

# MAKING THE CASE FOR STRATEGIC ALLIANCE MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS: SMART STRATEGY IN LEAN TIMES

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The Rhythm of Business 

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DRIVE ALLIANCE SUCCESS



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## Imagine

For the very first time, you left the office for your summer holidays without nagging worries about something left undone or if you properly anticipated the information senior executives might need about an alliance while you were away. Lo and behold, throughout your full three weeks away, there were no urgent requests and no panicked phone calls. It was the best vacation you've had in a long time.

What made this possible? You successfully made the case to add a strategic alliance operations manager to your team and invest in a digital workflow platform. It took time and effort to get it established, but now everything is running smoothly. Stakeholders go to the platform to easily get all the information they need – in one place and in easy-to-use formats instead of having to go through multiple systems and emails. Governance committee members know they will be advised of their open action items every Monday morning, along with an updated timeline containing all relevant meetings and upcoming key decisions, deliverables, and deadlines.

Alliance management as a company capability is recognized. The team has visibility, and everyone is aware of the role that alliances play in achieving company objectives. Order and certainty have replaced disjointed and individual efforts. Importantly, as one alliance operations manager said, “The people I work with don't have to work as many hours. They have the data and reports they need. They have a better work-life balance. Stakeholders also have a very positive view of our alliance management team.”

These are a few of the many benefits of establishing a strategic alliance management operations role and investing in a digital platform as part of your alliance management capability. This paper gives you the tools to shape and make the case for implementing a strategic alliance management operations role. It's the most cost-efficient way to add capacity and elevate the work of alliance management professionals – especially in lean, anxious times.

In partnership and collaboration,

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An operations function can help bring reliability and continuity to alliance management across a diverse portfolio of collaborations.



## Defining Strategic Alliance Management Operations

In most corporate settings, operations functions provide reliability and continuity in the discipline they support. In sales, it ensures smooth pipeline progression, manages customer relationship management (CRM) data integrity, and administers compensation systems. In finance, operations handle controls, reporting, and compliance routines. These functions thrive on repeatable processes, data visibility, and accountability systems.

Within alliance management, particularly in information technology firms with diverse and large partner ecosystems, operations are often run as a program office that manages the structured way in which these firms organize their partnering. For volume-based partner segments, it supports new partner evaluation, onboarding, program compliance, rewards and incentives, and scalable enablement. These models have created a template for operational support that aligns with repeat interactions across partner types.

However, biopharma strategic alliances are inherently more variable. Operational complexity is driven not by partner volume but by the degree of collaboration required between the partners, especially joint responsibility for stages of the drug lifecycle, contract terms, scientific uncertainty, and the sheer number of functions, territories, and stakeholders involved. Unlike the large partner programs common in information technology companies, every biopharma alliance is individually negotiated. And yet, even here, an operations function can help bring reliability and continuity to alliance management across a diverse portfolio of collaborations.

### DESIGNING STRATEGIC ALLIANCE MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS

Chris Black, head of corporate alliance management and integration at Merck & Co. (known as MSD outside of the US and Canada) conceptualized the role of alliance management operations as a strategically enabling **three-legged stool**, each leg addressing a distinct but critical gap (*See Figure 1 – Black’s Three-Legged Stool of Alliance Management Operations*):

1. **Operationalizing non-strategic agreements** – Typically classified as Tier 3 – where repetitive reporting obligations define the workload.





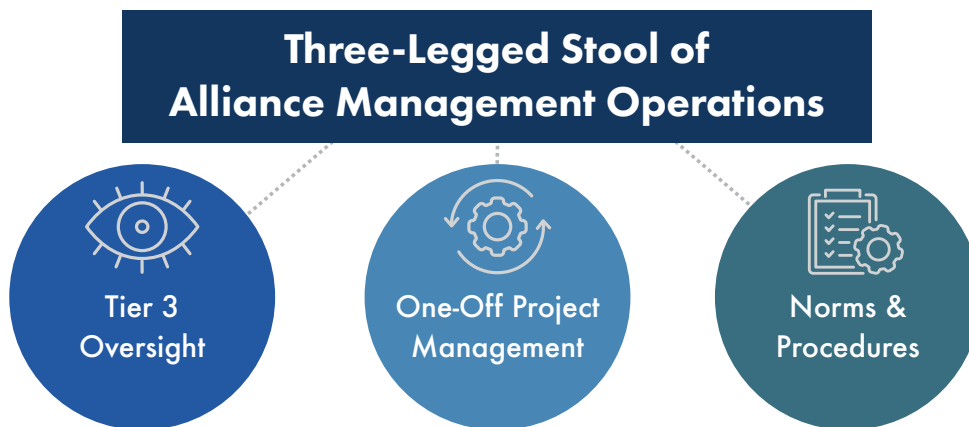


Figure 1 – Black’s Three-Legged Stool of Alliance Management Operations

2. **Managing one-off projects** like audit support, contract transitions, system upgrade, or record clean-up from acquired companies.
3. **Developing operational norms and procedures**, either to improve how something is currently done or to establish norms and procedures that don’t yet exist and need to.

