator

The regional layer plays a vital role. It tests relevance and refines the approach before anything is cascaded out to local markets, which can significantly improve both the speed of adoption and how well it fits locally.

Shared services teams should follow the same logic. They work best when staffed by dedicated corporate affairs specialists, not general hub capacity.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Local relationships owned in market, one strategy and one set of shared assets held at the center, and a regional layer that tests everything before it goes out.

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SECTION 02 REPORTING LINES

Getting reporting lines right

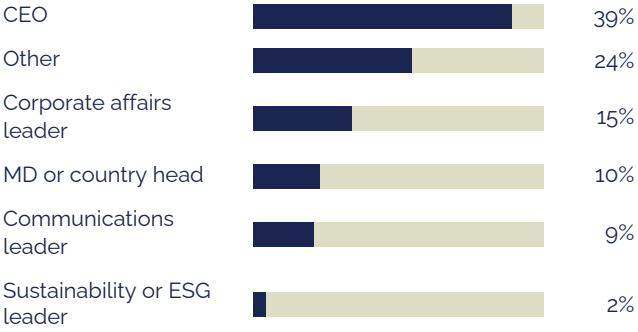
39%

of reputation leaders report directly to the CEO, with a further 10% reporting to the MD or country head.

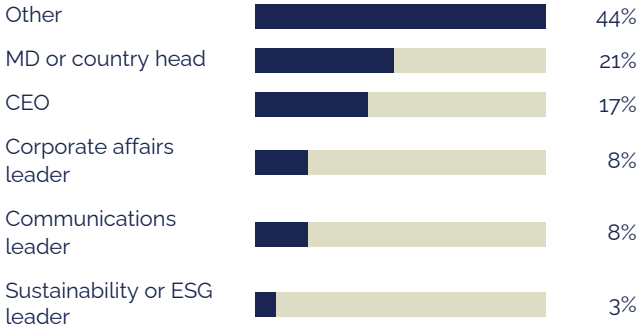
This closeness to the top of the organization gives leaders the authority to drive shared priorities, shape resource decisions and influence strategic conversations.

Leaders who report further down the chain work at a structural disadvantage that no amount of personal influence can fully make up for. The "other" responses show varied reporting lines, including board members, founders, regional leaders and functional executives, from CMOs and CHROs to heads of strategy.

SOLID-LINE REPORTING



DOTTED-LINE REPORTING



Source: Andrews Partnership Global Leadership Survey 2026. Dotted-line chart shows the 41% of respondents who have one.

41%

also have a dotted-line reporting relationship in addition to their solid line.

This reflects the matrix complexity most corporate affairs functions now work within. A dotted line can be an asset, but it needs deliberate governance to avoid confusion over ownership and accountability.

In the "other" portion of dotted-line responses, around half named a dotted line to the C-suite, including the CMO, COO or Chief Commercial Officer. The rest reported to regional leaders or senior leadership, such as a President.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

A solid line close to the top, and clear rules for every dotted line on who owns what.

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SECTION 03 THE CHINA EXCEPTION

How APAC reporting structures have evolved

For reputation leaders working across Asia Pacific, the regional layer has itself been changing.

A DECADE AGO

APAC ex-Japan

The regional model typically covered Asia Pacific excluding Japan, with Japan keeping its own direct line to global leadership.

→

SINCE AROUND 2020

APAC ex-China

More commonly, a Head of Corporate Affairs covers APAC excluding China, with China carrying its own direct reporting line to global.

