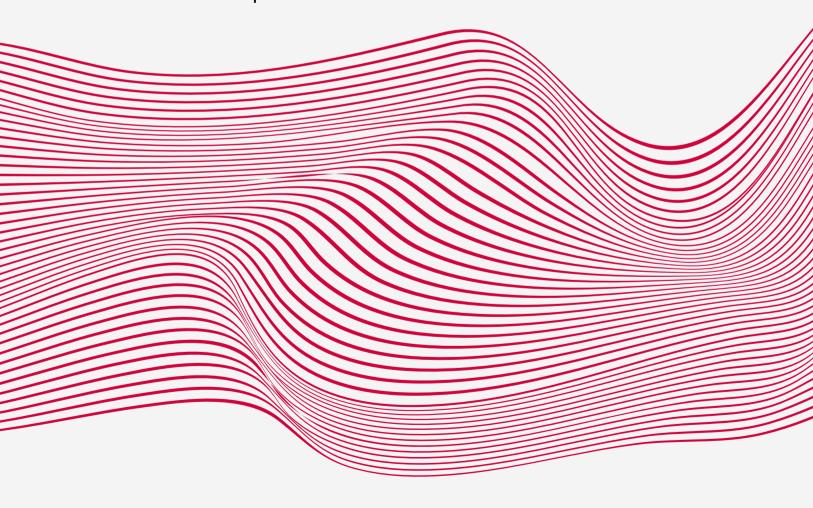
Future fit: five questions healthcare Boards should ask themselves today

Part of the **Leading Healthcare Forward** series from The MBS Group









Foreword

There are few sectors in greater need of transformation than Healthcare. Every day, I am inspired by the purpose and dedication displayed by healthcare professionals – both those within the workforce, and those at the helm of organisations. But while health services continue to rise to new challenges, the sector is in urgent need of modernisation.

Globally, our public and private health systems are overworked and understaffed. Services are powered by a shrinking workforce, many of whom are experiencing high levels of burnout.

There are also countless exciting opportunities presented by digital technology, very few of which have been capitalised upon in a wholesale, systematic way. Truly embracing digital services, remote monitoring, analytics and data would allow healthcare organisations to maximise their potential.

Private healthcare companies are operating in a highly challenging commercial landscape: around the world, the presence of national systems – all subtly different – and idiosyncrasies in practice make scaling in an effective and meaningful way difficult.

And among investors, healthcare represents an uncertain opportunity. According to Deloitte, while the global healthcare sector returned +19.8% growth in 2021, many areas experienced heightened volatility and weaker returns. Notably, healthcare companies with market caps below \$10bn delivered on average negative returns in 2021.

How did we get here? On the one hand, few could have predicted the global pandemic, which caused mass disruption to our health systems, exacerbating existing issues and both halting and accelerating progress in equal measure. But on the other, many of the sector's challenges – relating to labour and an aging population, for example – were not only predictable, but predicted.

So what next? How can the healthcare sector seize opportunities for transformation, and protect against future threats? How can we equip Boards and leaders with the skill, imagination and foresight needed to bring our sector into its next chapter?

Inspired by Moira Benigson, founder and Chair at The MBS Group, and her philosophy for future-focused consumer-sector Boards which enable creative and dynamic thinking, *Boards of the Future*, I spoke with more than fifty Chairs and non-executives across the private and public healthcare sector, to explore the priorities and challenges of Healthcare Boards today.

In summary: are Boards asking themselves the right questions? Have they created an inclusive environment in which those questions can be asked? And are those asking the questions being truly heard?

Healthcare Boards need diversity in the most holistic sense of the word: a blending of life experiences, sector backgrounds, subject expertise, ways of working, and corporate priorities. Healthcare Boards need to balance governance and oversight with 'big picture' thinking, scanning the horizon to identify future challenges and opportunities. Simultaneously, healthcare Boards must consider investor, workforce, and clinical priorities. Only then will our Boards be equipped to solve the challenges of today, and seize the opportunities of tomorrow – a prize indeed.



