

Beyond Succession:

Rethinking Leadership for 2030

7 minute read

THE CEO's chair has rarely looked steadier, yet the seats around it tell a very different story. Beneath the surface, the leadership team is being redesigned faster than at any point in a generation.

Three in four large organisations now have a Chief AI Officer, up from one in four a year ago. Most CEOs say talent and technology leadership are converging. And employers expect around two-fifths of today's core skills to change by 2030.

Boards need to look beyond who is next in line, and ask instead: what will leadership need to be capable of in 2030, and how do we build that now?

THE EXECUTIVE TALENT MARKET: SHORT TENURES AND A HIDDEN MARKET

The November analysis by Rialto researchers of ten senior roles shows a market that is large, uneven and moving fast. Two findings stand out: how quickly executives turn over, and how little of the market is visible.

Tenure is shortest where the pressure to show results is highest. Our analysis of the latest tenure data, combining our own global research with studies of listed companies in the US, Europe and the UK, gives a consistent picture. COOs last around 3.1 years on average, CMOs 3.4 years and CFOs 3.8 years. HR leaders average 4.3 years, CIOs 4.4 years and non-executive directors 4.1 years, while CEOs stay longest at around 6.8 years. CTOs appear to turn over fastest of all, at 2.6 years, though only our own data covers the role.

Finance and operations leaders face the sharpest pressure. COO tenure ranges from 2.7 years among the UK's largest listed companies to 3.6 years across Europe, partly because the role is often a stepping stone to CEO. CFO figures vary more, from 2.1 years at America's largest listed companies to 4.9 years in Europe, but the direction is clear: CFO turnover at the largest US companies is on course for its highest level since the pandemic. Each early exit costs momentum, institutional knowledge and team confidence.

The CEO seat, by contrast, is steadying. Departing CEOs at the world's largest listed companies served an average of 9 years in the first half of 2026, up from 6.6 a year earlier. The C-suite is settling at the top while the roles around the CEO churn.

Most of the market is not advertised. Relative to the size of each population, visible demand is concentrated in a few roles. Our research shows HR Directors attract the most advertised roles, around 91 for every 10,000 executive profiles, followed by CIOs at 51 and CFOs at 35. At the other end, there are around two adverts for every 10,000 CEO profiles, and fewer still for Chief People Officers and NEDs.

The most visible demand is for HR, technology and finance leaders: the three functions at the centre of workforce, AI and cost transformation. At the other end, CEO, Chief People Officer and NED appointments are almost never advertised. They move through succession plans, search firms and board networks.

FIVE FORCES RESHAPING THE C-SUITE

The research points to five forces that will define senior leadership through 2030. None is purely technical. Each turns, in the end, on how leaders think, decide and bring people with them.

1. AI is redesigning the leadership team, not just the tech stack

Three in four large organisations now have a Chief AI Officer, up from around one in four a year earlier. 85% of CEOs say every functional leader must become a technology expert in their own domain, and 77% say talent and technology leadership are converging.

CEOs also expect AI to make 48% of codifiable operational decisions without human intervention by 2030, against 25% today. Leadership judgement shifts from making routine decisions to designing the guardrails, escalation points and accountabilities around them.

2. The gap between AI ambition and AI value is a leadership gap

Only around one in ten companies report real AI benefits on revenue or cost, while more than half say they are getting nothing from it so far. More than three-quarters of organisations have not moved AI beyond experimentation, and 62% of executives say their leadership team lacks vision beyond tactical implementation.

CEOs themselves are blunt about the cause: 83% say AI success depends more on people's adoption than on technology. Yet they estimate only 25% of their workforce uses AI regularly. The bottleneck is the capacity of leaders to redesign work and lead adoption, not the tools.

3. Boards are betting on proven, internally developed leaders

After record CEO turnover in 2024 and 2025, the first half of 2026 brought the fewest global CEO departures in nine years.

Boards are favouring certainty: almost a quarter of incoming CEOs had led a public company before, and nearly nine in ten new CEOs at the largest US companies were internal appointments, both record highs.
This raises the stakes for leadership development. Internal succession only works when organisations have invested early in candidates' enterprise leadership, P&L exposure and readiness for scrutiny. Boards that have not built that bench are left with fewer options.

