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Who's Leading Healthcare Now?

Inside the New C-Suite Playbook

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In 2025, healthcare provider C-suites are evolving. They are more financially focused, digitally driven, workforce-conscious, and consumer-oriented than ever before. The most successful leaders will be those who can balance cost pressures with innovation, integrate AI responsibly, and rethink traditional care models to meet the needs of both patients and staff. In this article, we'll explore these new expectations for C-suite leaders and the types of candidates that will be most attractive for those positions.

CEO: Seeking Candidates with Non-Traditional Healthcare Leadership Experience

As the landscape of healthcare leadership evolves, the role of CEO is undergoing a significant transformation, and there is high demand for more non-traditional healthcare chief executives. Traditional hospital CEOs—historically physicians or operations leaders—are increasingly being replaced by leaders who bring expertise in consumerism, rapid growth, risk management, and digital strategy. In fact, the number of hospitals led by physician CEOs has decreased by 90% since 1935, with only about 5% of U.S. hospitals currently managed by CEOs with medical degrees, according to data from [ResearchGate](#).

In addition to the transformation of traditional hospital CEOs, the healthcare industry is seeing a rising demand for leaders with consumer-centric and digitally focused backgrounds. These individuals often come from payers, retail health, and tech sectors, bringing with them a profound understanding of patient experience and operational efficiency. Their expertise in AI integration and financial management positions them well to navigate the complexities of modern healthcare.

Moreover, leaders with deep financial and payer expertise are crucial for managing reimbursement and contracting, especially in the realms of value-based care and risk-based contracting. Executives who have demonstrated success in mergers and acquisitions are also highly sought after, as they drive growth, introduce new services, expand care delivery models, and elevate care experiences.

Who's in Demand?

- Executives from dominant brands across the ecosystem from integrated health systems, retail health, payer, and digital health
- Experienced CFOs and executives with payer-provider integration and tech-driven care model experience
- M&A and transformation specialists who can drive growth without increasing costs

CFO: Strategic Leaders with Private Equity and Venture Capital Experience

With razor-thin margins and reimbursement volatility atop pandemic-related losses, workforce shortages, geopolitical impacts on supplies, and tech-enablement that requires substantial investments, CFOs are expected to drive operational efficiency, optimize revenue cycle, and explore new business models (e.g., value-based care, partnerships, and alternative revenue streams).

Executives with expertise in payer negotiation, private equity, and financial transformation are increasingly essential for optimizing financial sustainability in healthcare organizations. Their experience in value-based care, alternative revenue models, and payer negotiations is crucial for ensuring adaptability in a constantly shifting reimbursement landscape. Additionally, those with a background in mergers and acquisitions and investment are highly preferred, as many CFOs are now transitioning into CEO roles.

Chief Technology, Digital, Data, and AI Officers: The New Power Players

Healthcare systems are being pushed to modernize now more than ever. Chief Technology Officers (CTOs), Chief Data and Chief Digital Officers (CDOs) are growing in influence as they lead digital health adoption and patient engagement strategies. Additionally, many provider systems are adding Chief AI or Chief Innovation Officers (CIOs) to lead responsible AI adoption, automation strategies, and partnerships with health-tech startups.

AI is transforming diagnostics, administrative processes, and clinical decision support, requiring leaders who can integrate these advancements strategically. AI-savvy leaders are leveraging AI-driven diagnostics, automation, and virtual care, while ensuring ethical compliance and regulatory adherence. The global AI in healthcare market grew from \$1.1 billion in 2016 to \$22.4 billion in 2023, marking a 1,779% increase, according to [DialogHealth](#).

Who's in Demand?

- CFOs with private equity, payer, or venture capital backgrounds
- Ex-PE or investment banking professionals who understand financing new care models
- Revenue cycle experts who can optimize payment structures and reimbursement strategies

Who's in Demand?

- Executives from big tech's health entities and health-tech startups
- AI strategists and automation specialists with experience in workflow optimization
- Data analytics and cybersecurity experts to ensure compliance and security

These strategic and efficiency-driven leaders transcend traditional IT roles to shape enterprise-wide digital health adoption, fostering innovations that streamline healthcare delivery and enhance patient outcomes.

By early 2024, over 70% of healthcare organizations, including payers, providers, and healthcare services, were pursuing or had implemented generative AI capabilities. (*McKinsey*)

CHROs and Workforce Leaders: Wellness and Retention Drivers

The ongoing clinician shortage and burnout crisis are driving Chief Human Resource Officers (CHROs) to focus on workforce stabilization, retention incentives, and redesigning care models to reduce staff burdens. Many systems are also appointing Chief Wellness Officers (CWOs) to address burnout directly.