According to Black, this third leg was the most undefined at the start, but he knew it was perhaps the most important component of continuous improvement of the alliance management practice.

**Katherine Kendrick**, head of alliance management at Jazz Pharmaceuticals, also envisioned the role to add internal capacity. She sees it as a proactive investment in developing the alliance capability throughout Jazz, a mid-size biopharma company with a significant and potentially expanding portfolio of alliances – underscoring that this is not just a big pharma play. Rather, it reflects the growing maturity of alliance management as an essential, business-critical capability.

**Lauren Griffey**, who is the first person hired at Jazz to take on the role of business operations for alliance management (Jazz’s label for the job), makes it clear it was not fully defined when she was hired. She began by taking several responsibilities off Kendrick’s plate and encouraged the team to “loop her in whenever it made sense.” This proactive approach allowed her to identify opportunities to drive consistency in practice, a key factor in strengthening Jazz’s alliance management capabilities.

This is not just a big pharma play. Rather, it reflects the growing maturity of alliance management as an essential, business-critical capability.



The operations role aims to free up alliance professionals for more strategic, value-creating activities, risk management and challenge resolution, portfolio insights, and enhanced stakeholder engagement.

## CORE ELEMENTS OF STRATEGIC ALLIANCE MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS

Irrespective of the initial impetus for adding an operations role to the alliance management function, it aims to:

- Free up alliance professionals for more strategic, value-creating activities, risk management and challenge resolution, portfolio insights, and enhanced stakeholder engagement.
- Standardize core workflows to reduce variability in quality and execution across alliance professionals and alliances of a similar nature.
- Improve visibility into and understanding of alliances and the role they play in a company's growth and innovation.

In many companies it is also a developmental pathway for future alliance managers. People who are able to enter alliance management without prior experience in the discipline are those that have the mindset, persona, and certain skills that make their leadership believe they can do the job. They are likely to have little, if any, experience in alliance management practices. The alliance operations role provides an opportunity for them to develop their understanding of those practices. It also helps them get to know and interact with the many stakeholders who engage in alliances.

While individual organizations vary, the foundational elements of the operations role (*See Figure 2 – Strategic Alliance Management Operations Foundational Elements*) include:

- **Systems management, metrics, and reporting:** Overseeing the systems used to track alliance management activity and to share data both internally and with partners, together with producing regular and on-demand reports. This includes systems such as allianceboard, the alliance management workflow platform, SharePoint or Box for shared files, and Teams for messaging and meetings. Importantly, this role is typically not intended to take on individual alliance professionals' responsibility for managing data in a digital platform such as allianceboard. Keeping that responsibility with the alliance professionals deepens their understanding of the alliance and its management needs.
- **Managing non-strategic alliances:** Providing oversight for alliances that require coordination but not high-touch strategic engagement. This includes those partnerships that only require providing a report of activity



