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# Healthcare2020: Women and leadership - the next decade



By

**Technology is presenting an opportunity for women to progress in the healthcare sector, even though they are currently underrepresented in the industry. “The digital world is changing healthcare with the new technology system that currently is underleveraged,” says Lynn O’Connor Vos, the CEO and president of Grey Healthcare Group. She told a plenary session at the healthcare2020 forum which was recently held at INSEAD’s Europe campus in Fontainebleau that nowadays patients are better informed and that there’s also a spotlight on the industry “from customers distrusting us.**

All these factors make supplying healthcare increasingly more challenging.” She says that in order to “adapt to these changes and to excel, there is one leadership skill both men and women must acquire - a comprehension of new technology or technology leadership.”

Technology today is also about strategy, says O’Connor Vos, who comes from a communications and marketing background, where women are

already making their mark. “It’s about being a strategist and unleashing technology to connect people with ideas – becoming a transformational executive.”

Another speaker at the plenary session, Kurt Graves, chief marketing officer of Novartis Pharmaceuticals, said that although women at present have little say in how the healthcare industry is run, he believes it’s critical for the future of the sector to increase the number of women in the industry.

Women account for only about 15 per cent of the executives in the Forbes list of top 500 global companies and the figure is declining annually – last year it dropped by one per cent. Graves notes that “if nothing changes it will take a staggering 73 years before there are equal numbers of men and women in the board room.”

### **Unique skillsets**

Both Graves and O’Connor Vos believe that women have unique skillsets needed in the industry, in particular their collaborative skills. ‘Women have the opportunity to excel in the digital world because ... their unique talents and skills ... are more suited to the new technology,’ says O’ Connor Vos. She argues that “the world has gone digital and people need to immerse themselves in this world throughout the organisation, and have a relentless commitment to learning. Individuals have to master blogs, text messages and social networks to use them as a business advantage. There is a move from specialist knowledge to information ‘for all’ through these channels and power has shifted from esteemed institutions to everyone talking on blogs and chatrooms about health issues.”

“You must know your patients,” says O’ Connor Vos. “There are eight million adults in the US that look at health information online. The internet has become the second most popular means of finding information on health issues, next to doctors.”

She believes that leaders must be “voyeurs and figure out what’s going on in these sites – there is information that you can’t obtain from qualitative and quantitative studies. For the first time we can hear the language of our customers and actually talk to them online giving valuable insights to marketers for improving websites by using the vocabulary their customers employ to research subjects.”

“Through discussion groups, patients are becoming more powerful, having an influence on service and care improvement,” she says. “At least 1.5 million times per day an individual puts content on the web regarding healthcare and forward thinking marketers will learn how to orchestrate these conversations on the web and, as a result, companies will get better and faster information. This can directly impact diagnosis, treatment and physician education.”

### **Time to leave the comfort zone**

O’ Connor Vos concludes that “both men and women need to leave their comfort zones and think differently. A recent survey in The Wall Street Journal notes that the new kind of leader is someone who doesn’t mind sharing power; is ready to be accountable and encourages openness and dialogue.”

These are traits that many women possess, she says. However, she adds “it’s not gender neutral, but the most important thing to do is to be dedicated to learning. The leaders who will succeed are those who embrace technology, who think aggressively and innovatively about the implications together with the opportunities for their institutions and their primary customers, the patients.”

Graves agrees that “women can bring skills to the table that men cannot such as the ability to communicate, listen and connect to teams at all levels of the organisation.” However, there are still both perceived and real barriers which prevent women from reaching senior positions, including the perception that women should emulate the behaviour of typical senior leadership- which tends to be male. Novartis has been trying to address this concern through a programme aimed at encouraging high potential women to be true to themselves. Graves points out that this is applicable to both men and women. “It is essential to build your own personal brand identity and essence. You need to be clear about your purpose, build a brand and put the development plan (into action).”

### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/healthcare2020-women-and-leadership-next-decade>

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### **About the series**

## Healthcare Management

The Healthcare Management Initiative at INSEAD was founded on the belief that many of the systemic challenges of the healthcare industry globally can benefit from the application of principles that stem from rigorous, evidence-based thought leadership.