Hatty CadmanDirector, Healthcare Practice,
The MBS Group

Five questions Boards should ask themselves today

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Is your Board asking the big questions?

Central to a healthcare Board's remit should be strategic direction, reputation protection, and blue-sky thinking.

Across the entire corporate sphere, the role of the Board is changing. No longer limited to auditing and governance responsibilities, Boards are tasked with protecting reputation, horizon scanning to foresee future opportunities and challenges, and thinking deliberately about a company's place in society. Strategic direction should be central to any healthcare Board's remit.

This is particularly pressing in healthcare, where issues around labour, D&I and sustainability could leave reputations permanently damaged. To mitigate risks, Boards must include non-executives who can effectively consider issues through long-term political, environmental, social and ethical lenses.

The healthcare sector is uniquely placed

Organisations in healthcare are held to a higher standard of corporate behaviour than other businesses – in part because of the sector's high-stakes subject matter, and in part because some public funding features in most national health systems. Rightly, patients and customers expect health companies to act with integrity, and to guarantee a duty of care towards their patients and customers, workforce and broader communities.

As a result, topics like outsourcing, zero-hour contracts, and sustainability are treated as public-interest issues in healthcare, in a way they are not in other sectors. Against this backdrop, it is paramount that Boards are asking the right questions. Failing to do so risks falling out of favour with patients and customers.

It is the Board's responsibility to identify the big issues of tomorrow

Boards should be tasked with debating not only the future of the organisation, but also what the world will look like in the years ahead. Doing so serves two purposes: to effectively mitigate future risk, and to encourage creative, outside-the-box thinking.



"I think you've got to have someone on the Board who can look to the future. Someone with their finger on the pulse of what the next big thing will be, and how we can improve."

Bill Colvin, Chair at European Lifecare Group

The most effective Boards today are discussing diversity, sustainability, the role of data and AI, and technological innovation in its broadest sense – and striking a careful balance between creativity and risk. Healthcare's inherent safety consciousness has historically acted as a barrier to innovation, but with the right voices around the table, Boards can drive forward while still employing a steady risk strategy.



"It is the role of the Chair to navigate the path between creativity and innovation, and a reasonable approach to risk. Because if you make a major mistake in healthcare, the consequences can be very, very significant."

Chair at Residential Care Home company



But very few businesses are asking the right long-term questions

While healthcare companies are often tapped into the political sphere (largely because the shape of the private health sector is at least in part determined by what is or isn't being offered in public systems), too few are considering their organisation's place in the bigger picture. Most Chairs told me that long-term risk trends – around labour, D&I, the environment, and use of technology – were not being frequently discussed.

Why is this? Throughout my conversations, I detected that – perhaps counter-intuitively – healthcare's commitment to purpose and to prioritising patient care can lead organisations to assume they're doing the right thing, without stopping to scrutinise the wider impact of their operations or decisions, or how the social context in which they're operating has changed around them. Sometimes, the 'bigger picture' gets lost. One demonstration of this is the disproportionately small number of healthcare companies with B Corp status; another would be one Chair's observation that, when they asked their Board colleagues how many of the business's employees were using food banks, they were met with blank expressions and a lack of data.



"Healthcare organisations would benefit from a framework for how to address the societal impact of Board-level decisions – deeper than B Corp, thinking about social impact in the widest sense. Boards need to be considering how their decisions affect patients and their current workforce, of course, but also the communities they serve and sit within, the impact they have on the environment, on deprivation and life chances, and on jobs."

Sim Scavazza, acting Chair of Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West (BOB) NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB), and NED for Imperial College Healthcare Trust

Sustainability may be the next frontier

According to the World Economic Forum, the healthcare sector is responsible for more than 4% of all greenhouse gas emissions globally. For most industrialised nations, the figure is closer to 10% of national emissions. Despite this, very few healthcare companies – Bupa is a notable exception – have sustainability as a regular Board agenda item. Looking ahead, the best healthcare Boards will include NEDs who can apply an environmental lens to operational decisions.



"NEDs with knowledge of how to decarbonise supply chains will be hugely valuable."

