2026 Healthcare Trends

Strategic Imperatives for Effective AI

CapTech

Artificial intelligence is fundamentally transforming entire organizations, industries, and even the very nature of business.

Today, AI has shifted from being a competitive edge to an essential foundation, driving every major technology trend and setting a new standard for innovation and market relevance in every industry.

Healthcare represents one of the most promising yet challenging frontiers for AI adoption. The potential to reimagine diagnostics, personalize treatment, and improve population health is profound. However, as AI adoption accelerates across industries, healthcare leaders face a unique set of pressures: balancing innovation with compliance, managing risk in a highly regulated environment, and building trust with both clinicians and patients.

To provide a broad, cross-industry view of the current AI landscape, CapTech conducted an executive survey focused on the barriers leaders face in deploying AI, as well as a consumer survey focused on AI adoption. The research reveals that while nearly all organizations are investing in AI, only a fraction are realizing meaningful ROI. The gap? Too often, technology-first strategies and hype-driven decisions overshadow business outcomes, employee engagement, and consumer needs.

With insights from this research, CapTech developed five strategic imperatives that provide a clear framework for effective AI adoption. These imperatives can deliver what healthcare executives need (measurable results, operational excellence, and trust) with what patients expect (better experiences, personalized care, and a sense of empowerment throughout their healthcare journeys).

CapTech's research highlights a critical paradigm shift: successful AI initiatives require a business-first, people-centric, and compliance-anchored approach. Leaders must move beyond reactive deployments and instead focus on purposeful, incremental innovation. That means aligning AI initiatives with strategic goals, empowering users, and embedding governance and transparency from the start. This is especially vital in healthcare, where the stakes are higher, the risks more pronounced, and the opportunities for impact are extraordinary.

Successful AI initiatives require a business-first, people-centric, and compliance-anchored approach.

TREND ONE

Solve What Matters

Focus on high-impact, practical AI use cases.

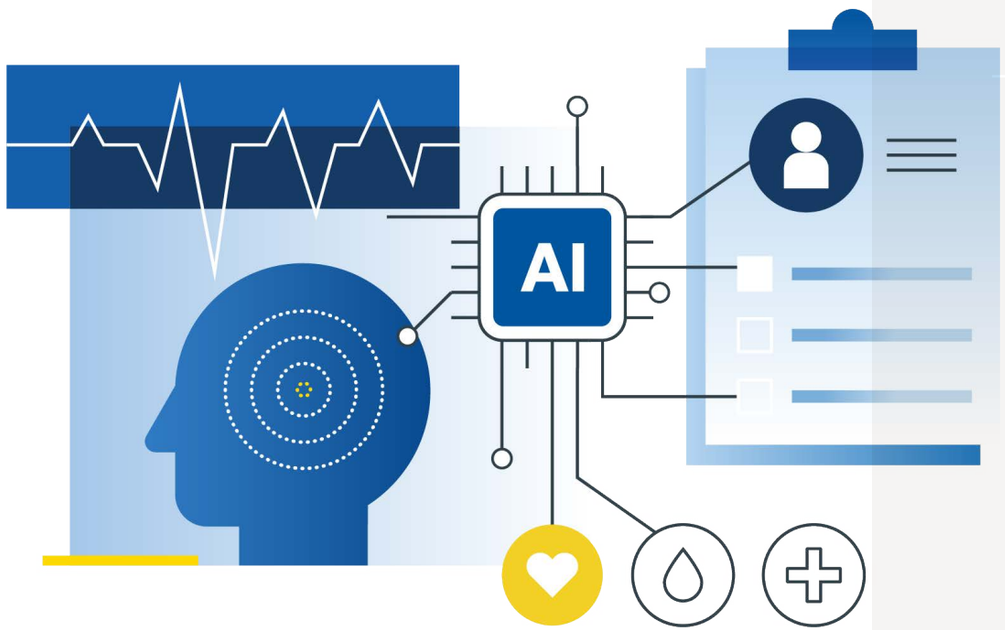
EXECUTIVE TREND

Healthcare leaders are facing intense pressure to deliver better outcomes with AI.

According to a recent cross-industry study, only 25% of AI initiatives are meeting ROI expectations, and 95% of organizations reported zero return on their AI investments.

To achieve true value, healthcare executives must prioritize AI applications that address core operational and clinical challenges, as opposed to using AI for AI's sake. As a prime example in 2025, health systems poured ~$1B (75% of their AI spend) into solutions that ease administrative burdens, including ambient clinical documentation ($600M) and billing automation ($450M), as opposed to hype-driven initiatives.

This shift toward practical, high-impact AI is not only improving operational performance; it's also enabling better patient outcomes, stronger patient engagement, improved transparency, and reduced clinician burnout.



~$1B

spend on AI solutions that ease administrative burdens

$600M

in ambient clinical documentation

$450M

in billing automation

PATIENT TREND

Patients adopt technology that clearly improves their care experience.