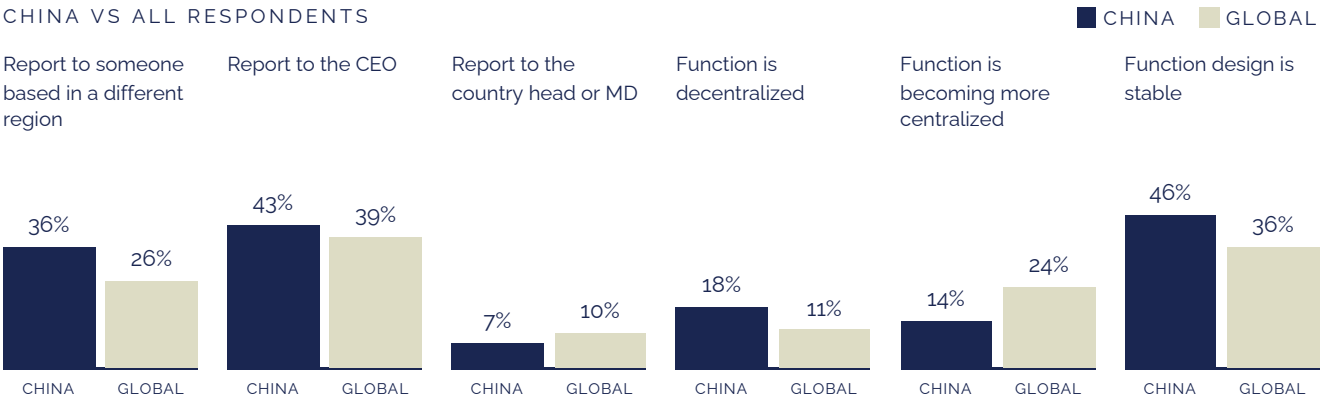
36%

of China-based leaders report to someone in a different region entirely, against 26% of all respondents.

The shift reflects China's scale, regulatory complexity and geopolitical sensitivity, which increasingly call for dedicated senior leadership rather than regional oversight. Our survey suggests direct global lines are already well established in the market.

China-based leaders are also more likely to report to a CEO and less likely to report to a country head or MD, consistent with a model that bypasses the regional APAC layer altogether.

CHINA VS ALL RESPONDENTS



Source: Andrews Partnership Global Leadership Survey 2026.

China-based functions are more likely to be decentralized than the global average (18% against 11%), reflecting the scale and complexity of operations that need deeply rooted local capability. Fewer China functions are moving toward centralization, and more report stability, suggesting many have already completed this change.

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SECTION 04 THE SENIOR ANCHOR LEADER

The value of a senior “anchor” leader



40%

of reputation leaders in our 2026 survey hold board roles. The design of their functions should reflect this new level of influence.

As functions mature, the focus moves beyond simply adding resources to where seniority and capability can create the greatest value. Many of the leading functions we work with are becoming leaner, with more seniority concentrated at the top. In some cases, a regional layer of just three people sits above an organization of more than 100.

In government affairs especially, one senior, empowered hire can achieve access that two junior hires can't, because the trust behind that access is built over years. Agency spend can fill gaps, but it has a ceiling and doesn't close a genuine capability or experience gap.

A consistent success factor is a senior leader with the credibility to influence regulators and the internal standing to coordinate across legal, compliance and commercial leaders. Our board pathways series highlights corporate affairs leaders whose influence reaches the very top of their organizations. The anchor role itself is widening as the mandate grows. Several senior appointments in 2026 show the trend toward integration:

GLOBAL FMCG	Created a single role spanning public affairs, communications, sustainability and legal.
CONSUMER GOODS	Combined communications and sustainability leadership for the first time.
TECHNOLOGY	Brought communications, public policy and people operations under one executive.
FINANCIAL SERVICES	Merged marketing and corporate affairs into a single mandate.

As the mandate expands, a single leader can keep brand, corporate, crisis and internal messaging consistent. Relationship management and the ability to influence become more important, as leaders work with a broader set of stakeholders and connect previously separate remits around shared business priorities.