Dr Graham Rich, Chair at Exemplar Health Care

Spotlight on: sustainability at Bupa

Bupa has designed and implemented one of the most comprehensive sustainability strategies in the healthcare sector, designed to reduce carbon emissions and transform its products and services to become more sustainable. Crucially, the strategy is owned by the Board.

The company has three 'missions': to become a net zero business by 2040, to accelerate sustainable healthcare through research, and to improve people's health through restoration and regeneration of nature.

Consumer-focused NEDs are well equipped to consider reputation

Businesses – and leaders – with an immediate and direct connection to their customers are more thoughtful about reputational risk. As such, there may be lessons healthcare organisations can learn from consumer businesses, about staying close to patients to anticipate future priorities.

The healthcare sector could have been better equipped to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on different groups of colleagues

Healthcare organisations played the leading role in the global fight against Covid-19 – but there were elements of the pandemic which leaders failed to foresee.

Many will remember the period in June 2020, when it was found that mortality rates from Covid-19 were higher among those from a Black or minority ethnic background. The disproportionate impact of the virus on Black and minority ethnic people was even more pronounced among healthcare workers. These findings coincided with Black Lives Matters protests which were taking place around the world, generating significant public interest and accusations aimed at healthcare organisations related to employee care.

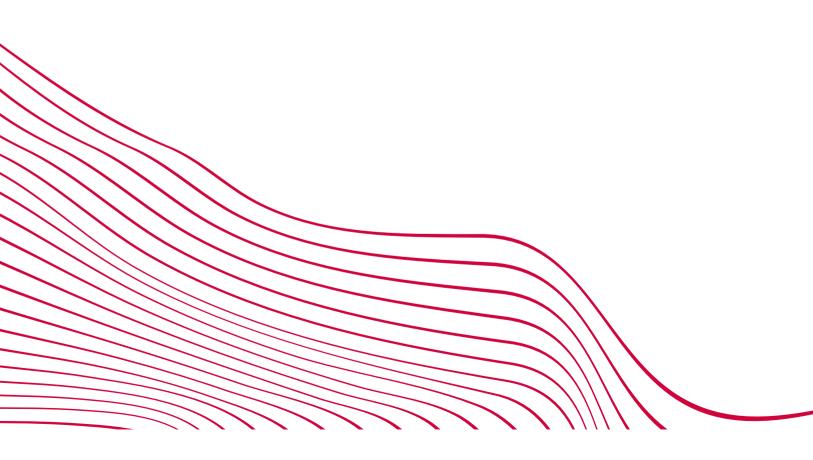
Going into the pandemic, too many healthcare organisations lacked a deep, detailed, understanding of the ethnic make-up of their employee base, and the lived experiences of different ethnic groups in their

workforces. Had more Boards been aware of this – had they made it a priority to more deeply understand their diversity ahead of the pandemic – the healthcare sector would have been better equipped to mitigate some of those risks, and better equipped to deal with the response.

Appointing Independent NEDs can encourage a culture of questioning and creative thinking

The most forward-thinking Boards are bringing in truly independent NEDs. Independent NEDs are often appointed to provide specific sector, business phase or functional expertise – but, when the right appointment is made, independent NEDs can elevate board discussion, offering new ideas and creative approaches.

Independent NEDs can be brought in to disrupt the status quo, ask challenging questions, and broaden the conversation beyond subjects concerning return on investment.



Does your Board foster diverse thinking?

Ensuring true diversity - in its most holistic sense - is critical to future success.

The case for diversity in business is well understood. Teams that include a variety of lived experiences, expertise, and ways of thinking make better decisions, and produce better results. On healthcare Boards, ensuring diversity – in its very broadest sense – is not only good business, but a matter of life and death.

Boards should represent a broad range of personal, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and feature gender and ethnic diversity

Ensuring representation will encourage healthy debate, and ensure that critical perspectives are not overlooked.



"I've found that diversity – in terms of gender, but in particular in terms of ethnic diversity – brings more productive conversations. You get people looking at issues through different lenses."

