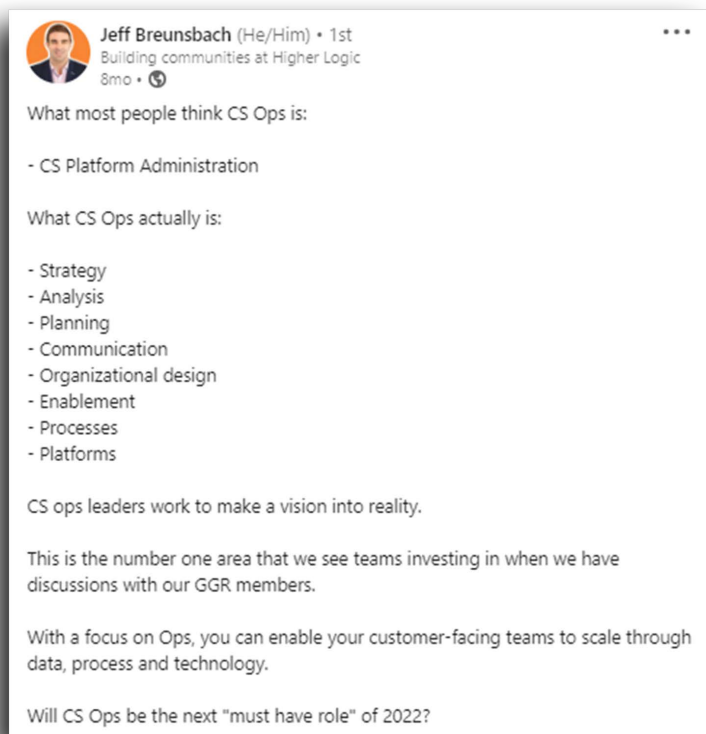


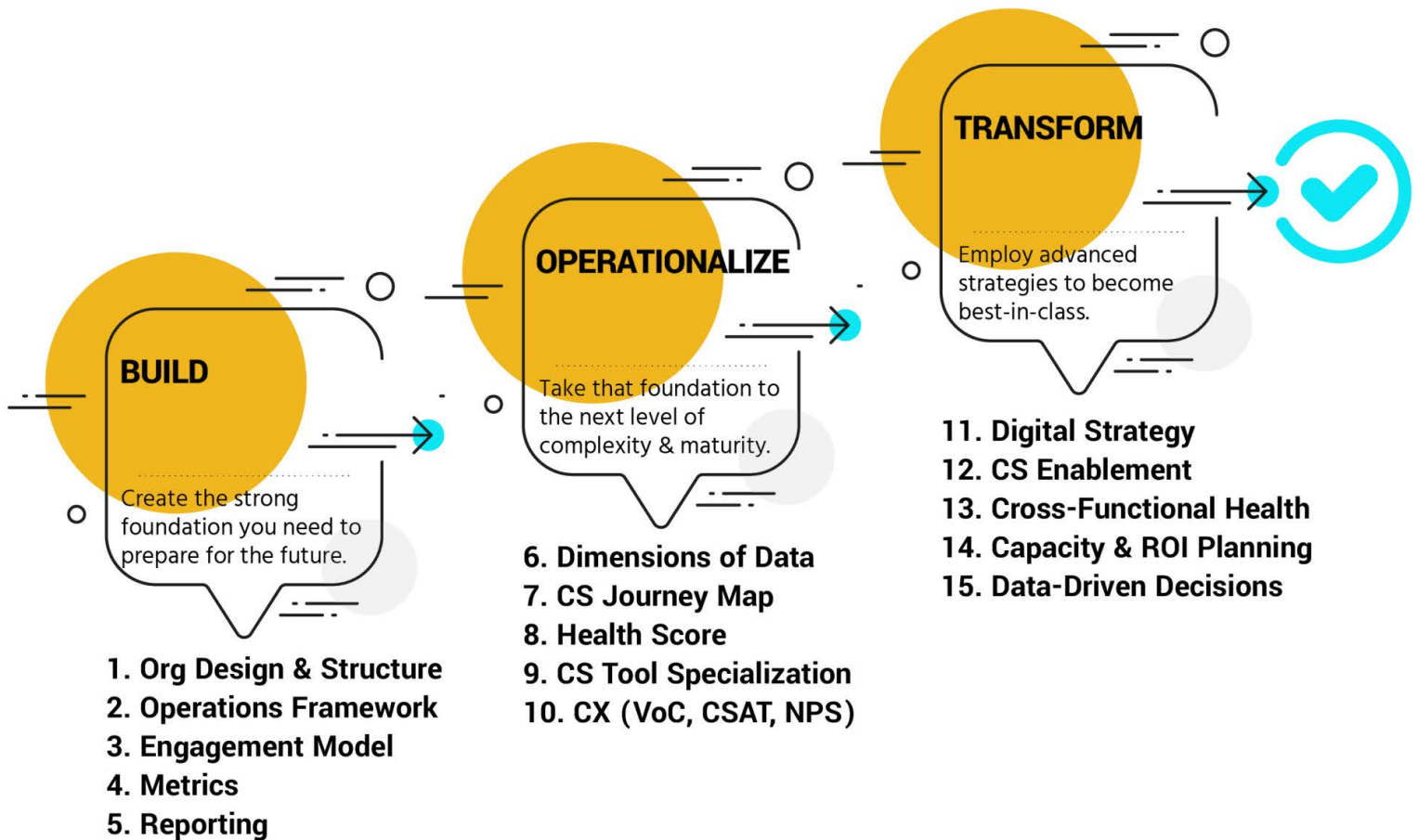
Why Customer Success Operations is More Than Just CS Tool Administration

