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Government and corporate affairs focus: Four non-negotiable attributes for government affairs leaders

While uncertainty and volatility have long characterized the working environment for government affairs professionals, the rate of change within the current political landscape is unprecedented. Having the right people in the right roles has never been more important. Interviews with government affairs leaders suggest key questions for CEOs and boards to consider.



The global political environment is highly uncertain and changing more rapidly than it has in many decades. Political and regulatory risks—including, but not limited to, those related to trade and tariffs, artificial intelligence, climate change, and supply chain resiliency—have intensified across geographies and sectors. These risks affect every company within every industry, whether they are prepared or not.

Furthermore, in our experience, many companies—as well as trade and industry associations—currently find themselves on the back foot in understanding, navigating, and advocating for themselves across various levels of government. The reasons often have their roots both in the way government affairs-related functions are organized internally and in the individuals these companies have in leadership positions.¹

Companies that do not have the right people in the right roles are at real risk; as the saying goes, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu.

As a result, it is imperative for CEOs and boards to take a fresh look at the complex demands of the government affairs function and ensure they have the right leaders in place. While government affairs leaders may once have been peripheral within the broader leadership team, this is definitively no longer the case. Companies that do not have the right people in the right roles are at real risk; as the saying goes, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu.

While titles and organizational structures will vary by company and context, this article, based on interviews with numerous experts in this field, lays out four key attributes of effective government affairs leaders today. The first three—network and experience, integrity, and communications skills—are non-negotiable. But the fourth—leadership capabilities, encompassing commercial acumen, management skills, and resilience—is most critical. It also includes questions for CEOs and board members to consider as they seek to understand how their companies' current capabilities stack up against what is required to successfully navigate today's complex political landscape.

Understanding the government affairs function today

Government affairs used to be about hiring a lobbyist when an issue arose, but this reactive approach is no longer sufficient; companies now need to engage in a constant process of building coalitions, using political-style campaigns, and targeting outreach to relevant policymakers at all levels of government. This requires a broad range of skills and strategies.

For **Jonah Crane**, head of global regulatory and policy development at Stripe, this complexity is part of his role's appeal: "I have been working to build the future of financial services, and shaping emerging regulatory frameworks requires a deep understanding of existing frameworks and engaging honestly with the trade-offs regulators must grapple with."

But companies are increasingly finding that no single individual has the bandwidth to cover the full range of issues and geographies in an increasingly complex government affairs landscape.² Instead, leading companies tend to deploy a combination of full-time internal advocacy professionals, high-profile senior advisors, and external specialty lobbyists and consultants.

To make these coalitions work requires a highly effective internal leader. That said, it is worth noting that there is considerable variation, even among the largest companies, in where these leaders sit, the title they hold, and their remit. Here, we include government relations, corporate affairs, public affairs, external affairs, and public policy, as well as issues related to legislative affairs, advocacy, and community relations. While the details, emphasis, and scope of leadership roles within these areas may vary, there is also significant overlap in the topics covered and skills needed to be successful.

1 William O' Leary, "Government and corporate affairs focus: Finding leaders who can effectively manage political and regulatory risk," Heidrick & Struggles, June 23, 2025, heidrick.com.

2 William O' Leary, "Government and corporate affairs focus: Finding leaders who can effectively manage political and regulatory risk," Heidrick & Struggles, June 23, 2025, heidrick.com.

The four key attributes of effective government affairs leaders

Effective government affairs leaders work constantly to expand both their knowledge of relevant regulatory topics and their relationships within the government affairs space.



No CEO can operate effectively without constant access to strategic, forward-looking insights on relevant political and regulatory developments.

Drew Maloney
President and CEO, Edison Electric Institute

Based on our more than two decades of experience working with government affairs leaders at many of the world's leading companies, a successful head of government affairs, here encompassing leaders of corporate affairs, public affairs, external affairs, and public policy functions, must excel in four areas.

1. Experience and network are table stakes

Credible candidates often bring 15 or more years of experience directly relevant to government relations work. Their career may have included time in a government agency, regulator, or major advocacy firm before leading the government affairs function of an organization.

Michael Kennedy, senior vice president and chief corporate affairs officer at Intuit, is convinced that his wide-ranging career was excellent preparation for his current position: "The time I spent in-house doing government affairs in a research university, as chief of staff to a U.S. Senator, and in various executive roles within the international corporate government-affairs space has given me a range of perspectives and a flexibility that have proved invaluable to helping my team and company adapt and navigate in an uncertain regulatory and political landscape."

Having the right network is, of course, an ongoing endeavor. Effective government affairs leaders work constantly to expand both their knowledge of relevant regulatory topics and their relationships within the government affairs space. They should also liaise closely with the leaders of relevant trade associations to ensure their company's positions are heard and represented, especially if they are a smaller player compared to other trade association members. Strategic use of such channels can multiply an individual leader's impact.