Dr Felicity Harvey CBE, Senior Independent Director at Mediclinic and Non-executive director at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

In 2020, for example, we saw the devastating effect of racial inequality. The disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on people from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds (who are more likely to be in lower socioeconomic groups) should act as an impetus for Chairs going forward. Including the voices of traditionally underrepresented communities around the Board table is paramount – in times of crisis and during business-as-usual.

Diversity in sector background will result in better decision making

Healthcare is a unique sector, defined by complex regulation and set standards of practice. But as health

organisations evolve and modernise, Boards could benefit from outside perspectives.



"We've hired someone with a retail background who knows everything about marketing to the customer. It's a new area for us, and we needed that expertise."

Dame Inga Beale, Chair at Mediclinic

Looking ahead, the most effective Boards will include insight from NEDs with sector-specific backgrounds, but also directors from adjacent industries, who understand growth and transformation, and bring fresh thinking.

Bringing in talent from the consumer sectors, for example, is particularly critical for organisations looking to take a more patient-centric approach. While patient care sits at the heart of healthcare, companies have historically not considered their patients as consumers. Appointing NEDs from consumer sectors like retail, hospitality, or consumer goods could have a transformative impact on the way Boards think about the patient journey – from online appointments to personalised services.



"NED skills are about the problems we're trying to solve, not the sector. Issues like ecommerce, cyber security, customer experience, and cloud computing – these are business issues, not healthcare issues. These are the topics we need NEDs to be grappling with."

Steve Weiner, Non-executive Director at Mediclinic, and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

Digital thinking should be a prerequisite

Digital transformation is crucial to future success in the healthcare sector. The winning Boards will be those which frequently and thoroughly discuss topics related to technology – from practical conversations about how automation can streamline booking systems to broad-reaching debates about how AI can be harnessed for common good. Boards should be applying a digital lens to problem solving, as well as looking ahead to predict how technology will disrupt the sector.



"Improvement and efficiency – around payroll, around shift scheduling, around patient booking – is no longer the domain of the IT and R&D departments. Boards need to embody a mindset of innovation, improvement and creativity."

Richard Bradford, Group Chair at InHealth Group

Over the last few years, we have seen Chairs appoint digitally-focused NEDs to provide specific expertise on digital, data, AI, and future technological advancements – but digital expertise is now being sought more broadly, across the Board.

Critically, a digital-focused NED must be able to:

- Apply digital perspectives in a healthcare context
- Translate complex topics for their fellow board members
- Offer value well beyond their domain expertise

Many Chairs I spoke with noted the risks associated with appointing one digital-focused NED. In particular, that all digital issues become assigned to that person, meaning other Board members abdicate responsibility for learning – thus weakening the entire Board's approach to digital thinking, and damaging governance and assurance processes.

Crucially, an innovative approach should 'baked-in' to all Boards. Looking ahead, Chairs must navigate how to bring in true digital breadth, while also ensuring that innovation remains integral to the entire Board.



"You can't bring in one expert. Everyone in the business has to be innovative."

Chair at NHS services business

Boards need singularity of vision

Throughout my conversations, one point that resonated particularly strongly was the need for common purpose and vision among NEDs. It is important that Board discussions incorporate a broad range of views, but each non-executive must share the same vision for the organisation's long-term strategy.

As one Chair put so aptly:



"There's nothing more draining to productivity than an individual who is not bought into your strategy or values. Boards need diversity, challenge, and different appetites to risk. They need people who are carefree, people who are anxious, and people who are going to adopt different perspectives: be it the patient, the employee or the investor. Boards need those ranges – but being tight on the strategy is critical. Otherwise the 'how' falls apart."

The many benefits of a diverse Board will not be felt without a truly inclusive culture

For Boards to function at their best, every person around the table must feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, and making suggestions. Empowering Board members, and enabling them to work well with each other, despite their differences, is therefore inextricably linked to maximising the potential of the Board. This is at the heart of the Chair's role.

Diversity in practice: how to make diversity work?