Much like Customer Success itself, there are a few different definitions of Customer Success Operations floating around. Maybe they are the group that [defines processes and metrics](#) for CS leadership and CSMs. Or, perhaps it's their responsibility to [support other members of the CS function](#) in any way they can. When organizations are early in their [CS Maturity](#), CS Ops roles may be primarily focused on tool administration. More mature CS Ops teams have robust capabilities that go far beyond that. In a [LinkedIn post](#), Jeff Breunsbach, Director of Brand at Higher Logic, gave a long list of all the functions CS Ops teams perform in support of Customer Success, including big picture strategy and organizational design.

Because CS Ops has so much immense potential that may not be fully realized within many CS organizations today, we thought it would be helpful to pull together a comprehensive definition to help CS leaders better understand their operational capabilities. As Customer Success organizations grow, so too must their capacity for strategy, programs, data, and automation. And this means building out a robust and capable CS Ops team to scale with the rest of the org.



Much like our original Customer Success Maturity Model, our [Customer Success Operations Maturity Model](#) is a framework we've built by aggregating findings from many sources, including interviews with CS Ops leaders, intelligence gathered from top Customer Success research firms like TSIA, data from our annual [Customer Success Leadership Study](#), and input from our customers, industry consultants, and friends along the way. Our research led us to identify 15 categories that together add up to CS operational excellence. We have split them into three stages that you may recognize from ESG: Build, Operationalize, and Transform. Looking over each, you'll see all the incredible things CS Operations are capable of and just how much more it is than simple tool administration.



Bear in mind that the vast majority of CS Ops organizations will not move from 1-15 on this maturity scale in a linear fashion. You might start building out your digital strategy on day one but take a bit longer to iron out all the reporting features you'd like to have across your CS organization. Or you may already have a CS platform in place but have some back-to-basics work to do in order to optimize its functionality. We're not saying you have to have 1-5 in place to move your CS Ops maturity forward from Build to Operationalize or 6-10 down pat to start tackling Transform. We've broken these capabilities down into 15 categories and three stages to help CS leaders clarify their organization's position and potential and then help them focus their time, energy, and resources on the capabilities that make the most sense for them.