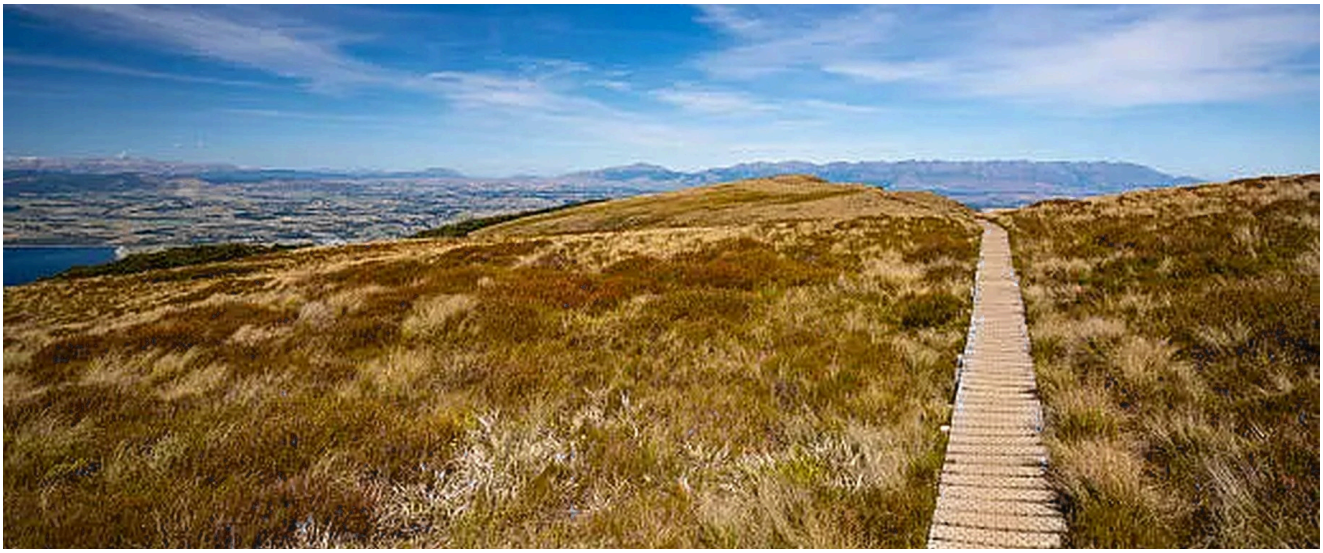
WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Structure follows mandate. Leaders are clear on what the function is accountable for, where it holds decision rights, and which risks and priorities it is expected to influence.

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SECTION 05 CREATING OR STRENGTHENING A FUNCTION

Steps to create or strengthen a function



For companies building a new corporate affairs function or strengthening an existing one, we often recommend this route:

01
Establish the senior anchor leader in the primary market

02
Build operational support around that role

03
Expand to secondary markets

04
Build governance that works across regions

Redeploy before you add.

Our resourcing principle

A lean, clearly defined structure can improve flexibility, responsiveness and accountability. To deliver those benefits, clear role definitions, reporting lines and performance measures need to be in place.

The resourcing principle we apply with clients is to redeploy before you add, fund the frontline before building out a regional layer, and keep the funding line matched to the reporting line. That way, authority is backed by the resources needed to act.

Keeping and developing talent is also vital. Building a culture of empowerment and trust, investing in capability and championing the smart use of AI can all strengthen retention, performance and resilience. Where culture and capability are underinvested, common results include burnout, higher turnover and the loss of hard-won knowledge.

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SECTION 06 GOVERNANCE

The governance that makes a hybrid structure work



Getting the structure and resourcing right is only part of the job. Even a lean, well-anchored function will slow down without clear governance underneath it.

These are the governance practices we see consistently in high-performing corporate affairs functions.

01 Clarity on ownership and decision rights

The functions that decide and act quickly have one named owner per decision, mapped at activity level rather than worked out in the moment. Whether teams use RACI or another framework, the aim is to separate who leads, who contributes, who must be consulted and who simply needs to be told, especially where government affairs, communications and ESG meet.

Our advice to clients redesigning their function is to publish ownership and escalation for crisis decisions first, before any structural change. Decision rights and role clarity also matter for onboarding: unclear role expectations are among the challenges leaders cite most often when they start a new role.

02 Tested escalation pathways

The organizations that handle reputational crises best are those where escalation pathways are not just written down but tested before pressure arrives. Scenario planning and simulations build this capacity. Test every proposed cluster or hub model by asking whether it shortens or lengthens the path to a decision. Cross-trained teams that have rehearsed decisions under pressure act with more confidence and speed when a real issue emerges.

03 Formal cross-functional governance

High-performing functions make collaboration deliberate and structured, so coordination holds up under pressure rather than depending on personal relationships. Tactics include cross-functional steering committees, issue meetings on a set schedule, shared planning forums and formal escalation channels.

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SECTION 06 GOVERNANCE, CONTINUED

04 Aligned and shared KPIs



Shared KPIs can strengthen alignment across functions and markets. When teams are measured against common priorities, they are better placed to coordinate resources, make decisions and show their contribution to business outcomes.

Commercial measures also matter in building credibility and trust with CEOs, helping corporate affairs leaders show how the function contributes to wider business priorities.