- Create a common language, and ensure every Board member is united in their vision for the future
- 2. Focus on fostering the right open environment in which diverse voices can thrive and different perspectives are welcomed
- 3. Identify how everyone is different: work styles, expertise, communication preferences
- Prioritise Board development, and thinking deliberately about how the Board works as a team



Does your Board have the right investor NEDs?

Investor NEDs should bring strategic value as well as a shareholder mindset.

Many healthcare organisations are privately owned. As such, healthcare Boards are often dominated by NEDs representing the organisations' investors.

Investor NEDs provide crucial governance – but bring a particular focus

Investor NEDs bring a shareholder mindset to meetings, and can offer unique perspectives on value creation and financing strategies, as well as networks and a breadth of view across sectors.

However, many of the Chairs I spoke with told me that an imbalance of investor NEDs around the table can nudge the agenda away from broad company strategy, innovation and investment and toward short-term, circumstantial issues – particularly during a period of transaction or refinancing. To that effect, some Chairs shared that investor NEDs can become preoccupied with "protecting" the business's value, rather than driving innovation.

Investor NEDs are also often reporting to someone else within their investment firm, which can complicate structures of accountability.



"As a Chair, it's my responsibility to first and foremost ensure that Board discussions align investors and the executive team, and make sure that everyone is on the effective delivery of the strategic plan."

Elizabetta Camilleri, Chair at Togetherall

The best investor NEDs prioritise long-term value creation

To ensure future success, Chairs should ensure that their investor NEDs can apply a strategic lens to their contribution.

The best investor NEDs can bring insight from previous investments and adjacent businesses. Many of the Chairs I spoke with told me that their most valuable investor NEDs play a networking role, introducing the business to the right people to solve problems or drive growth in a specific area.

Does your Board have the right clinical voices?

Boards have an opportunity to embrace clinical thinking in a more creative way.

Clinical expertise can be found on every Board in the healthcare sector. Much like an Audit Committee, Boards need the expertise to provide careful scrutiny of complex clinical outcomes.

However, looking ahead, there is an opportunity to embrace clinical thinking in a far broader, deeper, and more creative way. By appointing different kinds of clinical leaders, and creating a truly collaborative environment around the table, clinical voices can elevate Board discussion, and bring value far beyond risk and quality oversight.

Every Board needs baseline clinical leadership

Clinical expertise is critical to any healthcare Board. Clinical experts should:

- Provide assurance around the quality of the organisation's impact clinically
- Bring a real-world frontline reality to discussions, including where significant productivity gains can be made
- Offer insight on what is acceptable to, and what motivates, a clinical workforce
- Advise on safety and professional standards
- Reassure investors around what is preventable and what's not
- Provide careful scrutiny and oversight of clinical issues



"Stepping up to a Board-level role is a big jump, and sometimes clinicians can be left to sink or swim. As organisations have got bigger and more complex, there are sometimes very few colleagues in similar roles with whom those new to the post can network with or receive support from. Getting on the Board is the start, not the end. What's the development and support that's needed?"

Heather Tierney-Moore, NED, Priory UK

Boards should rethink their clinical leadership

In the years to come, the best Boards will be those that reimagine the role of clinical leaders around the table. Today, clinical leaders are often appointed to provide subject matter expertise, but are not qualified – or empowered – to contribute to the broader discussion, commercially or financially, for example. This is especially true for listed businesses, which require an additional layer of regulation.

It is critical that Boards embrace change in this area – firstly, by deliberately creating an inclusive culture, and secondly (and more importantly), by appointing leaders who bring value beyond their specific clinical expertise.

There is an emerging number of MDs, CEOs, COOs and even Chairs who have early clinical backgrounds but have transitioned into wider organisational leadership roles. These sorts of leaders bring a breadth of perspective and commercial understanding of clinical service environments that can be extremely powerful in a Board context.

Clinical leadership in practice

Chairs should think deliberately about how to structure the Board and Board processes, so that clinical leaders can be most valuable:

- 1. Consider the onboarding process
- Provide upskilling and development opportunities in governance and broader Board topics, and within the executive layers of the organisation
- 3. Ensure a direct and close relationship between the clinical governance leader and the Chair – in the same way as you would an Audit Chair



Is your Board effectively considering the workforce?

