



Oliver Hart

AUTHOR · NOBEL PRIZE LAUREATE

Boardrooms are facing harder questions about corporate purpose, ownership, and what the firm is actually for. Activist shareholders push ESG mandates while stakeholder capitalism slogans run ahead of operating reality. Most leadership teams lack a rigorous framework for thinking through ownership and incentive design when no contract can specify every outcome.

Oliver Hart is a Nobel laureate economist whose theory of incomplete contracts reshapes how boards approach corporate governance and the question of corporate purpose.

Oliver Hart's 2026 Biography

Why organisations work with Oliver Hart

- Hart's theory of incomplete contracts and the Grossman-Hart-Moore property rights theory underpin most modern thinking on corporate governance and the boundaries of the firm. Boards working through M&A, integration, outsourcing, or governance redesign get a framework grounded in four decades of foundational research.
- The Hart-Zingales shareholder welfare framework gives boards a substantive third position between Friedman-style shareholder primacy and stakeholder capitalism rhetoric. It is published in peer-reviewed journals and directly applicable to live ESG and shareholder voting decisions.
- Hart has served as a government expert witness in major US legal cases, including *Black & Decker v. USA* and *Wells Fargo v. USA*. The framework has been tested under adversarial legal scrutiny, with high-stakes commercial outcomes turning on the economic argument.
- Hart's body of work has shaped four decades of research on ownership and incentive design. The 2016 Nobel Prize and 2023 Knight Bachelor are the formal recognition of a framework that now underpins how regulators and corporate boards approach governance questions.

Biography highlights

- Co-recipient of the 2016 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, awarded with Bengt Holmström for contributions to contract theory.
- Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University Professor at Harvard, the institution's highest faculty rank.
- Author of *Firms, Contracts, and Financial Structure* (Oxford University Press), the standard reference text on the economic theory of the firm.
- Knight Bachelor in the 2023 King's Birthday Honours for services to

AVAILABLE FOR

- After Dinner Engagement
- Speaking

OLIVER'S SPEAKING THEMES

- Business Strategy & Growth
- ESG Strategy
- Organizational Design
- Political Risk & Policy

LANGUAGES: English

economic theory.

- Past president of the American Law and Economics Association and past vice president of the American Economic Association.
- Fellow of the British Academy, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Econometric Society, and member of the National Academy of Sciences.

Biography

What is a firm, and where should its boundaries lie? The question sits underneath most of the contested decisions facing modern boards, from M&A integration to ESG governance. The framework that lets boards answer it rigorously was largely built by Sir Oliver Hart.

Hart's contributions to contract theory, recognised with the 2016 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, centre on a foundational insight. Real contracts are incomplete: they cannot specify every contingency, and whoever holds the right to decide on the unspecified elements holds the real power. The Grossman-Hart-Moore property rights theory built on this to formalise when activities should sit inside firms and when they should sit in markets.

More recently, his work with Luigi Zingales of Chicago Booth has redrawn the corporate purpose debate. The Hart-Zingales shareholder welfare framework reframes corporate objectives around the actual preferences of investors, including their non-financial concerns, and proposes shareholder voting as the mechanism for expressing them. The framework speaks directly to live disputes about ESG votes and shareholder activism on social issues.

At Harvard since 1993, Hart holds the Lewis P. and Linda L. Geysler University Professorship and chaired the Economics department from 2000 to 2003. Past president of the American Law and Economics Association and fellow of the British Academy, he was made a Knight Bachelor in 2023 for services to economic theory. The 1986 paper with Sandy Grossman, "The Costs and Benefits of Ownership," remains the standard reference for how firm boundaries are analysed in modern economics.

Key speaking topics

- Contract theory and incomplete contracts
- The theory of the firm
- Corporate governance and ownership
- Shareholder welfare and corporate purpose
- ESG governance and shareholder activism
- Incentive design

Ideal for

- Boards of directors and chairs
- General counsel, CFOs, and corporate governance leaders
- Investors and asset managers grappling with ESG mandates
- Policymakers, regulators, and antitrust authorities

Audience outcomes

- A working theory of where firm boundaries should lie and why, applicable to live decisions on M&A and outsourcing.

- A defensible position on corporate purpose that goes beyond Friedman versus stakeholder capitalism slogans.
- The economic logic underneath shareholder activism and ESG governance, including when shareholder voting matters and when it doesn't.
- The intellectual vocabulary for thinking about ownership and incentive design with the seriousness these topics require.

Oliver Hart's Videos