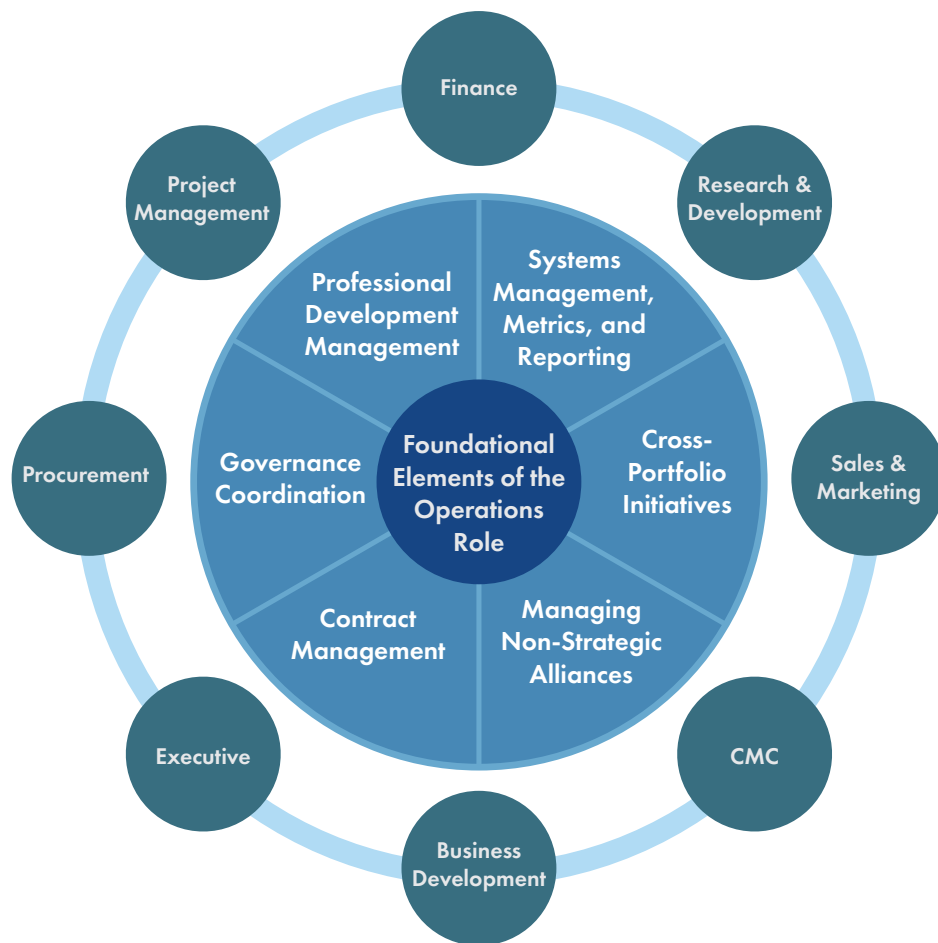


Figure 2 – Strategic Alliance Management Operations Foundational Elements

or ensuring royalties have been correctly paid. This also includes tracking trailing obligations for alliances that have been divested or concluded.

- **Cross-portfolio initiatives:** Supporting health check and other diagnostic assessments implementation, portfolio-level metrics and reporting initiatives, including coordinating with finance and investor relations on disclosure requirements, and conducting lessons-learned sessions and synthesis across deals.
- **Contract management:** Tracking and advising of upcoming contractual obligations, as well as ensuring timely contract evaluation and renewal. The operations role may also oversee the contracting process for the alliance management team's service and technology providers.

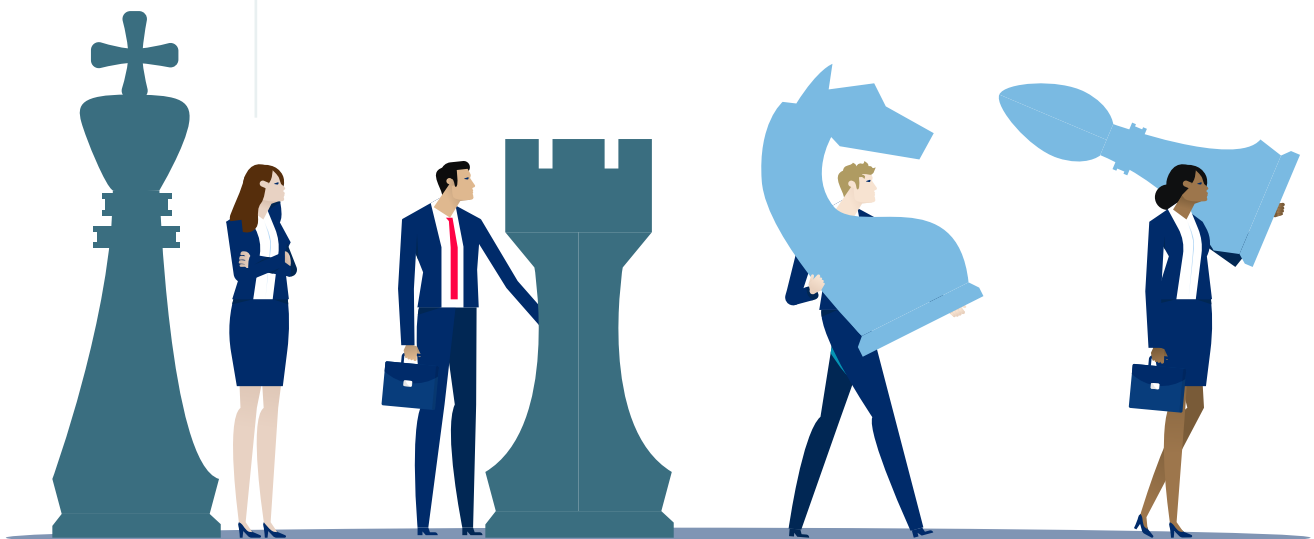




**Operations managers drive repeatable systems, take the burden of non-strategic work off alliance professionals, and build and manage the infrastructure that enables an organization-wide alliance capability.**

- **Governance coordination:** Keeping the big picture of governance responsibilities and timing across the portfolio. Potentially, this role can oversee a program of developing governance member bench strength.
- **Professional development:** Managing a program of skill building and capability development for both alliance professionals and alliance governance and team members, scheduling training, and managing knowledge-sharing platforms.

Make no mistake – this is not an executive assistant (EA) role. What distinguishes this from an EA role is intent and scope. While both roles offer leverage, operations managers drive repeatable systems, take the burden of non-strategic work off alliance professionals, and build and manage the infrastructure that enables an organization-wide alliance capability. EAs, in contrast, provide administrative support to individuals. Both are essential and very different roles.





## Staffing the Strategic Alliance Management Operations Role

### SKILLS, APTITUDE, AND BACKGROUND

Strategic alliance management operations sit at the intersection of process and cross-functional savvy – demanding not just organization and clarity, but diplomacy, business acumen, stakeholder engagement, and fluency with change management.

