

Steady advisers for an unsteady age:

Realising the full potential of the general counsel in a polycrisis

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Businesses now operate in an age of “polycrisis”, where geopolitical, socioeconomic, technological and environmental risks are increasingly interconnected and compound one another.

Protecting operations, reputation and financial performance today requires more than reacting to crises as they unfold. Organisations need a proactive approach that can anticipate and mitigate threats, as well as the right leaders and capabilities to implement the approach when crises occur.

With their mandate of risk oversight, legal expertise and skills, and unique vantage point in the organisation, general counsels (GCs) are well-positioned to lead their organisation’s crisis management strategy. Many organisations have already expanded the crisis management remit of GCs.

However, our research finds that organisations are yet to equip them with the resources needed to fully support that expanded role.



Based on a survey of 1,100 primary legal decision-makers across North America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) and Asia-Pacific (APAC), we identify five areas of focus that can enable organisations to unlock the GC advantage in managing crises.

Managing crises: deploying a proactive approach

Close to 70% of organisations have a documented crisis management approach in place but these strategies differ in their level of crisis anticipation and mitigation maturity.

70%

Fewer than a fifth of organisations deploy the most advanced approach (Figure 1): combining proactive horizon scanning for emerging threats, established escalation decision rights and responsibilities for senior leadership and business functions, and regular crisis impact assessments and drills to prepare and align businesses against such occurrences.

Figure 1: The proactive approach gap

Surveyed organisations’ typical approach to managing crises



Source: The Role of GCs in a polycrisis survey 2026; Q2: Which statement best reflects how your organisation typically manages emerging crisis risks? Select one.

*We address issues once they escalate, with response decisions made in the moment by senior leadership.

**We monitor risks, but escalation is primarily triggered when leadership determines a situation has become serious.

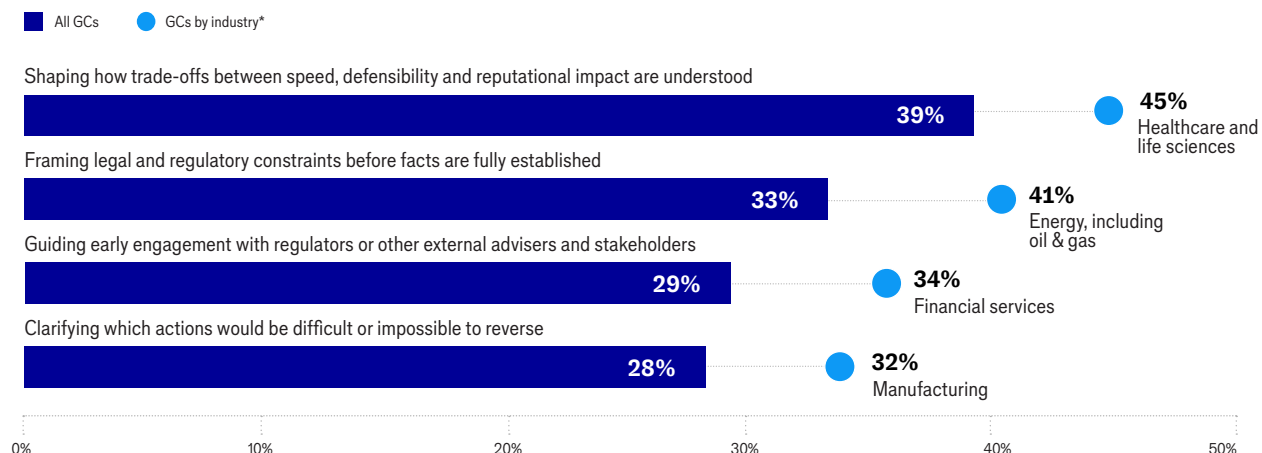
***We have documented escalation guidance, though decisions often require interpretation and discretion.

Matching the governance structure with GCs' evolving crisis management remit

GCs are increasingly involved in building and implementing a crisis strategy. The survey shows that their crisis management remit might look different across sectors (Figure 2), but it is clear their role has expanded beyond managing the legal implications of a crisis event.

Figure 2: The expanding crisis management remit of GCs

Areas where GCs perceive they add most value in shaping decisions in a crisis event (%)



*Industry with the highest share of GCs selecting a given option among the six surveyed.

Source: The Role of GCs in a polycrisis survey 2026; QC15. During a crisis event, where does your advice in your role as the primary legal decision-maker add the most value in shaping how early decisions are made? Select up to two. Top four of seven options displayed.