4. Transformation fatigue is now a performance risk

Across organisations globally, 82% see transformation as essential, yet half of people report transformation fatigue and 44% say change is too frequent. More than half say AI initiatives are accelerating that fatigue, and 41% blame leadership missteps for failed change.
The lesson for 2027–2030 is that the volume of change is not, in itself, the problem; it is the way it is led. Clarity of purpose, honest pacing and capability-building are what separate change that sticks from change that exhausts.

5. Leaders themselves are under strain

Nearly four in ten C-suite and senior executives considered leaving their role in the past year. Confidence is fragile too: only three in ten CEOs are confident of growing revenue over the next 12 months, a five-year low.
Executives are being asked to lead more change, faster, with less certainty. Sustaining their judgement, resilience and energy is no longer a personal matter; it is a business continuity issue.

GENDER: PROGRESS AT THE TOP, PRESSURE IN THE PIPELINE

Men outnumber women in eight of the ten roles Rialto examined; only HR leadership is majority female (69% of HR Directors and 73% of Chief People Officers). The gap is widest in technology leadership, exactly where the C-suite is growing fastest.

There are some signs of movement. Women made up 16% of incoming CEOs at the world's largest listed companies in the first half of 2026, the highest share in nine years, though fewer than one in ten in the US. Among mid-market firms, women now hold almost a quarter of CEO roles.
But the pipeline beneath is weakening. Women's share of senior management in mid-market firms fell from 34.0% to 32.9% in a year, and globally women's representation halves between entry level and the C-suite, from 46% to 23%.

That creates a new structural risk for 2027–2030. Technology, AI and operations roles are becoming the routes to the top, but they are where women are least represented today. Without deliberate action, the C-suite of 2030 could be less diverse than the one it replaces.

That makes this a capability issue, not only a fairness one. To avoid it, it is essential to widen who gets stretch assignments and P&L exposure early, challenge appointment criteria that favour narrow career paths and support high-potential women through the transitions where the pipeline most often leaks.

THE CAPABILITIES THAT WILL DEFINE LEADERS FROM 2027 TO 2030

Employers expect 39% of workers' core skills to change between 2025 and 2030 with nearly two-thirds naming skills gaps as the biggest barrier to transformation. Executives are not exempt. The leader of 2030 will need technical understanding and leadership capability in equal measure. These six capabilities stand out:

- AI fluency and decision design. Understanding where AI adds value in their domain, and designing who decides what, with which guardrails. 85% of CEOs say every functional leader must become a technology expert, and they expect AI to make 48% of codifiable operational decisions by 2030.
- Transformation leadership. Turning strategy into adopted ways of working, paced so people can absorb it. 83% of CEOs say AI success depends on people's adoption, yet half of employees report transformation fatigue.
- Enterprise leadership. Leading outcomes across functions, not just a department, and sharing accountability with peers. 77% of CEOs see talent and technology roles converging, and organisations that redesign five core areas together are four times more likely to hit their objectives.
- Judgement under uncertainty. Making clear calls with incomplete information and adjusting quickly without losing direction. Only 30% of CEOs are confident of revenue growth, and boards increasingly prize proven judgement in CEO appointments.
- Trust, communication and influence. Explaining the why behind change, listening, and building belief across the organisation. 41% of employees blame leadership missteps for failed change, and 31% feel uninformed about transformation goals.
- Self-leadership and learning agility. Sustaining energy and perspective, seeking feedback and continually renewing their own skills. Nearly 40% of senior executives considered leaving their role in the past year, and 39% of core skills will shift by 2030.

The common thread is that each capability is developed through experience, reflection and feedback rather than acquired through a course. They are built in the work, with support, over time. That has direct consequences for how organisations prepare their leaders now.

WHAT ORGANISATIONS SHOULD DO NOW

The organisations best placed for 2030 will treat leadership capability as part of their transformation strategy, not a separate HR programme. Five priorities follow from the evidence.

- Plan for the leadership team the 2030 strategy needs. Traditional succession planning asks who is next in line for each role; the more useful question is whether the leadership team collectively has the capabilities the strategy demands, and where the gaps are.
- Build the internal bench years ahead of need. Give high-potential leaders early exposure to enterprise decisions, P&L ownership and external scrutiny. Readiness cannot be created in the six months before an appointment.