Among our interviewees, backgrounds vary dramatically, but common threads emerge: strong stakeholder engagement, intellectual curiosity, comfort with ambiguity, as well as a bias toward action and a drive to improve how things are done.

**Backgrounds vary dramatically, but common threads emerge: strong stakeholder engagement, intellectual curiosity, comfort with ambiguity, as well as a bias toward action and a drive to improve how things are done.**

- **Lauren Griffey, CA-AM, associate director, alliance management at Jazz Pharmaceuticals** brought fifteen years of sales experience in over a dozen disease states, followed by five years in sales training, which gave her fluency in drug launches, customer engagement, and stakeholder negotiation. Despite entering the role without prior knowledge of alliance management, her emotional intelligence and systems-thinking mindset proved foundational and key to winning the role.
- **Leah Kuzmuk, MSc, alliance manager at AbCellera**, fresh from graduate studies, had been involved in both industry sponsored and investigator-led clinical trials. She also built a clinical trial recruitment software startup. Her limited exposure to established alliance management practices turned out to be an asset – she questioned assumptions, created systems, and structured complexity with fresh eyes.
- **Robert McBride, J.D., director, business development, alliance management operations and analytics at Exelixis**, a former in-house legal counsel, transitioned into alliance and business development operations to bring order to a very active deal landscape. He leveraged legal reasoning and process orientation to design tools, standardize workflows, and shape the function from scratch.



Success in this role builds foundational insight into deal structures, reporting obligations, and decision hierarchies – knowledge critical for those aspiring to move into alliance manager roles.

These profiles underscore that no single-track leads to alliance operations excellence. Rather, successful individuals tend to:

- Ask incisive questions.
- See the big picture while obsessing over details.
- Enjoy creating order from ambiguity.
- Build bridges across departments with tact and credibility.

## ALLIANCE OPERATIONS AS A CAREER PATHWAY

While some view the role as a steppingstone, others see it as a strategic anchor. When Griffey stepped into the role, it was still being defined. Eighteen months into the role, she took on her first commercial alliance, followed by two early-stage development alliances another eighteen months later. Her background in operations enables her to bring forward efficiencies in how the alliances are managed. Kuzmuk too, has added managing strategic alliances to her role. McBride has not taken on the direct management of alliances. His priority is on ensuring stakeholders have what they need, freeing up those who do manage alliances to focus on the complex questions or those that require legal input. It has freed up considerable time for the team.

Importantly, success in this role builds foundational insight into deal structures, reporting obligations, and decision hierarchies – knowledge critical for those aspiring to move into alliance manager roles.

## STRUCTURING THE FUNCTION: Models and Variations

Different organizational needs yield two primary staffing models:

- **Centralized support model:** Seen at Exelixis, where McBride leads a cross-functional team across both business development and alliance management, providing tools and analytics across the portfolio. Other versions of this at different companies include alliance management operations as part of research and development operations and analytics.
- **Embedded model:** Kuzmuk is part of the alliance management team, and as stated has a dual role. She spends about 30% of her time on operations. Griffey, too, is part of the alliance management team at Jazz. At Merck, each alliance management team, including Black's



corporate alliance management and integration team has someone functioning in an operations capacity, so it is not just at smaller to mid-sized companies where the role is part of the team.

How the role is structured depends on how the role is envisioned. If it is seen as a career pathway to hands-on management of alliances, the embedded model is more likely to lead to progression of the individual. The centralized support model allows the capability to be leveraged across multiple departments. Another possible version of the centralized support model, especially when there are alliance management teams embedded in business units, is to mirror that structure and have operations managers embedded in the business units, but reporting to a central function responsible for establishing standards, consistency of practice, and resource allocation for strategic alliance management operations.

Notably, both models reflect a shared imperative: streamline tactical execution to preserve strategic bandwidth. Whether it's McBride automating recurring questions through a shared platform, Kuzmuk orchestrating biweekly cadence meetings to anticipate deliverables, or Griffey championing internal consistency, these models converge on one goal – empowering alliance professionals to focus on what only they can do.

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Executives benefit from easy-to-understand dashboards, customized for what is relevant to them, responsive alliance management professionals, and reduced turmoil.



## The Value of the Strategic Alliance Management Operations Function

### FOR ALLIANCE PROFESSIONALS

Strategic alliance management operations serve as the quiet catalyst for unlocking strategic bandwidth. As Griffey noted, preparation and coordination by an operations lead allow alliance managers to step up to a trusted advisor role, identifying cultural mismatches, fostering alignment, and delivering portfolio insights. Black's "three-legged stool" structure offloads Tier 3 agreements, project clutter, and report production – freeing time and mental space for work that truly drives outcomes.

