

The background of the central white box is a detailed architectural line drawing. It features a complex network of lines representing structural elements like beams, columns, and roof trusses. There are also smaller details like a window frame on the left, a circular element on the right, and a small graph-like structure with dots and lines on the right side. The drawing is rendered in a light blue-grey color on a white background.

THE 2026 CONSULTING ALMANAC: THE OPERATIONS REPORT

What 86 independent consultants told us
about how their practices actually run.

vivid

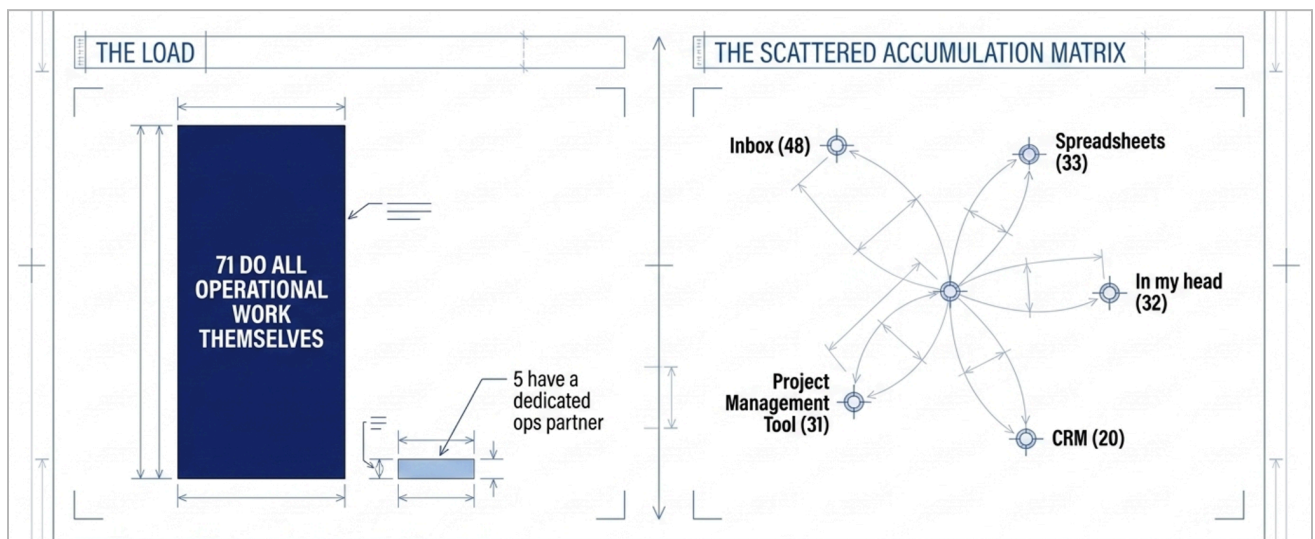
OPERATIONAL ADVISORS

NotebookLM

In spring 2026, 86 independent consultants answered a survey about how the operational side of their practices actually runs. They are part of a movement larger than most people realize. MBO Partners puts the number of independent professional-services consultants in the United States at roughly 11.5 million, up 55 percent since 2020. Most of the 86 work solo or in small teams, most have been at it for years, and most run under \$250K a year. The friction they described did not track with inexperience. It showed up at nearly every level of tenure, which is the frontier that opens once capable people have already grown past their original setup.

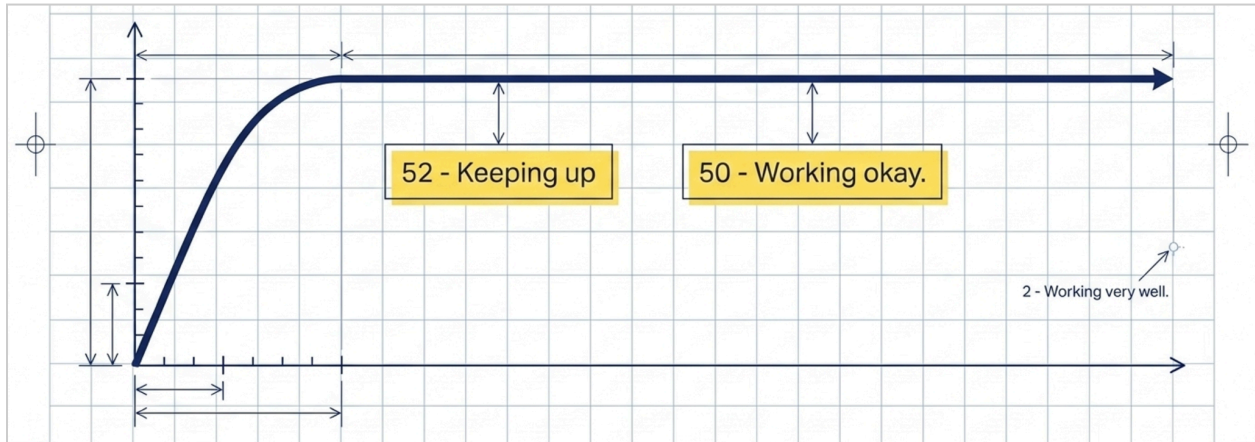
ONE PERSON, EVERY FUNCTION

Seventy-one of the 86 handle all of the operational work themselves. Only five have a dedicated operations partner. These are the people who sell the work, deliver it, set the strategy, manage the calendar, chase the invoices, keep the records, and remember what happens next, all at once, and still hold onto nearly every client. Very few businesses of any size ask one person to carry that many functions and keep standing. The operational role is the one function that never got designed on purpose, because it was always being absorbed by someone already doing four other jobs. Ask who is responsible for the internal process in a practice like this, and the honest answer is the founder, and also nobody.