Workforce considerations should be underpinned by appropriate Board-level leadership.

Some of the biggest macro-problems in healthcare globally are related to workforce. Around the Board table, workforce considerations should not be an 'HR issue', or grouped together with ESG priorities – they should be recognised as a pressing commercial need and significant strategic risk, underpinned by appropriate Board-level leadership.



"We can't talk with any credibility to our staff about how much we value them, if they look at us and don't see themselves represented."

Dominic Dodd, Chair at UCL Health Alliance and Skin Analytics

How healthcare organisations navigate workforce considerations will determine future success

Before Covid-19, our global healthcare systems were already defined by significant labour issues. But the legacy of the pandemic has exacerbated the sector's challenges. Healthcare is facing:

- A crisis-level labour shortage (compounded in the UK by the impact of Brexit)
- Valuable talent leaving the sector
- Widespread burnout among employees
- Employees demanding more from their companies, and thinking differently about their work and life (for example, wanting to work their hours over three days, not five)
- Increased pressure from customers and patients, who are not satisfied with the working conditions and pay of those providing care, and the implications for their care

However, despite this context, Chairs told me that workforce issues are frequently pushed to the bottom of – or off – the Board agenda.



"As Chair, it's essential to ensure that we explore and understand the reality of the situation and pressures impacting our people – how are they coping with day-to-day pressures, including care responsibilities and financial pressures, like is anyone using a food bank"

Stuart Fletcher, Chair at isoshealth

How can Boards effectively consider their workforce?

- 1. Bring in an independent NED. Boards need at least one director who can look at workforce-related problems in a strategic (and non-tactical) way. Appointing a director who comes from an adjacent sector with similar workforce structures for example hospitality could be valuable here.
- 2. Ensure true diversity. Workforces in the healthcare sector are highly diverse, including a broad range of ages and ethnicities, individuals with disabilities, and disproportionately featuring those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Representation of minority groups around the Board table means issues faced by the employees won't be overlooked, and also adds integrity around decision-making.
- 3. Appoint the right clinical leaders. The best clinical leaders will be tapped in to the perspectives of the entire workforce not just senior clinicians or practitioners and understand the implications of a burnt-out, diminished workforce.
- 4. Build in empathy to the Board. A considered and emotionally-intelligent approach to workforce-related issues is paramount – especially when it comes to topics like pay.
- **5. Be unapologetic about purpose.** Research has shown that employee retention is higher in purpose-driven organisations with a clear mission and set of values. Chairs should appoint NEDs who reflect company values and can act as role models to the wider workforce.

Thinking tactically: how to build a healthcare Board

There are a number of considerations that businesses must make about how their Boards are run. To ensure that non-executive Directors can deliver the maximum value, Chairs should consider:

What size is your Board? Smaller Boards can encourage team spirit, ensure everybody around the table can contribute, and make it easier for Board members to know and understand each other. By contrast, larger Boards have been known to encourage presenteeism.

How is your Board run? Small changes to the way meetings are run can make a big impact. For example, providing Board packs that are focused and insights-driven can drive efficiency on the Board. Equally, making room on the agenda for broad discussion can encourage creative thinking and the sharing of ideas. A few Chairs also mentioned the value of more consistent communication among Board members between meetings.

Is your Board working as a team? Chairs should think deliberately about strengthening the working relationships between Board members – in much the same way as businesses do with executive teams.

Is your Board connected to the rest of the business? To work most effectively, Board members should have clear, understood, and visible lines of communication with critical leadership roles like CEO, CFO and CPO. Chairs should also ensure that Board members are given time to truly get to know the business in its broadest sense – to speak with employees and spend time on site, in an appropriately non-executive way.

Can every NED make a wide contribution? One of the points that resonated most strongly throughout my conversations was the drawbacks of hiring an NED for only one particular purpose (hence the limitation of digital-specific NEDs). On the best, most effective Boards, each NED will add value across a broad range of topics.