McBride articulated this clearly: "Without operations, alliance professionals become bogged down by 'death by a thousand cuts' – answering the same stakeholder questions repeatedly, pulling data from siloed sources, and managing dozens of tactical deliverables." With a centralized platform and predictable processes in place, the alliance professionals now spend far more time on high-leverage problem solving. (See Figure 3 – Value of the Strategic Alliance Management Operations Function.)



Figure 3 – Value of the Strategic Alliance Management Operations Function



## **FOR EXECUTIVE STAKEHOLDERS, Including Governance Committee Members and Heads of Alliance Management Functions**

Executives benefit from easy-to-understand dashboards, customized for what is relevant to them, responsive alliance management professionals, and reduced turmoil. Effective alliance operations are an essential component of helping alliance professionals be proactive in managing challenges and preventing executives from being negatively surprised.

Kuzmuk described how alliance operations ensure business-ready data – on molecules, programs, and milestones – “So leaders like **Jake Beverage**, (vice president, alliance management at AbCellera), don’t need to chase it down or synthesize it themselves.”

Black highlighted the benefits of having someone who could take on time-consuming, yet important one-off projects that generally impact the entire alliance portfolio. For example, when a corporate headquarters moves to a new address and all partners need to be notified. Or when a complex project is underway, such as migrating all content from a legacy file sharing technology to a new platform. Without an operations manager to lead those very time-consuming and detailed initiatives, multiple alliance professionals would need to be engaged, taking them away from their primary responsibilities and without a doubt, taking much longer as a project.

Kendrick relates a time when she got a request out of the blue from her CEO. He had a specific alliance question. In the past, it likely would have required several emails, calls, and hours to put together a response. Because she had an alliance business operations function and it had led the implementation of an alliance management workflow platform, she logged onto the platform and was able to create a quick report in a matter of minutes, not hours – and without having to interrupt her team. With reporting obligations increasing and scrutiny on the use of resources tightening, alliance operations provide consistency, traceability, and speed of response—qualities any executive values.

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**Compared to a professional strategic alliance director, the operations role is modestly compensated – but delivers exponential return.**

## **FOR ALLIANCE TEAM MEMBERS AND OTHER FUNCTIONAL STAKEHOLDERS**

Project and program managers, along with other functional leaders, focus on the asset. Their job is to advance the asset in its lifecycle. The alliance professional focuses on the alliance and collaboration – the structure and ways of working that allow the alliance team members to advance the program.

Kuzmuk's work with cross-functional team members exemplifies this. As she puts it, "the strategic alliance management function is the anchor." Cadence meetings, as Kuzmuk explained, "Ensure everyone knows what's coming – reports due, decisions pending, presentations needed." She ensures that milestones, goals, decisions, and deliverables are all mapped and made visible to prepare for meetings.

All of our interviewed alliance operations managers have worked to help drive consistency across alliance managers, which helps stakeholders know what to expect from alliance management. As Griffey said, "I was free to ask, 'Why are you doing it this way?' I could see how alliance manager A did it and how alliance manager B did it and create the best approach and consistency across alliance managers."

Legal, finance, and corporate development all rely on alliance data – often in formats and timelines unique to their functions. Without centralized operations, they're left working through a patchwork of contact points and assumptions. With operations in place, they gain a single source of truth, smooth coordination, and confidence that key metrics and obligations won't fall through the cracks.

## **FOR PARTNERS**

External partners may not interact with the alliance management operations function directly – but they feel its impact. Kickoffs are well-orchestrated. Reports arrive on time. Griffey observed that invisible acts of clarity create tangible trust.

When alliance execution runs smoothly, partners don't feel the strain of corporate complexity. Instead, they experience the professionalism and reliability that underpins sustainable collaboration which in turn helps achieve the goal of many companies – to be a "partner of choice."



## THE COST OF THE FUNCTION

Compared to a professional strategic alliance director, the operations role is modestly compensated – but delivers exponential return. Black emphasized that especially for large portfolios, one well-trained, process-oriented hire can dramatically boost capacity. It depends on industry and geography, but operations managers' salaries are typically thirty to forty percent (30 – 40%) less than that of an associate director level strategic alliance manager – typically the entry-level alliance manager role in biopharma. And as we see, it is a great pathway for people with the right skills to advance into the role.

Moreover, the value isn't just in cost containment. It's in amplifying the effectiveness of higher-paid talent. Freed from logistics and repetition, alliance professionals can manage more alliances and devote more attention to troubled ones – multiplying their strategic impact.



**It is the most cost-effective way to scale the alliance management capability.**



## Making the Case for Investing in Strategic Alliance Management Operations

Despite its outsized impact, strategic alliance management operations often start as a bootstrapped effort—a high-performing individual cobbling together tracking systems, cadence meetings, and stakeholder briefings. But as alliance portfolios expand, expectations intensify, and organizational demands grow more complex, ad hoc won't scale. Investment in dedicated operations support becomes a necessity, not a nice-to-have. It is the most cost-effective way to scale the alliance management capability.