However, their organisations' governance structures have not always kept pace in equipping GCs with decisional capabilities that match their evolving remit. Among the organisations surveyed, the primary responsibility for deciding whether an emerging issue becomes a crisis remains spread across:



44%
Chief executives



24%
Boards



21%
GCs



11%
Other c-suite executives

More organisations should give their GCs a permanent seat at the crisis decision-making table so that they can escalate credible threats early and play a central role in shaping a proportionate crisis response.

Discerning signal from noise: bridging the crisis information gap

Information tools, such as an advanced tech stack and timely external expertise, are vital in helping GCs distinguish credible warning signals and assess the likelihood and severity of a crisis. Yet their use remains limited and delayed across several surveyed organisations.

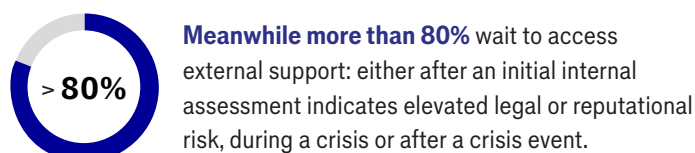
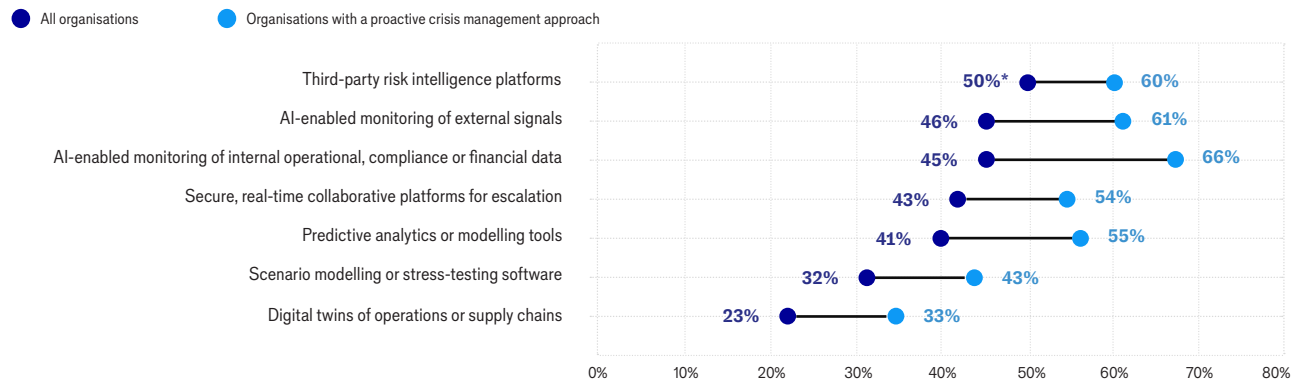


Figure 3: The tech stack gap

% deploying advanced solutions for risk scanning and crisis anticipation



Source: The Role of GCs in a polycrisis survey 2026; QC3: Which of the following technology solutions does your organisation actively use to scan for emerging risks and identify issues that may escalate into a crisis? Select all that apply. Seven of nine options displayed

A proactive approach to crisis management could help narrow the tech stack gap. The survey shows that a higher-than-average share of organisations with a proactive approach deploy advanced risk scanning tools (Figure 3). This suggests that these organisations are translating strategic intent into concrete investments in crisis anticipation and response.

.....● Harnessing boards as GCs' partners in shaping crisis decisions

GCs and their board of directors share the remit of risk oversight and corporate governance. This naturally aligns them to focus on protecting the long-term viability of their organisation.

GCs prioritise issues with long-term impact: The survey reveals that, when presented with a trade-off between long-term and short-term action, **59% of GCs** choose to address the issue with the greatest potential long-term impact over the issue that is most visible in the short-term to regulators, media or stakeholders in a crisis event.

59%

↑13pp

Boards, like their GCs, prefer early escalation of emerging risks: When an early warning signal is credible but ambiguous, 30% of organisations overall prefer to escalate it early, even if the threat may be overstated. Among organisations where the board is the primary decision-maker for crisis escalation, this rises to 43%—**a 13-percentage-point (pp) difference**.