KPIs that reflect business-critical influence and risk, not just output volume, are a consistent feature of the most effective functions we work with.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

One named owner for every decision, crisis escalation tested before it is needed, collaboration built into the calendar, and one set of KPIs that measures influence and risk as well as activity.

SECTION 07 FORESIGHT

Creating a function designed to predict the future

16%

of leaders use AI for scenario modeling and risk prediction, compared with 88% using it for content production.

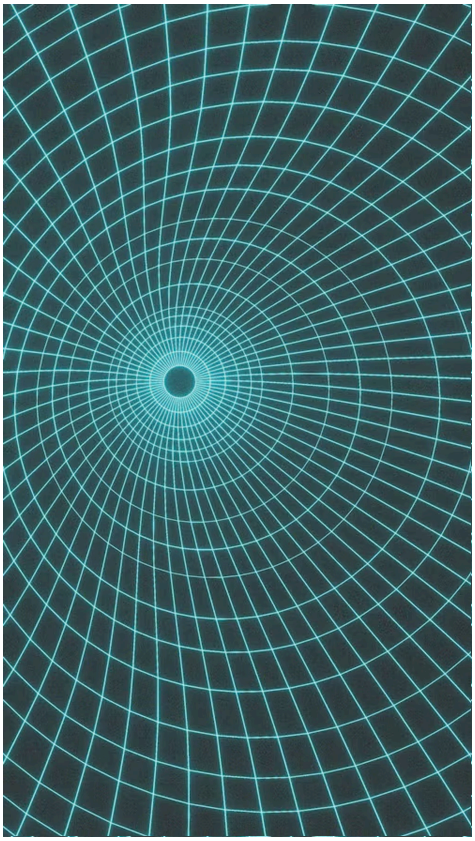
The best-designed functions are built to anticipate change, not simply respond to it. That means embedding foresight as a capability and treating function design as an ongoing discipline rather than a one-time exercise.

Foresight is one of the biggest opportunities for corporate affairs functions to increase their strategic value. Our survey shows leaders rank the ability to influence and to be forward-thinking as the top two skills for 2026. Yet many remain focused on reactive work.

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SECTION 07 FORESIGHT, CONTINUED

Using AI beyond content



The functions using AI in strategic areas are not necessarily building large central teams or relying on IT for all of it.

In some organizations, a small sub-team of around three people owns the key elements: an AI lab with developer capability, a network of champions across the function, and a function-level AI policy that sits alongside the company-wide policy.

As audiences increasingly use AI assistants to find and judge information, shaping how those assistants describe the company, known as generative engine optimization (GEO), is becoming a capability some functions will need to build.

We have helped many organizations introduce roles focused on long-term policy and scenario planning, to anticipate and respond to geopolitical, economic and regulatory shifts, including those driven by AI. This is an increasingly important way for functions to contribute strategic intelligence as well as communications expertise.

Horizon scanning

Done regularly, not only when an issue appears.

Structured risk grading

A shared way to judge which risks matter most.

Crisis plans built in advance

Ready before they are needed.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

The most senior corporate affairs leaders are being asked to contribute at board level. Their functions' intelligence should be built to support that, so board engagement is credible rather than reactive.

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CONCLUSION

Function design is an ongoing discipline



Function design is not a one-time exercise. It needs deliberate review as the external environment changes, organizations grow and the demands on corporate affairs leaders continue to expand.

The reputation leaders best placed for the next decade are not those with the largest teams or the most resources. They are those who have built functions with a clear mandate, effective governance and the right balance of seniority, capability and reach to deliver business value.

GET IN TOUCH

Andrews Partnership

At Andrews Partnership, we combine evidence-based benchmarking with deep functional insight to design structures that strengthen accountability, clarity and performance, so teams are well set up today and ready for the future.
Discover our function design and structure service

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FURTHER READING

Influence in the Age of AI: Four shifts shaping reputation leadership in 2026	READ ↗
The eight personality attributes of successful Chief Corporate Affairs Officers	READ ↗
Is geopolitics the gateway to your next board appointment?	COMING SOON

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Andrews Partnership Global Leadership Survey 2026 of senior reputation leaders (andrews-partnership.com/reputation-leadership-2026). Andrews Partnership function design and benchmarking work with global corporate affairs functions. Client organizations are anonymized throughout.

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