Some of the expectations for these leaders going forward are to introduce an innovative approach to retention, staffing models and workforce culture, and **go beyond HR policies** to bring AI-driven workforce planning and automation adoption to enhance the employee experience.

Pharmaceutical companies like Johnson & Johnson have mandated generative AI training for over 56,000 employees, indicating a significant shift toward AI literacy in the healthcare sector. (*Business Insider*)

Who's in Demand?

- HR leaders from high-turnover industries (retail, hospitality, tech) who understand workforce engagement
- Employee experience and talent strategy leaders with a focus on retention
- AI and automation-savvy CHROs who can integrate workforce analytics

Chief Medical Officer (CMO): New Mindset for Physician Leadership

CMOs are now expected to be strategic business partners, driving value-based care initiatives, digital health transformation, post-merger leadership, and population health management. Additionally, with a more tech-enabled workforce, CMOs must understand the role of emerging technologies like AI, in patient care.

Business-minded partners with a deep understanding of value-based care and population health management are highly sought after. These leaders possess technology fluency and change management skills, with demonstrable experience in leading major integration programs. Their expertise in navigating complex systems and driving strategic initiatives makes them indispensable in ensuring efficient and effective healthcare delivery.

Who's in Demand?

- Physicians with strong business acumen, data analytics expertise, and technology enablement tied to patient outcomes
- Proven track record with large integrations of medical staffs (post-merger/acquisition)

Chief Clinical Officer (CCO): System-Wide Clinical Innovation

CCOs are holding the responsibility for clinical innovation, AI-driven decision support, and patient experience improvements. Historically, Chief Clinical Officers (CCOs) were responsible for delivery strategies. However, today's generation demands more efficient care and rapid improvements in patient care. As a result, CCOs are now often tasked with connecting clinical outcomes to innovative care models.

Who's in Demand?

- Leaders with technology fluency and change management skills with experience in scaling clinical programs
- Mentors that can support a new generation of clinicians in designing a patient-care environment that is engaging while supportive of their own wellness

COO: Health System Efficiency Architect

The COO remit is growing, expanding beyond the traditional focus on general operational efficiency. Modern COOs are enterprise strategists, managing AI-driven process automation, and consumer-centric operational models. Additionally, tariff-driven supply shortages can disrupt hospital operations and affect everything from patient care to facility management. COOs are charged with leading the collaboration across Procurement, Clinical, and Finance leaders to prepare for cost burdens, minimize shortages, and understand clinical trade-offs.

In addition to the traditional roles, modern healthcare leaders are now focusing on optimizing system performance and value through automation and AI. These advancements allow for more streamlined processes and enhanced patient care. By collaborating with clinical and procurement teams, these leaders prioritize essential supplies and implement optimized inventory management to ensure smooth operations and minimize disruptions.

Apollo Hospitals in India plans to increase its investment in AI to automate routine tasks, aiming to free up two to three hours per day for healthcare professionals. ([Reuters](#))

Who's in Demand?

- Executives with digital health expertise and consumer-driven operational models, such as retail care
- Experienced leaders from virtual care, AI-driven automation, and digital front-door companies
- Leaders with expertise in payer structures, M&A, and private equity companies

Chief Strategy Officers: Vertical Integration and Partnership Leaders

Health systems are increasingly exploring M&A, partnerships with payers and retailers, and expansion into outpatient and home-based care. Chief Strategy Officers are expected to balance growth initiatives with cost containment while aligning with long-term system sustainability. These leaders must be able to drive M&A, payer-provider collaborations, and partnerships with retail health companies as well as expand business models, non-traditional revenue streams, and overall strategic growth while balancing financial sustainability.

Chief Diversity and Health Equity Officers: Beyond Internal DEI

While standalone Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) are becoming extinct, many organizations are embedding core values of diversity, equity, and inclusion within population health or community engagement roles, signaling a shift toward structural and operational integration of equity goals rather than separate initiatives.

In response to the evolving landscape, many organizations are transitioning towards integrating DEI into broader roles such as Chief Community Health Officers or Population Health Leaders. This shift emphasizes a system-wide approach to health equity strategies, incorporating health outcomes, community partnerships, and ESG governance. This structural integration aims to embed equity goals into operational frameworks, thereby promoting sustainable and impactful change across the healthcare system.

Who's in Demand?