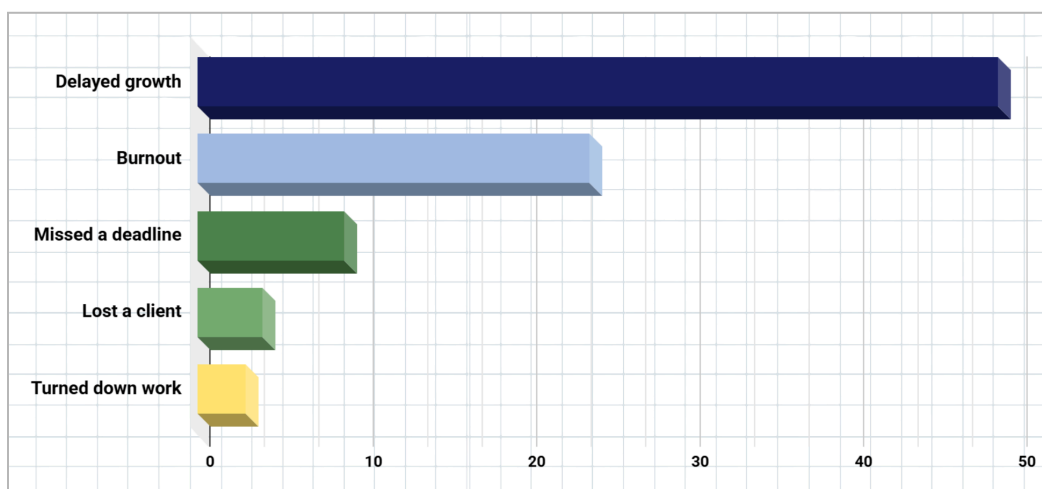
WORKING OKAY

Asked how their current approach is working, 50 of the 86 said okay. Only 2 said very well. The psychologist Corey Keyes has a name for the steady middle that is neither struggling nor thriving. He calls it languishing, the state between distress and flourishing where things are functional and quietly stuck. Steadiness is a real achievement, and most small businesses never reach it.



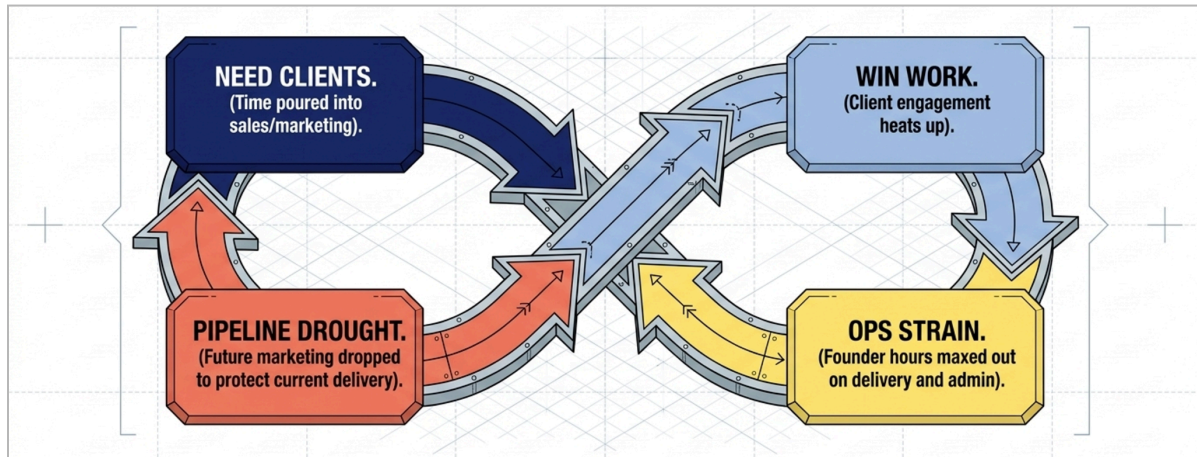
THE COST IS REAL, AND THE GROWTH IS RECOVERABLE

49 named delayed growth as a consequence of operational friction. Almost no one lost a client or missed a deadline, so the delivery core is intact. 24 named burnout. Among the 51 who say they are both keeping up and working okay, 12 report burnout anyway. That is the human cost sitting quietly inside the steady-looking middle.



A CAPACITY PROBLEM WEARING A SALES COSTUME

You need clients to earn, so the hours go to delivery. Client work ends, so you also have to keep selling. For one person, those two demands tend to collide. The marketing that would build the pipeline is the first thing set down when an engagement heats up, because the client is present and the future pipeline is abstract, and so the practice moves between full and lean and the practitioner concludes the trouble is sales.



FROM STEADY TO FLOURISHING

These consultants have built something genuinely difficult. That steadiness is the achievement, and it is also the vantage point from which deliberate growth becomes possible. Steady is not the same as flourishing, and the plateau has a real cost. Every one of these consultants is part of a movement of millions of people who decided to bet on themselves. The nerve it took to start is the same nerve it takes to build the next layer.