- Design transformation around people's capacity to change. Sequence initiatives, be honest about trade-offs and build capability alongside every programme. Change done with people outlasts change done to them.
- Support leaders through transitions. With COOs averaging around three years in role and CMOs and CFOs under four, structured onboarding, coaching in the first 100 days and clear expectations from the board reduce the cost of early exits and help new leaders make an impact sooner.
- Widen the pipeline deliberately. Assess candidates against future capabilities, track who gets stretch assignments and give under-represented talent, especially in technology and operations, the sponsorship to reach the top.

WHAT EXECUTIVES SHOULD DO NOW

A career built on functional excellence will not automatically carry a leader through to 2030. In a market where tenures are short and most roles are never advertised, executives need to take ownership of their own development.

1. Audit your capabilities against 2030, not your current role. Be honest about where you are strong and where you would be exposed, particularly in AI fluency and enterprise leadership. Seek feedback from people who will tell you the truth.
2. Lead beyond your function. Volunteer for cross-functional work, transformation programmes and board exposure. These are the experiences boards now look for when they choose proven leaders.
3. Make your impact visible. It is no longer enough to show you ran a function well. You should be able to explain how you shaped strategy, created commercial value, developed people and moved the organisation forward. (See our insight, What Boards Want to Hear: Building an Executive Leadership Narrative for Career Transition)
4. Invest in your own resilience and reflection. Sustained high performance under pressure depends on perspective, energy and a space to think. The strongest leaders build that deliberately, often with a coach or trusted peer, rather than waiting for a crisis.
5. Keep learning in public. Leaders who are openly curious about AI and new ways of working give their teams permission to learn too. That example is one of the most powerful levers of adoption.

Rialto Executive Career Intelligence Reports provide senior leaders an evidence-based view of their market value, a gap analysis against what boards want now and a target list of the organisations and roles where their profile is strongest. Combined with executive coaching, reports help leaders build the capabilities and visibility that the next stage of their career will demand.

QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS AND LEADERSHIP TEAMS

- If we appointed our next CEO in 2028, how many credible internal candidates would we have today?
- Does our leadership team collectively have the AI fluency to redesign how work and decisions happen, or are we delegating it to one role?
- How many transformation initiatives are we running, and do our people have the capacity to absorb them?
- What support do we give executives in their first year in role, when the risk of failure is highest?
- Who is getting the stretch assignments that lead to the top, and does that group reflect the talent we have?
- How do we know whether our senior leaders are thriving, or just coping?

LEADERSHIP IS THE TRANSFORMATION

Technology is redesigning organistions, but the outcomes depend on people: on leaders who can make sense of change, make good calls under pressure and bring their organisations with them. The boundaries between functions are dissolving. Technology is no longer the CIO's alone, workforce strategy no longer HR's alone and growth no longer marketing's alone. The CEO's task is to build a leadership team that works as one system, delivering today while preparing for what comes next.

The organisations that thrive between 2027 and 2030 will be those that start now, developing leaders before they need them, supporting them through the moments that matter, and treating leadership capability as the foundation of every transformation.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why do CFOs and COOs turn over so quickly?

They sit where the pressure to deliver results is greatest, and the COO role in particular is often a stepping stone to the top job. Many are also first-timers: 64% of new CFOs at the largest listed companies in the first half of 2026 had never held the role before.

Will AI take over senior decision-making?

It will take over a growing share of the routine calls. CEOs in IBM's study expect AI to make almost half of codifiable operational decisions by 2030. The big calls, and responsibility for the guardrails, stay with leaders.

How do we know if our leadership team is ready for 2030?

Start with the board questions above. If you struggle to name credible internal CEO candidates, or AI sits with one person on the team, you have your answer.

I'm a functional leader. What should I be doing now?

Get out of your silo. Take on cross-functional work, get comfortable with AI in your own domain and be ready to show how you have moved the whole organisation forward. Rialto's Executive Career Intelligence and coaching can help you plan the route.

MORE INSIGHTS



Your Career Is a Strategic Asset. Are You Managing It Like One?



Moving into Private Equity: Finding the Right PE Opportunity

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