- Former consultants with experience in M&A and transformation and post-deal integration
- Retail health and payer executives who understand scaling value-based care models
- Private equity and venture-backed health tech strategists

Who's in Demand?

- Population health experts with experience in social determinants of health (SDOH)
- Policy leaders who can influence health equity regulations and community partnerships
- Data-driven leaders who can prove the financial and operational impact of health equity initiative

Chief Experience/ Engagement Officers: Consumerism Leaders

Healthcare systems focus on enhancing patient experience through innovative engagement strategies and transparent communication. They leverage technology to offer on-demand care and improve patient satisfaction, developing consumer-centric models that prioritize patient needs and expectations. Executives with backgrounds in retail health, patient engagement, and digital health solutions are in high demand. Professionals who drive innovation in patient care delivery and satisfaction are also sought after. Despite advancements, 60% of Americans feel uncomfortable with AI in healthcare, and 57% think it could harm the patient-provider relationship, according to data from [Pew Research](#).

Who's in Demand?

- Executives with backgrounds in retail health and consumer experience
- Leaders with expertise in patient engagement and digital health solutions
- Professionals who can drive innovation in patient care delivery and satisfaction

Other Emerging C-Suite Leaders

The rapidly evolving landscape of healthcare management requires innovative strategies and leadership roles to address emerging challenges and enhance patient care, including:

- **Chief Population Health Officer (CPHO):** Many health systems are appointing CPHOs to lead efforts around preventive care, chronic disease management, and addressing social determinants of health (SDOH).
- **Chief Supply Chain Officer (CSCO):** With ongoing global supply chain disruptions and cost pressures, health systems need leaders who can optimize procurement, manage vendor relationships, and ensure resilience in medical supply availability.
- **Chief Innovation Officer (CInO):** Many organizations are appointing Chief Innovation Officers to oversee broader transformation efforts, including new care delivery models, clinical innovations, and partnerships with startups and venture-backed healthcare solutions.

- **Chief Compliance & Risk Officer (CCRO):** With increasing regulatory scrutiny, cybersecurity risks, and AI governance concerns, many systems are elevating compliance and risk leadership to C-suite positions. This role would oversee regulatory adherence, risk mitigation, and ensure legal compliance in areas like AI use, patient data security, and financial regulations.

Governance Modernization: More Agile and Diverse Boards

Healthcare boards are under pressure to be more diverse, tech-savvy, and adaptable as provider systems face regulatory scrutiny and demands for greater visibility on ESG-related efforts. Financial instability, cybersecurity risks, and AI-driven transformation are making boards more proactive and involved in long-term strategy, digital health integration, and workforce stability. Many organizations are re-evaluating governance structures to be more agile and responsive. Some of these efforts are on reducing board size to improve decision-making and moving away from hospital-heavy composition in favor of experience in consumer, digital strategy, and AI governance. In addition, ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) considerations are also influencing board selection, particularly around health equity, sustainability, and diversity in gender, race, and expertise.

In response to rapid industry changes, boards are restructuring to improve governance, with nearly 70% undergoing such efforts. ([American Hospital Association](#))

Who's in Demand?

- Payer and health policy experts who can track and provide guidance on regulatory shifts
- Investment and finance leaders who understand new funding models
- Leaders from big tech with a strong focus on AI and digital health ethicists to drive responsible AI adoption
- Cybersecurity and data governance experts due to rising concerns over data privacy
- Retail health leaders who understand consumer-driven healthcare

Key Considerations for the Future

A perfect storm of workforce shortages, rapid AI transformation, geopolitical implications for health policy and pricing, and an uncertain policy landscape are driving a need for healthcare provider systems to transform. Health systems should invest in thoughtful succession planning that provides actionable insights, development plans for leaders, and evaluation of the organizational design, including reporting lines and spheres of responsibility. With the influx of technology leaders in AI and process automation, systems must determine the level of influence and engagement these leaders will have and consider a reporting structure that creates high visibility while maintaining tight collaboration with legal and clinical leadership. While these trends are impacting large health systems, smaller and rural systems need to consider how they will attract experts and build capabilities to stay competitive and resilient.

About Egon Zehnder

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We partner closely with public and private corporations, family-owned enterprises, and non-profit and government agencies to provide executive search, leadership solutions, CEO search and succession, board advisory, and diversity, equity & inclusion.

Our services include discovering leaders, developing leadership, advancing governance, shaping successions, and unlocking transformations. We partner with Mobius Executive Leadership to offer highly experiential, personalized and transformational programs for senior leaders.

We believe that together we can transform people, organizations and the world through leadership.

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