For example, telehealth usage has stabilized 38 times higher post-pandemic than pre-pandemic levels because it solved convenience and access issues, and retail clinics saw a 25% jump in visits by meeting demand for quick, local care.

According to CapTech's 2025 consumer research, 48% of consumers use some form of AI weekly in their personal lives, demonstrating that they're open to AI if it directly benefits them. They expect healthcare AI to reduce wait times, personalize care, or enhance outcomes without adding tech complexity. Bottom line: Healthcare executives should invest in AI that solves real pain points for patients (e.g. triage efficiency, chronic disease management) to earn patient trust and adoption.

38x

increase in telehealth usage post-pandemic

25%

increase in on-demand visits for quick, local care

48%

of consumers use some form of AI weekly in their personal life

TREND TWO

Cultivate Empowerment

Engage and enable employees and patients to build trust in AI.

EXECUTIVE TREND

Successful AI initiatives require cultural adoption, not just technology.

In fact, 70% of AI-related change efforts fail due to employee pushback or lack of support. For instance, hospital executives can appoint clinician AI champions and provide education on new diagnostic AI systems to ensure usage. Empowerment also means designing AI to assist clinicians, rather than replace them. That way, AI tools feel like help, not a threat. For example, AI-powered early warning detection can alert physicians for confirmation and reduce time to treatment.

70%

of AI-related change efforts fail due to employee pushback or lack of support

> "Don't force it. Let me choose. Let me opt out."
>
> *— 2025 CapTech Consumer Study*

PATIENT TREND

Likewise, patients want to feel in control of AI in their health.

They even appreciate AI tools like symptom checker apps or chatbot assistants when they're optional and transparent. One consumer from CapTech's 2025 consumer research provided this insight: "Don't force it. Let me choose. Let me opt out." Health systems can respond by making AI an opt-in enhancement, like an automated triage chatbot that patients can use if they want, while keeping human nurses available.

TREND THREE

Start Small, Expand Strategically

Use incremental wins like pilots to drive scalable AI innovation.

EXECUTIVE TREND

Given the high stakes, a crawl-walk-run approach to AI is the best course in the healthcare industry.

Now, health providers are accelerating AI rollouts, as buying cycles for AI tools are 18–22% faster in health systems and clinics. Meanwhile, payers (insurers) remain cautious. Their AI adoption cycles are 20% slower, often holding longer pilot evaluations. Executives must balance pressure to innovate with risk management by identifying quick wins (e.g. automate a simple workflow) that build confidence for broader AI initiatives. Rather than "big bang" overhauls, launch focused pilot projects, prove value, then scale up. For example, a hospital might start with an AI scheduling system in one department, and after reducing no-show rates and improving patient satisfaction, expand it hospital-wide.

CapTech's research revealed that consumer trust is directly tied to AI adoption rates. This slower pace to adopt AI among payers could be influenced in part by lower consumer trust in insurers compared with providers. Generally, patients view clinicians as advocates in their care, while payers are often seen as cost-focused gatekeepers.

$1.4B

healthcare AI investment in 2025

18–22%

faster buying cycles for AI tools in health systems

20%

slower AI adoption cycles in health payers (insurers)

PATIENT TREND

Gradual introduction of AI is key to patient acceptance.

Consumers are more comfortable with incremental improvements versus radical changes. They might welcome AI that automatically preregisters them for appointments (a small enhancement) but would be uneasy if an entire clinic visit were run by AI. CapTech's research shows consumers value AI for making services faster or more convenient, but don't want to be overwhelmed by too much change at once. One consumer said, "I like when AI helps me find what I need faster, but I don't want it to take over everything." Healthcare providers can roll out an AI pilot for one use-case (e.g. automated reminder system) to a small patient group, gather feedback, then refine and expand if successful. This phased approach ensures that each micro-step, whether it's a new feature or service, is validated by positive patient outcomes before scaling up. This aligns innovation pace with what patients can comfortably adopt.

TREND FOUR

Ensure Security, Earn Trust

Embed data security, privacy, and ethics in every AI initiative from the start.

EXECUTIVE TREND

Healthcare is one of the most regulated and risk-sensitive industries, so AI solutions must be secure and compliant by design.

Leaders know that a breach or unethical AI use can devastate far more than patient trust alone. As of 2025, the average healthcare data breach in the U.S. now costs nearly $11 million, and 2025 marked the largest healthcare data breach ever recorded, affecting nearly 193 million individuals and costing over $3B in direct response costs and business disruption. As one healthcare CTO told CapTech, "Cyber-resiliency is critical… It's a matter of when, not if you will be attacked."

Strict AI governance is imperative from day one. Healthcare organizations that prioritize security and ethics not only avoid pitfalls but gain a competitive edge by building a reputation of trustworthiness.

This means implementing secure interoperability standards like Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR) APIs, applying strong encryption for data sharing, and even exploring blockchain to ensure health data remains tamper-proof.

The main factors impacting cost include detection and escalation, lost business, post-breach response, and regulatory fines.

