

Towards the C-Suite 2035

Boardroom Navigator

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

Executive leadership is entering a decade of profound transformation. Digital disruption, geopolitical volatility, demographic change, and shifting workforce expectations are redefining how organisations must lead. As legacy systems falter and talent dynamics evolve, leaders must reimagine the structure, capabilities, and composition of the C-Suite itself.

This whitepaper by Robert Half serves as a strategic roadmap for decision-makers – including senior executives and private equity investors – who seek to future-proof their organisations. Drawing on exclusive insights from 400+ European C-Suite leaders and 100 private equity investors, it explores macro- and micro-level challenges through to 2035, and offers actionable strategies for succession planning, leadership development, and C-level transformation.

Key Leadership Challenges Through 2035

Executives face a convergence of systemic pressures that demand immediate strategic attention:

- › **Digital acceleration & AI transformation:**
Legacy infrastructure is no longer fit for purpose. C-Suites must drive innovation at speed, with new digital fluency across functions.
- › **Workforce transformation:**
Talent shortages, evolving values, and generational shifts require renewed leadership approaches and new skill sets.
- › **Geopolitical & economic volatility:**
Inflation, regulatory shifts, and supply chain fragility are testing leadership resilience.
- › **AI-driven disruption:**
From decision-making to operations, emerging technologies such as AI, quantum computing, and machine learning will reshape how value is created.
- › **Succession uncertainty:**
Many organisations still lack robust, forward-looking succession plans – risking continuity at a time when leadership adaptability is critical.

**DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION
MEANS NOTHING
WITHOUT WORKFORCE
TRANSFORMATION.**

Top Challenges Among C-Suite Leaders

- › Maintaining pace of innovation to stay competitive
- › Speed of disruption by emerging technologies
- › IT infrastructure to meet performance expectations
- › Adapting business to workforce transformation

The 2035 C-Suite: Strategic Leadership Redefined

The next generation of executive leadership will be more integrated, agile, and digitally literate – combining technical expertise, human-centric leadership, and strategic foresight. Key shifts include:

- › **New roles rising:**
Chief AI & Data Officer, Chief Transformation Officer, and Chief Technology Transformation Officer are becoming essential pillars of leadership teams.
- › **Leadership style evolution:**
Data-driven, emotionally intelligent, and purpose-led leadership will be the norm.
- › **Decision-making enhanced by AI:**
Nearly half of executives envision a hybrid model in which AI augments – not replaces – human judgment. Only 10% foresee full automation of strategic decisions.

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Redefining Leadership Roles: Top 5 Where AI Will Lend a Hand – or Take the Lead by 2035 *

SMEs	Large Businesses
AI Will Completely Take Over	
Financial management, forecasting and reporting	Scenario planning and simulation
Innovation and product development	Innovation and product development
Customer insights and personalisation	Risk management, regulation and compliance
Talent acquisition and workforce planning	Financial management, forecasting and reporting
Performance measurement and reporting	Strategic decision-making
AI Will Support the Task	
Employee engagement and retention strategies	Supply chain and operation optimisation
Performance measurement and reporting	Workforce development, reskilling and upskilling
Workforce development, reskilling and upskilling	Performance measurement and reporting
Leading and managing workforce utilisation and productivity	Leading and managing workforce utilisation and productivity
Supply chain and operation optimisation	Customer insights and personalisation

* Results reflect the Top 3 rankings of C-Suite Members and Private Equity Investors, based on their prior selection of all applicable options for their organisation(s).



Strategic Recommendations for Future-Ready Organisations

1 Rethink C-Suite Composition

- › Appoint transformation stewards: Chief Transformation Officers, Chief AI & Data Officers, and Digital Fluency Mentors
- › Elevate stakeholder-centric roles: Chief HR Officer, Chief Communications Officer, and Chief Marketing Officer as strategic anchors of trust and engagement

2 Build a Dual Leadership Pipeline

- › Immediate: Hire VPs for Talent, AI, and Technology Transformation
- › Mid-term: Establish formalised succession frameworks via Leadership Development Managers and Succession Planning Leads

3 Strengthen Executive Competency

- › Foster adaptive leadership styles that balance data-driven decision-making with emotional intelligence and purpose-driven thinking
- › Combine traditional skills (strategy, financial stewardship) with modern capabilities (data fluency, agility, storytelling)

4 Close the Executive Readiness Gap

- › Embed and promote learning in AI, ESG, and cross-functional leadership to close capability gaps at the C-level
- › Leverage game-based learning, peer mentoring, and simulation training to prepare for volatile scenarios

5 Future-Proof Knowledge Transfer

- › Institutionalise cross-generational mentoring between Baby Boomers/Gen X and Gen Y/Z to preserve know-how
- › Embed storytelling and scenario-/simulation-based learning to test leadership under stress to accelerate experiential growth

To Stay Future-Ready ...