Additionally, because it makes the work of the alliance management professionals visible, provides consistent data to stakeholders, and presents portfolio level reports to executives, implementing a strategic alliance management operations role helps build an alliance capability across the organization.

*Figure 4 – Making the Case depicts our five-step approach.*

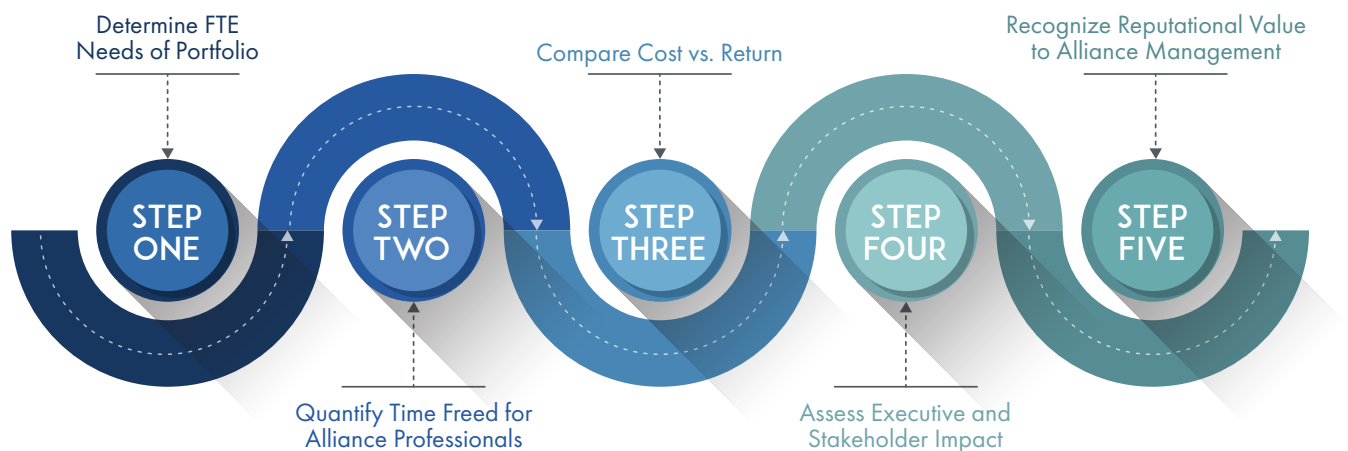


Figure 4 – Making the Case



## STEP ONE: Determine the FTE Needs of Your Portfolio

Alliance teams juggle governance commitments, deliverable management, cross-functional alignment, and reporting cycles across dozens of agreements. Even smaller portfolios – with as few as three to five active alliances – generate a significant volume of tactical requirements.

To determine the full-time equivalent (FTE) personnel needs of the portfolio, first start with tiering or segmenting the portfolio based on the intersection of management complexity and potential value. Based either on industry benchmarks or just the loads your team carries, apply them to each alliance in the tier to get a baseline of total FTE requirements. Black recommends that you also consider where alliances are in their lifecycle – recognizing that startups and wind-downs or closeouts can require considerable time from the alliance professional. He also considers the governance structure of the alliances that individuals manage. Much of this will surface in the complexity/value tiering, as the number of governance committees is a complexity factor, but it is worth a second look.

Alliance managers are never insulated. They respond to executive reporting requests, participate in cross-functional process initiatives, and contribute to audit, compliance, and business development projects. These additional responsibilities can strain capacity even further. Based on our recent experiences with alliance management teams at several mid-sized biopharma companies, it is common for alliance management professionals to currently carry workloads twenty-five to fifty percent (25 – 50%) over industry benchmark capacity. This affects their ability to engage in truly value creating work, negatively affecting how stakeholders view *their* value.

## STEP TWO: Quantify Time Freed from Alliance Professionals

Freed capacity isn't theoretical – it's immediately felt.

- McBride's cross-functional team automated routine updates and addressed routine stakeholder questions, allowing alliance managers to focus on complex engagements.
- Black scoped the role to handle lower-risk agreements to avoid diluting the focus of more senior alliance managers.
- Griffey immediately started freeing up Kendrick so she could focus on developing the function and building stakeholders' ability to successfully engage with their alliance counterparts.

**Even smaller portfolios – with as few as three to five active alliances – generate a significant volume of tactical requirements.**



**Estimates suggest that a single operations role can free up twenty to forty percent (20 – 40%) of each alliance professional's time**

Estimates suggest that a single operations role can free up twenty to forty percent (20 – 40%) of each alliance professional's time – time that can be reallocated toward strategy, driving decisions and milestones, risk management, efficiency enhancement, and broader portfolio insights.