> "Cyber-resiliency is critical… It's a matter of when, not if you will get attacked."
>
> *— Healthcare CTO*

PATIENT TREND

Security and ethics are the foundation for any AI-enabled patient experience.

Patients' trust is fragile, and they're highly concerned about how AI uses their personal health data. CapTech's 2025 consumer survey revealed that 65% of consumers are very worried about AI privacy breaches, and 2 in 3 people don't understand how their data is being used by AI systems. This transparency gap can undermine adoption. Healthcare providers must be upfront about AI and give patients control.

For example, clinicians can make the effort to explain in plain language when an AI is involved in their care (such as an algorithm reading their MRI) and obtaining consent for its use. Health systems can proactively explain that an AI diagnosis tool has been rigorously tested, and their doctor can validate its output. Health systems can also introduce patient-facing dashboards that show what data is collected and how AI algorithms use it. For example, Cleveland Clinic requests patient consent before using ambient transcription, and Estonia's national health system uses blockchain to let patients see who accesses their records. When patients feel their data is safe and AI is accountable, they're far more likely to embrace those innovations.

65%

of consumers are very worried about privacy breaches

2 in 3 people

don't understand how their data is being used by AI systems

TREND FIVE

Structure Data to Personalize

Invest in data infrastructure to enable personalized, AI-driven healthcare experiences.

EXECUTIVE TREND

Data is the fuel for the effective use of AI in healthcare.

Siloed, messy data undermines AI value. That's why data management is a strategic business imperative. Hospitals and health systems are now pursuing interoperability and unified data platforms. In fact, the U.S. 21st Century Cures Act enforces data sharing, prompting providers to adopt standards like FHIR for seamless record exchange. Leading networks like Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic are now leveraging advanced data integration to give patients unified health records across systems, and health systems are exploring solutions that combine Electronic Health Records (EHR), claims, and wearable data to power predictive analytics for population health.

However, many executives admit their current data ecosystems aren't up to par, and even tech-savvy firms struggle with fragmented databases across business units. A Chief Technology Officer of a multi-hospital health system told CapTech, "Healthcare has grown up in early days… it's like a dirty closet… you have to take a hard look at data management." The reality is only 1% of companies consider themselves "AI Mature" with fully integrated workflows and measurable outcomes. That's why healthcare executives must invest in modern data infrastructure now (cloud data lakes, real-time data pipelines, master patient indexes) to enable AI algorithms to personalize care.

For example, health insurers are aggregating data to tailor member outreach, like customizing wellness programs for individual needs, and providers are creating centralized "analytics hubs" that drive personalized medicine research and clinical decision support. These initiatives illustrate how unified, high-quality data can transform patient experiences and outcomes. Better data leads to better AI insights, and ultimately better health.

PATIENT TREND

Patients are increasingly expecting personalized healthcare, similar to how they receive tailored recommendations in retail or entertainment.

People have grown accustomed to brands that anticipate their needs and make experiences feel effortless. As consumer brands raise the bar with intuitive, individualized experiences, people now expect and deserve the same level of convenience, relevance, and empathy from their health systems. Patients want to feel understood, supported, and cared for, at every step in their healthcare journey.

When data is well-leveraged, AI can deliver personalization that patients notice and appreciate, including reminders and content specific to their condition, treatment plans based on their genetics, and adaptive apps that coach them individually. According to CapTech's consumer survey, nearly 44% of people say personalization is important in their interaction with a brand (including healthcare providers), and those who value it are 4 times more likely to trust and engage with services. In healthcare, this means patients respond when a nutrition app can give meal suggestions aligned with their medical history, for example, or a hospital portal surfaces relevant content, like physical therapy videos tailored to a patient's recent surgery. Another cutting-edge healthcare trend is precision medicine: using a patient's genomic and clinical data to customize therapy. New CRISPR-based gene therapies treat diseases like sickle cell by targeting a patient's unique DNA profile, demonstrating an ultimate form of data-powered personalization.

On a more everyday level, patients connecting their Apple Watch or Fitbit to their clinic is becoming common, as is the expectation that doctors will incorporate those personal data points into their care. In fact, 44% of Americans own activity-tracking wearables, and 82% are willing to share data with providers. To meet these new expectations, healthcare organizations must break data silos and ensure data quality. When they do, AI can help deliver the right information or intervention to the right patient at the right time, vastly improving patient engagement and outcomes.

44%
of consumers say personalization is important in their interaction with a brand

4x
patients who value brands are more 4x more likely to trust and engage with services

Charting the *Path Forward*

AI is ushering in a new era, empowering visionary leaders to reimagine what is possible for patient well-being, organizational resilience, and the entire future of healthcare. To realize this potential, healthcare leaders must move beyond technology-first approaches and embrace AI strategies that prioritize measurable outcomes, empower stakeholders, and safeguard data and ethics. By investing in AI solutions that address real clinical and operational needs, engaging clinicians and patients in the process, and building robust governance and data infrastructure, healthcare organizations can shape a future where technology and human care work hand in hand to deliver better outcomes for all.

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