... businesses must act now to build tomorrow’s leaders – whether from within, outside, or both. Leadership development takes time, and the future won’t wait!

Preparing for 2035:
How Companies Approach Succession Planning Today:

Succession Planning	Private-owned	Publicly-listed
Internal only	33 %	35 %
External only	22 %	14 %
A combination of both	40 %	47 %
We don’t know yet	6 %	5 %

Excerpt: 2035 C-Suite Competency Matrix *

Robert Half's forward-looking matrix outlines the evolving roles, skills, and experiences required across C-Suite functions. Key developments include:

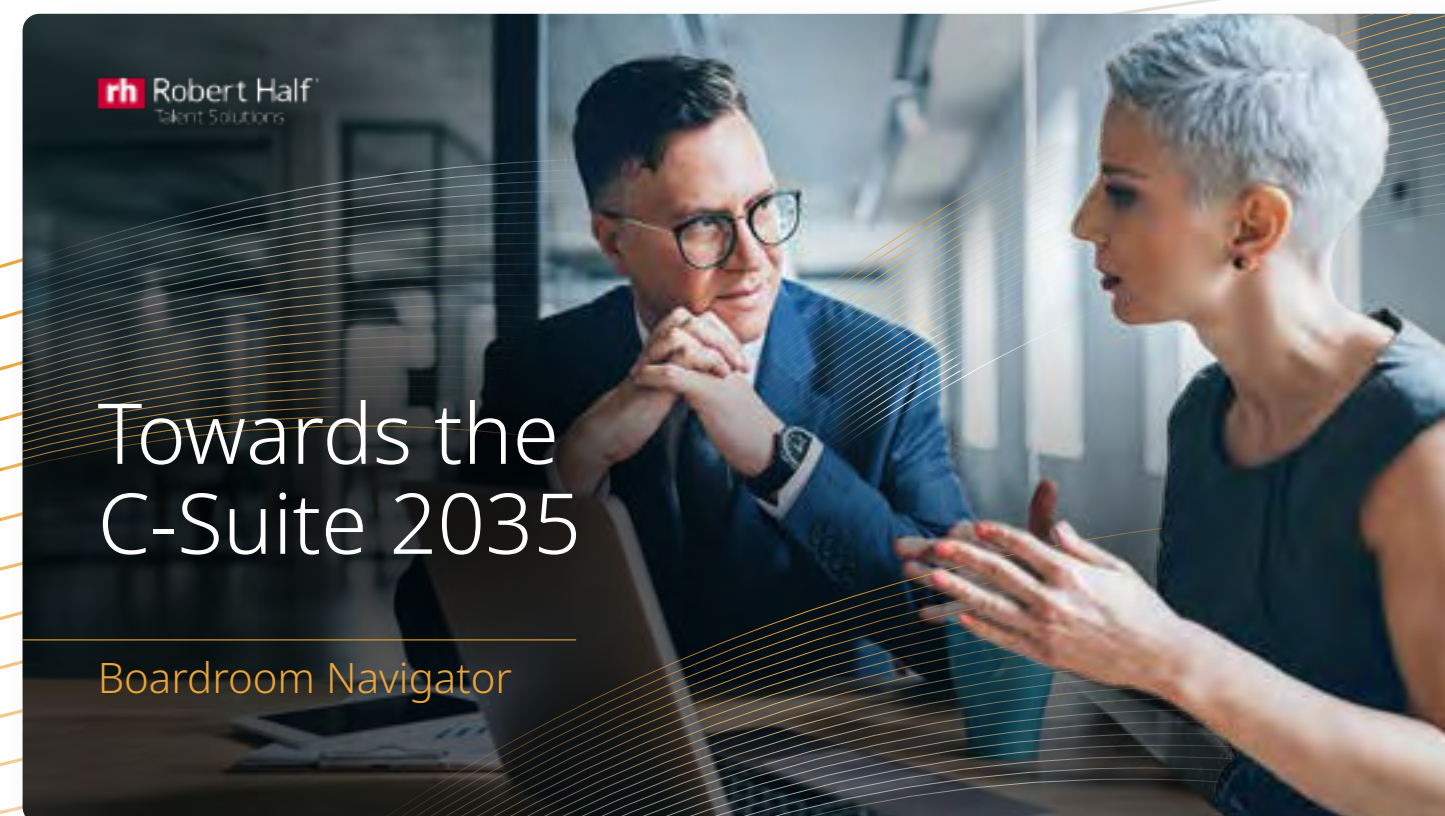
- › **Chief Transformation Officer**
as integrator of business, people, and technology
- › **Chief Technology Officer**
as architect of digital enterprise value
- › **Chief HR Officer, Chief Communications Officer, and Chief Marketing Officer**
as strategic enablers of workforce transformation, cultural alignment, and stakeholder trust