### STEP THREE: Compare Cost vs. Return

Let's do a rough comparative calculation using a very narrow lens:

- Assume an average alliance director salary of \$200K, as reported on salary.com (<https://www.salary.com/research/salary/position/director-of-strategic-alliances-salary>).
- An operations lead may cost \$110K–\$150K, depending on background and geography (based on biopharmaceutical sales operations and medical affairs operations salary ranges per job openings on indeed.com).
- Freeing up just 30% of an alliance professional's time, right in the middle of the range described above (~\$60K of value) already covers nearly half the cost of the operations manager.
- Multiply this across a team of three to four alliance professionals, and the return quickly becomes more than twice the investment. (See Figure 5 – Value Delivered)

And that's without factoring **intangible returns**: reduced rework, shorter onboarding for new hires, better audit readiness, reduced risk of critical information mismanagement or loss, and improved stakeholder relationships.

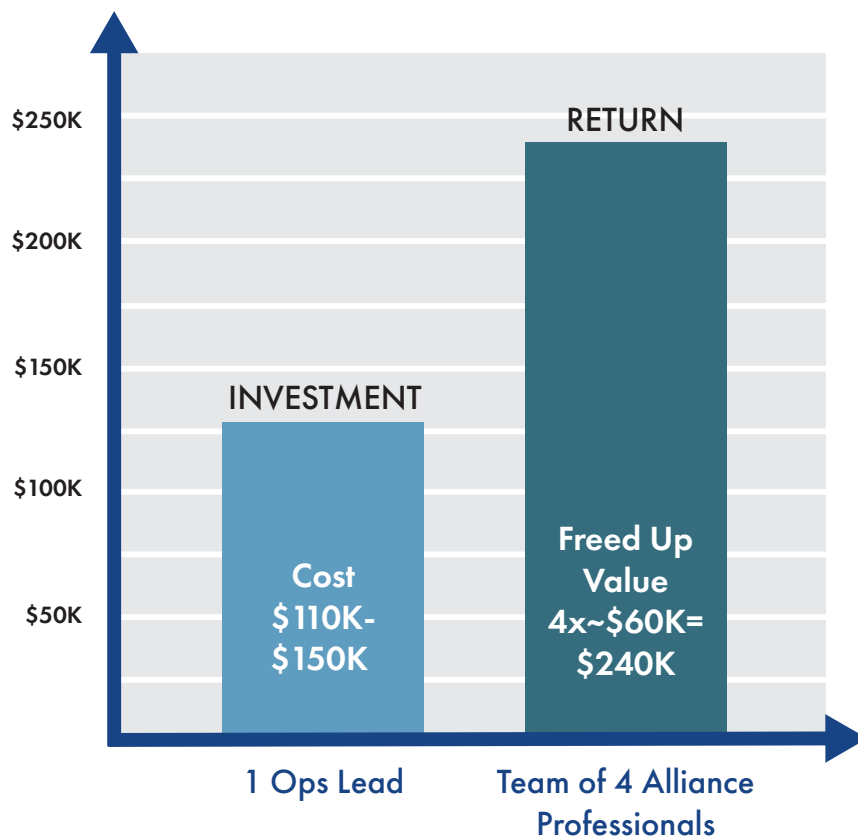
### STEP FOUR: Assess Executive and Stakeholder Impact

Executives get what they need – when and how they need it. They spend less time in redundant meetings, can focus on strategic value creation, and can be more effective alliance governance members. Stakeholders stop asking the same questions repeatedly. Partners experience smoother execution. And perhaps most critically: alliance professionals are elevated, not buried. This isn't just about tactical support – it's about creating the *capacity for strategic insight*.

### STEP FIVE: Recognize Reputational Value to Alliance Management

Strategic alliance functions often struggle for organizational legitimacy. When reports are late, metrics are inconsistent, unexpected issues emerge, or





$$\text{Return on Investment} = \frac{\$240K}{\$130K} = 185\%$$

Figure 5 – Value Delivered

**This isn't just about tactical support – it's about creating the capacity for strategic insight.**

meetings feel reactive, leadership questions the function's value. Alliance operations provide the infrastructure to run alliance management as an organizational capability – just as every other critical function is run and improves over time.

Kuzmuk emphasized that when alliance data and governance materials are structured, accessible, and reliable, *the value of alliance management is no longer invisible*. It is measurable, defensible, and extensible.





Strategic alliance management operations is the discipline built for this moment. It's not overhead – it's infrastructure.



## A Smart Strategy for Lean Times

In today's biopharma landscape, complexity is the constant. Portfolios are expanding—not just in size, but in diversity. Collaborations span research to commercialization, startups to multinationals, and molecules to digital platforms. Meanwhile, tightening budgets, shifts in government policies and funding cuts are making people anxious. Teams are asked to do more with less.

That's not a temporary constraint – it's the new reality.