57%

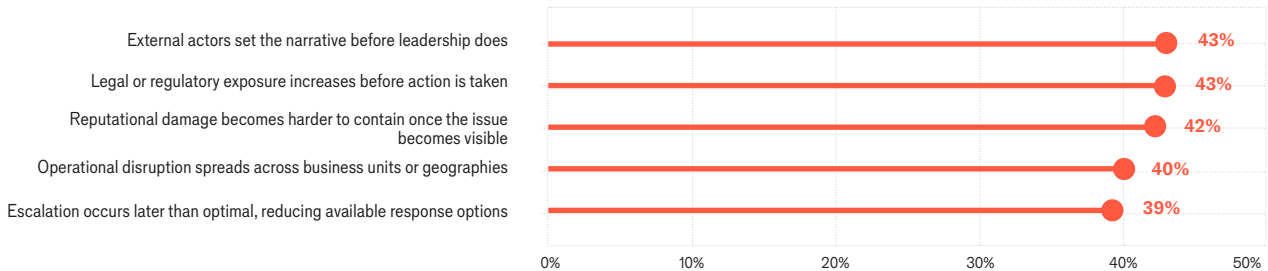
This alignment creates an opportunity for even more GCs to harness the board as a strategic partner in crisis decision-making. **Currently, 57% of surveyed GCs** engage with their boards early enough to frame the crisis at hand and the available response options.

Getting crisis severity right: avoiding costly underestimation and overestimation

Underestimating a potential crisis event can expose organisations to critical interconnected risks, as identified by around 40% of GCs (Figure 4).

Figure 4: The ostrich effect

Greatest risks surveyed organisations face when underestimating potential crisis events, according to their GCs.



Source: The Role of GCs in a polycrisis survey 2026; QC8. What are the greatest risks your organisation faces when underestimating potential crisis events? Please select up to three. Top five of nine options displayed



Narrowed crisis response

options: When issue escalation and crisis identification is delayed, crisis aversion or damage containment may no longer be viable options.



Loss of narrative control: As a crisis becomes visible to external parties before leaders can determine a response, the organisation risks becoming a narrative taker rather than a narrative shaper. Counterparties may begin to take control of the narrative, making reputational damage harder to contain.



Operational disruption: Combined with increased legal exposure, these external factors can cause internal operational disruptions.

Overestimating the magnitude of potential crises also carries costly risks.

Wasted resources: In the immediate term, for **50% of GCs**, unnecessary diversion of financial or operational resources is a key risk (Figure 5).

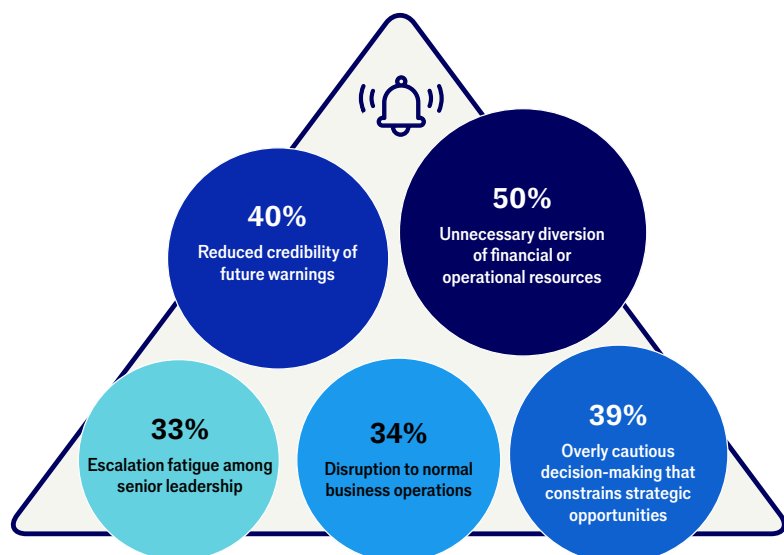
Weaker future warnings: 40% of GCs

worry about reduced credibility of future crisis warnings among leadership and employees in the long run, when issue escalations are frequent and crises do not materialise. This may leave organisations underprepared to manage future crises (Figure 5).

Risks GCs' return on influence: Repeated false alarms also risk GCs' personal influence in the organisation. **42% of GCs** cite concern about overreacting or losing credibility as a factor that most often limits their ability to escalate an issue they believe warrants senior attention.

Figure 5: The cry-wolf effect

Greatest risks surveyed organisations face when overestimating potential crisis events, according to their GCs.



Source: The Role of GCs in a polycrisis survey 2026; QC9. What are the greatest risks your organisation faces when overestimating potential crisis events? Please select up to three. Top five of nine options displayed