2. All stakeholders must recognize the government affairs leader as a fair broker, with ethics and integrity

The head of government affairs often operates under ambiguous conditions and will be the face of the company in many important fora. They need to act as a trusted advisor and sounding board for the CEO and executive team as well as, increasingly, their board. As with all leaders, it is vital that they uphold the highest ethical standards.

Kathryn D. Karol, for example, sees significant parallels between the two hats she wears at Caterpillar: senior vice president of global government and corporate affairs and chair of the board of directors of the philanthropic organization of Caterpillar, Inc. "In both cases, it's important that I prioritize collaboration with our employees, governments, dealers, customers, and other key stakeholders to identify opportunities that can truly transform the communities where we operate—making them stronger, more resilient, and more sustainable—while also advocating for issues that are critical to executing our corporate strategy."

3. Communication and collaboration are at the core of the role

The head of government affairs must work especially well with their CEO, chief legal officer, and chief communications officer. **Drew Maloney**, the recently appointed president and CEO at Edison Electric Institute, is clear on the invaluable nature of the advice he receives from his government affairs team: "No CEO can operate effectively without constant access to strategic, forward-looking insights on relevant political and regulatory developments. Navigating those issues is a vital part of my responsibility to my board and members."

A genuinely strategic government affairs approach—one that maximizes value to the organization—depends as much on broad collaboration and coordination as it does on the ability to wield influence at the level of national or even supranational governments.

Regulation, however, cuts across all aspects of an organization and of the industry, which means that the government affairs leader must be able to coordinate and collaborate well with all leaders—from the chief risk and compliance officers to heads of finance, HR, and environmental health and safety, as well as strategic business units. Heads of government affairs must also be in sync with marketing teams to ensure that advocacy efforts don't contradict central brand and identity messages.

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4. Success comes down to effective business leadership

Even with all of the foregoing, to be successful, heads of government affairs also need to bring the following leadership capabilities:

- Considerable commercial acumen, combined with a strong understanding of customer needs
- Strong team and talent management skills, which include self-awareness, curiosity, a talent for asking the right questions, and excellent listening skills
- The ability to inspire a team by creating a sense of purpose
- The ability to work as part of the executive team—including thinking strategically, anticipating and interpreting market changes, communicating persuasively, and acting decisively
- The resilience and adaptability to react to unexpected developments and overcome setbacks⁴

In other words, a successful head of government affairs must bring the same leadership qualities that CEOs expect of other members of their top team. While experience is easier to gauge, it requires careful assessment and judgment to ensure that candidates with the right experience also excel in these leadership capabilities.

4 For more on how and why these capabilities matter across enterprise leadership teams, see Dr. Regis Chasse and TA Mitchell, "The connecting leader: Five imperatives of leaders today," Heidrick & Struggles, September 25, 2024, heidrick.com, and Emma Burrows, Sandra Pinnavaia, Sharon Sands, Brad Warga, Jennifer Wilson, and Darren Ashby, "Chief people officer of 2030: Building a tool kit to get from here to there," Heidrick & Struggles, February 20, 2025, heidrick.com.

Getting started

CEOs and boards are approaching questions about government affairs leadership from a broad variety of different starting points. Some may be formalizing these leadership positions for the first time, while others may be assessing whether their existing structure and talent pool is fit for purpose.

The following questions can help CEOs and board members understand their current capabilities and what they should be aiming for:

- 1 Do you understand all the ways that government affairs are relevant within the unique context of your company and industry?
- 2 Have you mapped all the roles and functions that touch on issues and stakeholders related to government affairs, and the current skills and capabilities of the individuals in those positions?
- 3 Do the people in your company who are currently leading any work related to government affairs possess the four attributes we have described, along with other leadership capabilities crucial to success in your organization?
- 4 Are you actively developing one or more leaders as potential future heads of government affairs?

About the author

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Government & Corporate Affairs Practice

When policy shapes performance, leadership matters. Regulatory pressure is rising. Geopolitical risk is reshaping markets. Activist stakeholders and policymakers move faster and expect more. For CEOs and boards, government affairs and corporate affairs are now central to enterprise risk, reputation, and growth.

Many organizations built lean government relations teams or relied on legal and communications leaders. Today, that model often lacks the scale, coordination, and strategic firepower required. Companies need senior leaders who can integrate public policy, regulatory strategy, stakeholder engagement, CSR, and geopolitical risk across the enterprise.

Heidrick & Struggles' approach to integrated executive search and leadership advisory services, global reach, and cross-industry expertise is trusted by governments and organizations around the world. We connect government and corporate affairs leadership with board strategy, succession planning, organizational design, and culture, ensuring your leadership architecture aligns with today's political and regulatory realities. We specialize in executive search for critical senior roles, including:

- Chief Government Affairs Officer
- Chief Corporate Affairs Officer
- Chief Public Affairs Officer
- Chief Regulatory Officer
- Global Head of Public Policy
- Head of Government Relations
- VP, Regulatory Affairs
- Head of Geopolitical Risk

For organizations building and strengthening government affairs, public policy, and regulatory leadership, Heidrick & Struggles brings the global scale, cross-functional insight, and integrated expertise today's environment demands.

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