“Build” Capabilities of CS Ops

In the early stages of Customer Success, individuals usually have to wear many hats because the teams are small and specialized roles haven't been clearly broken out and defined. Resources are limited. CSMs might work closely with their leaders to establish strategic objectives or operational projects. CS leaders may be the ones choosing and launching their CS platform or [wrestling with a CRM](#) to get it to work for their team's needs. As the organization matures, CS leaders will start to split out the operations role and give these functions to dedicated personnel, usually beginning with the hire of a CS Ops Manager.

We call this early stage “Build” because these are the operational capabilities that CS teams need to create a strong foundation of support for the Customer Success team. These are the basic functions your operations team needs to orient themselves and begin to enable your CSMs with practical tools and processes to help them achieve their goals.

1. Organizational Design and Structure

CS Ops has the potential to grow into a wide array of supporting roles, eventually incorporating several different functions like enablement and training, tool administration, digital strategy, and content creation. But, in the beginning, you might only have a single CS Ops Manager (as we mentioned, typically the first operations hire). You've got to decide where Customer Success itself sits in the overall company's reporting and funding structures and then where CS Ops fits within your CS organization. Your organizational structure drives the velocity of your CS maturation, so it's best to get this clear right out of the gate – while things are still relatively straightforward.

For design and structure, you start with designating a person for CS Operations, and then you grow into assigning functions to the team and measuring their impact on KPIs (especially that [critical NRR metric](#)). Your CS Ops team should grow along with your CS org, always keeping a headcount that adequately supports your CSMs and customer base.

2. Operations Framework

The operations framework is the method behind the madness, the processes and procedures that map out the team's approach. How are they going to do all the valuable work that they do? Having a framework allows you to create repeatable processes for evaluating, deploying, maintaining, and measuring your processes – both manual and automated. For example, you could leverage DevOps methodologies to make the team's processes more efficient. It's also a good idea to build in [change management principles](#) to help both internal and external teams embrace the new techniques and capabilities coming out of CS Ops.

This is number two on our list, so you know it's particularly critical to get it right early on. Without a repeatable operations framework in place, your team won't be able to scale down the road. By standardizing your processes, you can minimize disruption and maximize the benefits of operationalization.

3. Engagement Model

Another fundamental operational aspect of every CS organization is choosing your engagement model. How should your CSMs interact with your customers? When you organize your customer segments into tiers, you select each tier's engagement model (high-touch, mid-touch, tech-touch, etc. Not to be confused with segmentation (which happens first), you'll choose engagement models based on a customer's common characteristics, and you may even consider testing out components of dynamic engagement.

The engagement model is on our Customer Success Maturity Model, too (at number two, but here it means something slightly different. Operations looks at everything from a backend perspective, whereas CSMs apply engagement with their customers on the front end. CS Ops will ask and answer questions like: What is the correct headcount ratio for CSMs in each customer tier? How are accounts assigned? What criteria does an account have to meet to fall into each customer segment and tier level? They build the behind-the-scenes strategy for each tier level and continuously test and refine the effectiveness of the engagement models.

4. Metrics

Everyone loves metrics. Data. They are wonderful to have. But without any context, those metrics are just a bunch of numbers. You shouldn't measure a metric without defining why that particular metric is important. Figure out the outcome you're looking to drive by tracking the movement of a specific variable. Then, identify the various metrics you want to measure and why they are important to the business. Understand what each metric really means and how to calculate it. What outcome are you looking to drive for your customers by tracking these specific metrics? This is what having metrics as a CS Ops capability means.

5. Reporting

Both metrics and reporting are necessary capabilities for CS maturity and CS Ops maturity. Reporting functionality will naturally grow alongside your tool capabilities. CS Ops in early maturity might use Excel spreadsheets to track metrics and report on them, pulling data into a templated Excel sheet. Later on, Business Intelligence tools and CS Platforms have much more robust reporting features that will allow the CS team to pull reports whenever they need them or have on-demand dashboard capabilities that deliver business views in real-time. CS leaders can use all of these to make informed, data-driven decisions.

For this capability, CS Ops should also know whom they share these reports with, where their data goes, and how it's being used by both CS and external departments like Sales and Marketing so that everyone can benefit from all of our juicy CS intelligence.