C-Suite Positions	Chief Transformation Officer (CTRO)	Chief Technology Officer (CTO)	Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO)
Wealth of Experience Needed In This Role	To execute change programmes, realign strategy and people, and restore performance under disruption. › Turnaround management › Restructuring › Workforce transformation › Digital transformation › Crisis management	To lead enterprise-wide change, manage risk during crises, and ensure secure, agile tech infrastructure globally. › Digital transformation › Settlement of branches/plants/etc. › Crisis management › Cybersecurity incidents › Workforce transformation	To lead in redefining work, respond to external pressures, manage crises, and design future-ready organisations. › Workforce transformation › Succession planning › Crisis management › Socio-political activism › Digital transformation
Technical Skills: Most Important to the Role	To lead complex change, coordinate large-scale programmes, embed ESG thinking, and inspire transformation through storytelling. › Change management › Project management › CSR/ESG knowledge › Storytelling skills	To integrate AI effectively, deliver transformation programmes, manage change across systems, and reduce tech risk exposure. › Artificial intelligence knowledge › Project management › Change management › Risk management	To lead transformation, drive ESG alignment in culture, and communicate vision internally and externally with influence. › Change management › CSR/ESG knowledge › Public speaking and presentation skills › Storytelling skills
Soft Skills: Most Important to the Role	To guide transformation with purpose, maintain momentum under stress, and navigate resistance constructively. › Strategic thinking › Resilience › Conflict management	To lead tech-forward thinking, pivot technologies quickly, and bridge business-technical communication. › Innovative capacity › Agility › Communication skills	To support people through transformation, listen deeply, and maintain balance in evolving workforces. › Emotional intelligence › Active listening › Resilience
Mix of Leadership Styles Required	To guide systemic change, to enable flexibility during transformation and to support teams through change. › Transformational leadership › Agile leadership › Coaching leadership	To manage fast-paced tech innovation, drive tech-enabled disruption and to build engineering talent. › Agile leadership › Transformational leadership › Coaching leadership	To lead and foster employee well-being and culture, to develop leadership at all levels and to empower and enable the workforce. › Compassionate leadership › Coaching leadership › Servant leadership
Mix of Emerging Technology Likely Impacting This Role	To scale enterprise transformation using automation, simulations, and AI-driven adaptability. › Intelligent process automation › Machine learning › Digital twins	To lead early adoption of high-bandwidth, distributed, and quantum-enabled systems for enterprise platforms and architecture. › Quantum computing › 6G connectivity › Edge computing	To deploy LLMs and NLP for personalised training, communication, and talent analytics, and use AR/VR for immersive learning experiences. › Natural language processing › Large language models › Augmented reality and virtual reality

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Conclusion

By 2035, the C-Suite will no longer be defined by functional silos but by strategic agility, digital fluency, and collaborative leadership. The future belongs to organisations that act now – identifying, developing, and empowering leaders who can thrive in complexity. This whitepaper is both a wake-up call and a guidebook for transformation: a foundation for sustainable leadership in an age of disruption.



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Methodology

Robert Half commissioned UK-based Rigour Research Ltd to carry out an online survey in the first quarter of 2025 across the European Union and the United Kingdom. The survey gathered responses from 400 C-Suite and executive leadership professionals, drawn from a broad range of commercial sectors. Respondents were evenly split between SMEs and large enterprises, as well as between publicly listed and privately owned companies. In addition, 100 private equity investors based across Europe and the United States were surveyed. The majority (88 %) focus on growth and scale-up stage investments, while 34 % also invest in distressed assets.

The survey was conducted using prompted questions. Participants were initially asked to select all answer options applicable to their organisation. In a second step, they were asked to rank their top three choices from the options previously selected. To ensure representative results, the data were weighted in line with the distribution of the overall population. Please note that due to rounding, some totals may not add up to exactly 100 %.

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