Current research agenda for operations leaders

Topic	What we're researching	Why it matters
Financial outlook for hospitals into 2026	• Which hospitals are seeing their financial picture improve and which ones are struggling? • Which hospitals are prepared for 2026?	Faced with growing financial pressures on the traditional hospital business model, operations leaders need to orient their financial performance to the larger market to see how they stack up and where they have opportunities to inflect financial performance.
Care variation reduction (CVR) assessment	• How should providers prioritize care variation reduction (CVR) efforts? • What are your system's CVR opportunities by service line, facility, and specialty in terms of length of stay or dollars saved?	There is a $100B cost savings opportunity in addressing unwarranted CVR. Operations leaders need to understand the opportunity in their systems to prioritize CVR effort.
The case for care variation reduction (CVR)	• What is the urgency for system-wide care variation reduction today? • What new challenges and approaches exist to reducing variation across a system? • What are the cost-saving opportunities in inpatient and outpatient settings? • How can providers enfranchise their leaders and teams to guide and drive efforts to reduce unwarranted care variation?	Standardizing care across facilities improves quality, reduces costs, and ensures consistent patient experiences. Operations leaders play a key role in implementing these standards, but sustained progress is only possible with buy-in from other leaders and broader teams.
2026 workforce benchmarks	• What are the latest benchmarks for workforce span of control and turnover? • How can organizations use comparative data to inform staffing analysis and workforce planning?	Benchmarking enables operations leaders to assess organizational performance, identify areas for improvement, and make data-driven decisions about staffing structures and retention efforts.

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State of the nursing workforce	• What disconnects exist between what nurses need and what their roles and work environments provide? • What are the most urgent gaps in physical and psychological safety, staffing, workload, flexibility, and career development? • What actionable strategies can health systems use to address these gaps?	Nurses are the largest component of the healthcare workforce – and one of the largest line items on the health system budget. Operations leaders need to understand the root causes of dissatisfaction and burnout in the nursing workforce to improve retention, workplace culture, and long-term sustainability of nursing teams.
Service line market trends	• What key changes in each of the major service lines -- oncology, cardiovascular, neurosciences, orthopedics, women's health, and infusion -- are the most impactful to care delivery and service line strategy?	Operations leaders need to understand specialty care market dynamics to anticipate disruption, identify opportunities, and manage their services more effectively.
AI for clinical and coverage decision-making	• How are health system stakeholders investing in AI to support clinical decision-making? • What are their future plans for AI adoption, including partnership strategies and anticipated barriers? • What inflection points and potential futures should leaders prepare for as AI becomes more embedded in care delivery?	AI is reshaping how clinical decisions are made, influencing everything from diagnosis to treatment selection. Operations leaders must understand how this transformation affects clinical workflows, coverage determinations, and workforce engagement strategies.
AI in revenue cycle and payment integrity operations	• How is AI transforming revenue cycle management, including claims processing, coding, and prior authorization? • How does AI enhance payment integrity by detecting underpayments, fraud, and missed reimbursement opportunities?	AI-driven RCM tools impact how providers get paid and how value is assessed. Operations leaders must align pricing, contracting, and value propositions with these evolving systems.