Figure 6 – Alliance Management Operations Maturity Journey

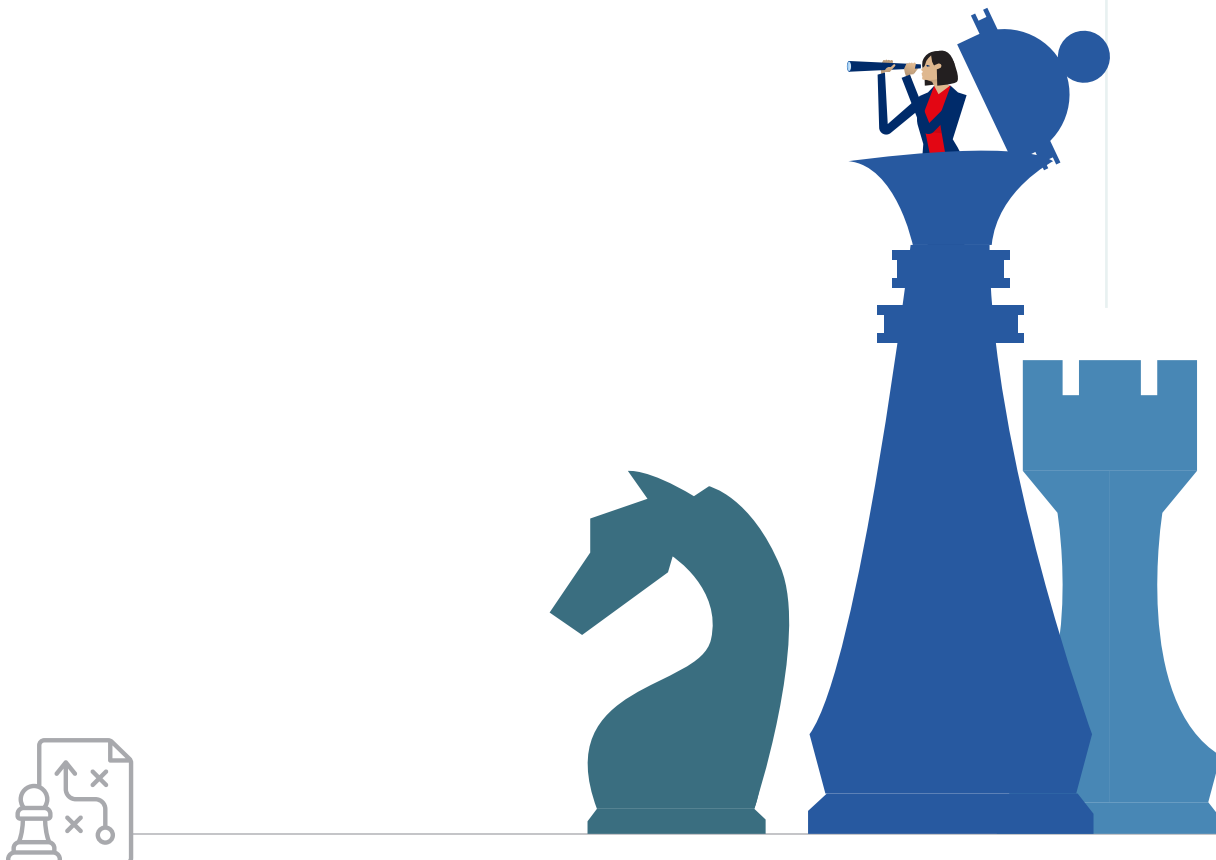


Strategic alliance management operations is the discipline built for this moment. It's not overhead – it's infrastructure. It turns isolated expertise into repeatable excellence by taking what often starts as an ad hoc effort by individual alliance managers and maturing it into a strategic enabler (See Figure 6 – *Alliance Management Operations Maturity Journey*). It transforms reactivity into readiness. And most critically, it allows the humans in the system – your alliance professionals – to focus on the work only they can do.

For the cost of a single hire and investment in a digital alliance management platform, organizations can unlock:

- Greater portfolio capacity
- Faster, cleaner decision-making
- Higher trust across internal and external stakeholders
- A more resilient alliance function, no matter the turbulence ahead

It's not about scaling big – it's about scaling smart. And investing in strategic alliance management operations is one of the smartest moves an organization can make in lean and anxious times.



## About allianceboard

allianceboard is the software-as-a-service solution used by leading business development and alliance management teams to track and manage their alliance portfolio effectively in one intuitive platform from early scouting activities all the way through alliance management.

Simplicity of use, powerful automations and AI-driven insights enable you to put strategic back into alliance management and drive alliance success.

Book your demo today at [www.allianceboard.com](http://www.allianceboard.com) and see how you can gain back your time, boost your visibility and impact.

## About The Rhythm of Business

The Rhythm of Business is a professional services firm with core expertise in alliance management, strategic alliances, and business collaboration.

Our mission is to help people partner well. Since 1999 we have consulted globally and offered education and training, digitization, and data-based assessments to help organizations achieve higher levels of partnering and alliance success. We work with leaders to build and execute a collaborative leadership agenda, break down barriers, and consistently drive excellent alliance practice throughout an organization and its partnerships.

Visit The Partnering Guide™ for the latest thought leadership and posts on current topics in alliance management, strategic alliances, and business collaborations. Access it at [www.rhythmofbusiness.com/partneringinsights](http://www.rhythmofbusiness.com/partneringinsights).





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