“Operationalize” Capabilities of CS Ops

More customers are buying your product, the business is healthy and expanding, and CS leaders expect more from CS Ops. Scaling your Customer Success team means you need operationalized processes and procedures to support growth. At the operationalize stage, CS Ops teams have laid the groundwork, and now they are building a structure on top of that foundation. If anyone ever accused CS Ops of being just CS tool administration, this stage obliterates that notion.

At this point, CS capabilities are accelerating too, and leadership may be considering or already creating a [Customer Success Center of Excellence](#). It's no coincidence that one of [the first three things you need to start a CS Center of Excellence](#) is a CS Ops Manager. Operational capabilities are the throughline for any CS CoE.

6. Dimensions of Data

Expanding on numbers four and five, metrics and reporting, is having access to the right data. Data that you have confirmed will be useful in driving successful outcomes for your Customer Success organization. This data should be accurate, timely, and readily available to the people who need it. It's essential to have data hygiene methodologies in place to ensure data quality. And by this stage, you should have identified all possible sources of valuable data and integrated them into your systems.

Without [systematic access to disparate data sources](#), it's too time-consuming to aggregate, manipulate, and deliver the KPIs that CSMs and CS leaders need to manage their customers proactively. This includes gathering data from other departments (who are, ideally, not siloed) and connecting all the dots to paint a clear, big-picture strategy for leadership.

7. CS Journey Map

Elevating the customer engagement model to the next level involves building your CS journey map. The CS journey map considers everything your customer experiences from pre-sale through renewal. Tracking things like the [critical moments in customer relationships](#) and utilizing [tools like RASCIs](#) to diagram moments of truth will deepen your and your team's understanding of the customer experience. Then, [with the help of a cross-functional team](#) with representatives from every department involved in the customer journey, you can create current and future state journey maps that highlight the gaps in your customer experience that everyone can work to fill.

8. Health Score

Everyone knows how critical customer health scores are, but how many of us continuously work to [prove the validity of our health score](#) metrics? Implementing a health score is one thing. Constantly challenging and testing the impact of your health score variables on your customer relationships is another thing entirely. Going beyond your CS Platform's default health score setting and taking a process-based approach to [aligning your customer health score with your business priorities](#) is a major indicator of CS Ops maturity.

9. CS Tool Specialization

So, here we are at number nine, and we are finally talking about CS tool administration. See? CS Ops has a lot to do before tools even enter the picture. Without the capabilities leading up to this point, you likely haven't defined your strategy well enough to effectively use the robust capabilities of the tools meant to support it.

Deploying technology for technology's sake often leads to a Customer Success tech stack that has too many moving parts, requires too many specialized resources, lacks adequate integrations to support operational efficiencies, and may be saddled with technical debt. Rather than speed things up with automation capabilities, it can actually slow things down, impeding growth.

Technology selection should involve a discovery process – incorporating things like readiness assessments, [requirements documentation](#), vendor demos, and proof of concepts – to ensure that everyone (inside and outside of CS) derives the most value from the technology decision possible. And once selection is complete, the fun (and hard work) of implementation and administration begins – creating a whole new set of responsibilities for your CS Ops team.

10. CX (VoC, CSAT, NPS, etc.)

Now we look at how CS Ops is measuring the customer experience. Gathering data and measuring KPIs like Voice of the Customer, CSAT, and NPS is part of a strong and, crucially, *continuous* [customer feedback strategy](#) that enables CSMs to adjust their engagement approach based on real-time data. In more mature organizations, it's CS Ops who identify the best times and ways to reach out to customers for feedback. Then, they set up a variety of techniques and channels to automate the collection and reporting of these essential CX metrics. The most mature CS orgs even have specialized Voice of Customer roles within their CS Ops team.

“Transform” Capabilities of CS Ops

You've put processes into place. You've got the right tools. You have an awesome team. How do you take CS Ops to the next level? In the transformation phase, CS Ops supports the organization in streamlining and scaling to the highest degrees of maturity. We're talking capabilities that fill in the structure you've painstakingly built – all the details that make it shine – the floor, the walls, the windows, the roof, and all the good stuff in between.