Looking to the future

I'm excited about the next chapter of the healthcare sector. With the right challenge and guidance, there's an opportunity for healthcare organisations to truly modernise. In doing so, they will better treat their patients, serve their customers, and bring returns for their investors.

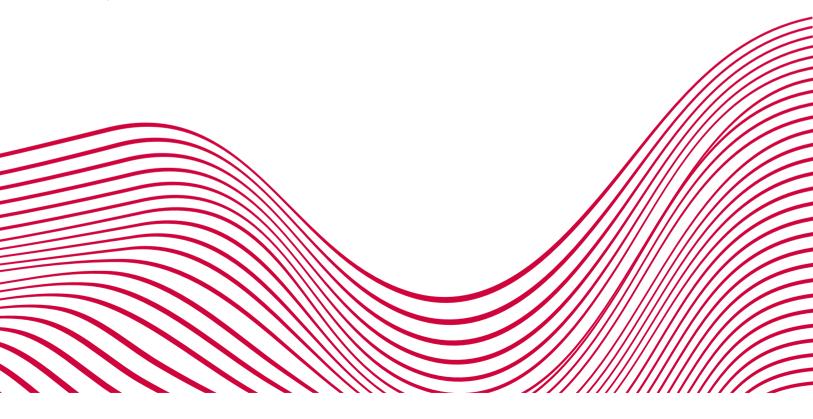
This challenge and guidance must come from the Board. With the right voices around the table, well-functioning and strategically-minded Boards with creative flair can have a transformational impact on their businesses and on the sector.

Of course, this is not to say that traditional Board functions should lie forgotten. Clinical governance, regulation, and oversight are as necessary today as they have always been. But there is an opportunity to broaden the Board's remit, and raise the bar for what's expected of Board members.

As patient expectations change, technology develops and topics like the climate emergency become even more pressing, the winning healthcare organisations will be those tackling these issues head-on, at Board level.

I hope that this publication will inspire Chairs to think differently about the non-executive Board, and serve as a catalyst for action among those leaders who already share my vision. Now is the time to act – to reimagine the role and reshape the composition of the Board for a better future in Healthcare.

It has been a privilege to have so many enlightening conversations with healthcare Chairs and non-executives for this report, and I'd like to personally thank each leader who so generously gave up their time to contribute.



About us

About the MBS Group

The MBS Group is a leading sector-specialist executive search firm advising all consumer facing industries. Clients consider us to be the partner of choice when searching for critical leadership roles that make a difference. We work at Board level and on executive positions across all functions of strategic importance.

For more information, visit www.thembsgroup.co.uk

Our Healthcare expertise

Supporting clients at Board, Executive Committee and leadership levels, we combine extensive experience in and a deep understanding of the wide and varied Healthcare sector, including its clinical leadership, as well as access to relevant talent pools in adjacent consumer-facing industries.

Our Boards expertise

Led by Moira Benigson, our Board Practice advises on non-executive appointments that challenge the status quo and bring diversity, digital know-how and outside-the-box thinking to the table. Our breadth and depth of experience across all consumer-facing sectors and beyond gives us the ability to offer a creative perspective on the strategic leaders of a business.

Clients of all types – be it listed, privately-owned, private equity-backed or not-for-profit – and of varying sizes trust us to deliver the most effective Boards.

About the Author

Hatty Cadman leads the Healthcare practice at MBS. She brings a deep understanding of leadership and of Boards, a passion for the vibrancy, innovation and impact of healthcare businesses, and an absolute commitment to client service excellence. She has worked with Boards, investors and owners for nearly two decades, advising on executive and non-executive appointments, as well as on Board review and development, and onboarding.

Across healthcare, she has delivered CEO, Chair, and clinical and functional leadership appointments to businesses across healthcare, clinical services, digital health, and research and innovation. She has also worked with UK government and the NHS, on CEO, Chair and NED, Medical Director and Chief Scientific Adviser appointments, amongst others.

Prior to joining MBS, Hatty spent a decade with Russell Reynolds Associates before leading the Healthcare practice at a Board-level boutique search firm, where she also co-authored the business's diversity and inclusion plan.



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