Transform marks the final stage of CS Ops maturity in this model, but not the end of its evolution and growth. Just like Customer Success, CS Operations is a discipline constantly pioneering new techniques, tools, and processes for better and better ways to serve their organization. The industry is always innovating and improving. That's what makes CS Ops and Customer Success so exciting, after all.

11. Digital Strategy

Don't make the mistake of thinking that implementing a Digital Customer Success strategy means going full-tilt into automation starting tomorrow. This CS Ops capability is more about how you will focus and develop your digital plan over time. Like everything else, we don't recommend taking a set-it-and-forget-it approach. Digital CS should constantly evolve and change based on how you can best leverage tools and technologies to drive value for your customers. With a robust digital strategy, CS Ops will do things like support CSMs in executing customer marketing campaigns (and collaborating with Marketing to get it done!).

They'll design content for customer communications in the middle and later stages of the customer journey, not just onboarding and adoption. Tech touch will be part of every customer tier, not just the tail, and will work hand-in-hand with human interaction to provide personalization at scale for your customers.

12. CS Enablement

Having a CS enablement function means dedicating resources toward empowering CSMs with the skills and knowledge they need to solve problems and achieve organizational goals. The most successful CSMs have a deep knowledge of your products and services and have been professionally trained and certified in Customer Success and, therefore, can take a consultative approach with their customers.

They also understand and can leverage all the programs, processes, and technologies that support the CS organization to their benefit. Helping CSMs achieve this level of success requires CS enablement. CS Ops can work with leadership to develop a training program that shares this tribal knowledge with CSMs and other departments that could also benefit from it. To enjoy the full benefits of enablement, CS Ops should tie these specialized efforts to related KPIs to confirm the program's effectiveness (there's that continuous testing, refining, and improving again!).

13. Cross-Functional Health

Customer Success can't work in a silo, and neither can CS Ops. We need other departments to cooperate with us to spread knowledge and establish the most successful operational practices across the enterprise. A siloed CS Ops team will struggle to provide organizational value against competing, often entrenched, incentives of other customer-facing functions and departments. But, when everyone works together to develop and share efficiencies and innovations across teams, everybody benefits. Especially our customers.

Cross-functional collaboration begins by forming a CS Ops charter with input from other customer-facing business units. Once a clear charter is established and communicated across the company, CS Ops should regularly reach out to other departments to gather feedback and guidance from departments outside of Customer Success. This will help create a fully cohesive, integrated Customer Success program that all departments can get behind.

14. Capacity & ROI Planning

How do you figure out the proper capacity of CSMs for your engagement models? As your customer base expands, it will get harder and harder to deliver on expected outcomes and value if you don't have enough staffing in place. At the same time, how do you know the proper headcount for the CS Ops team to ensure both the success of CS and their ability to innovate and add new operational capabilities over time? Capacity and ROI planning is the answer. CS Ops needs to develop an understanding of the expectations for each engagement model and the corresponding staffing levels necessary to meet them. This means knowing the costs associated with staff and, in advanced maturity, the ability to correlate spend on CS directly to NRR.

15. Data-Driven Decisions

The best decisions are data-driven. But what does it really mean to make data-driven decisions? Here, it means that the CS organization has matured to the point where everyone can trust the data in front of them. Leadership has confidence that the metrics in their (easily consumable) reports are not only correct but also valuable for identifying trends early on and helping them make the best decisions for the business. The goal is to use predictive analytics to understand lagging and leading indicators well enough to identify risk with enough time to mitigate it.

As Gainsight [points out](#), "No one has CS Ops wholly defined, so there is room for experimentation and improvement." Don't forget that we're always searching for better ways, new inspirations, and cutting-edge technologies to keep moving Customer Success toward its goals. Customer Success Operations is so much more than technology administration – it's the ship's helm, steering the entire organization into the future.