

# The CEO Impact Index

A proprietary Golin study to help communicators effectively shape CEO positioning

March 2025



INTRODUCTION

# Rewriting the CEO playbook: Leading through transformation

In 2023, Golin launched the CEO Impact Index (the Index) at a pivotal moment when the traditional formula for CEO positioning was beginning to shift. What once required a careful balance of business performance, social purpose and personal authenticity has evolved. The script has been rewritten into a more focused mandate: CEOs must primarily showcase their business transformation story to stakeholders while adapting to an increasingly complex regulatory environment and combating rising misinformation about their companies.

Now in its third edition, the Index analyzes and ranks communications strategies of Fortune 500's top 250 CEOs across eight critical dimensions: media visibility, LinkedIn presence, business recognition, trade engagement, business forum participation, employee engagement, megatrend alignment and overall sentiment. This comprehensive evaluation has become particularly relevant as CEOs navigate an increasingly polarized stakeholder landscape where facts and fiction often compete for attention.

The second half of 2024 brought this evolution into sharp focus. Record CEO transitions (373 exits from U.S. public companies in 2024\*), regulatory uncertainties following the return of President Donald Trump to the White House and the tragic death of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson fundamentally changed how CEOs approach stakeholder communications.

One exceptionally prominent CEO, Elon Musk, made a transition from private to public life, signaling a new era of business involvement in policy making (and leading us to exclude him from the Index – see methodology for more details).

These events, combined with rising legal challenges to corporate DEI initiatives, growing scrutiny of ESG commitments and ongoing economic and technological disruption, emphasize that today's CEO communications must focus on clear, transformation-driven narratives that cut through the noise and misinformation.

As we look to 2025, CEOs are cautiously optimistic, particularly regarding AI and digital transformation. However, their communications strategy must highlight how they are evolving their businesses to meet market demands, navigate regulatory complexities and address the diverse expectations of global stakeholders amidst growing geopolitical tensions.

Golin's CEO Impact Index serves as a crucial diagnostic tool for CEOs navigating this new era where business transformation stories have become the cornerstone of effective leadership communications with all stakeholders.

# Our key findings

As we analyzed the macro reputation landscape—looking at everything from employee engagement and thought leadership to media sentiment, social engagement and industry influence—six key themes emerged:

- 1. Effective CEO positioning goes beyond media relations.** While traditional media remains crucial, our data reveals top-performing CEOs outpace peers across multiple dimensions. The highest-ranked CEOs scored three times higher in industry awards and recognition, 6.5 times higher in major event speaking and more than double in employee engagement ratings. This demonstrates that strong reputations are built through a strategic combination of industry leadership, workforce engagement and public presence.
- 2. LinkedIn remains CEOs' safe harbor in a fragmented social media landscape.** While social media platforms grow increasingly fragmented and polarized, LinkedIn stands as CEOs' professional safe harbor, despite only 18% of Index CEOs fully leveraging its potential. Although overall CEO posting has decreased, those who strategically engage are seeing record levels of impact, suggesting that thoughtful, discussion-provoking content matters more than posting frequency.
- 3. AI matures from concept to execution.** The AI discourse has matured significantly, shifting from theoretical potential to practical implementation and governance. Despite slightly reduced coverage volume, engagement metrics show increasing appetite for nuanced discussions about AI's tangible impact on business results—from cost reduction and improved efficiency to enhanced customer experiences.
- 4. CEOs pivot to a results-driven approach amid growing scrutiny around DEI.** Organizations are facing complex trade-offs between regulatory compliance and stakeholder demands on DEI initiatives. In response to political and sentiment shifts, CEOs are shifting from broad societal commentary toward more focused communication on measurable outcomes and specific business impacts of their DEI programs.
- 5. Top CEOs mobilize their employees as advocates.** The impact of strong CEO leadership extends beyond internal metrics, directly influencing talent attraction, retention and industry recognition. Our data underscores that employee sentiment can serve as a powerful barometer of CEO effectiveness, with highly rated CEOs consistently creating workplaces that employees actively recommend and validating employee perception through external rankings.
- 6. Visible CEOs are associated with transformation and growth – regardless of sector.** CEOs perceived to be on the cutting edge of what's next continue to rank at the top of the Index. A clear and compelling transformation narrative benefits all, regardless of industry. Companies led by top ranking Index CEOs seem to enjoy better annual share price growth and annual revenue growth than their Fortune-ranked peers. This favorable trend was seen in our 2023 analysis as well.

**KEY INSIGHT #1**

# Effective CEO positioning goes beyond media relations

CEOs and their teams often prioritize media and sentiment as markers of influence, but reputation goes beyond headlines. True leadership impact comes from a broader mix of industry, community and stakeholder engagement. Strategic decisions, innovation, workforce relationships and community engagement collectively shape a CEO's perception.

Our data reveals an important insight: top-ranked CEOs aren't just media darlings. Proven out for the third time in our study, the most influential leaders create impact through diverse channels—speaking at key events and business forums, engaging on social platforms and connecting with employees to build a comprehensive leadership presence.

The data shows that employee engagement and industry leadership hold equal weight in terms of impact. The Top 10 CEOs on the Index led in employee engagement, scoring 20 percentage points above the Index average of 44%. Equally crucial to a CEO's reputation is visibility within their industry—7 of the Top 10 CEOs earned perfect scores in trade community engagement, outperforming the average by 88 percentage points.

The most visible CEOs also regularly appear at top business forums. The Top 10 CEOs scored 6.5 times higher in speaking engagements than the rest of the ranked CEOs, emphasizing the reputational value of showing up and leading key discussions.

Awards and rankings, often dismissed as mere accolades, prove surprisingly significant. Top 10 CEOs scored more than three times higher in awards than their peers, with the highest two spots claiming perfect 100% scores in this category.

**What to do next:** The data is clear—media presence matters, but the strongest CEO reputations rest on multiple pillars. Top leaders excel in industry influence, employee engagement, thought leadership and professional recognition. True impact relies on a holistic, strategic blend of visibility, stakeholder engagement and leadership. In 2025, CEOs who master this balance in a dynamic landscape will be the most influential voices in business.



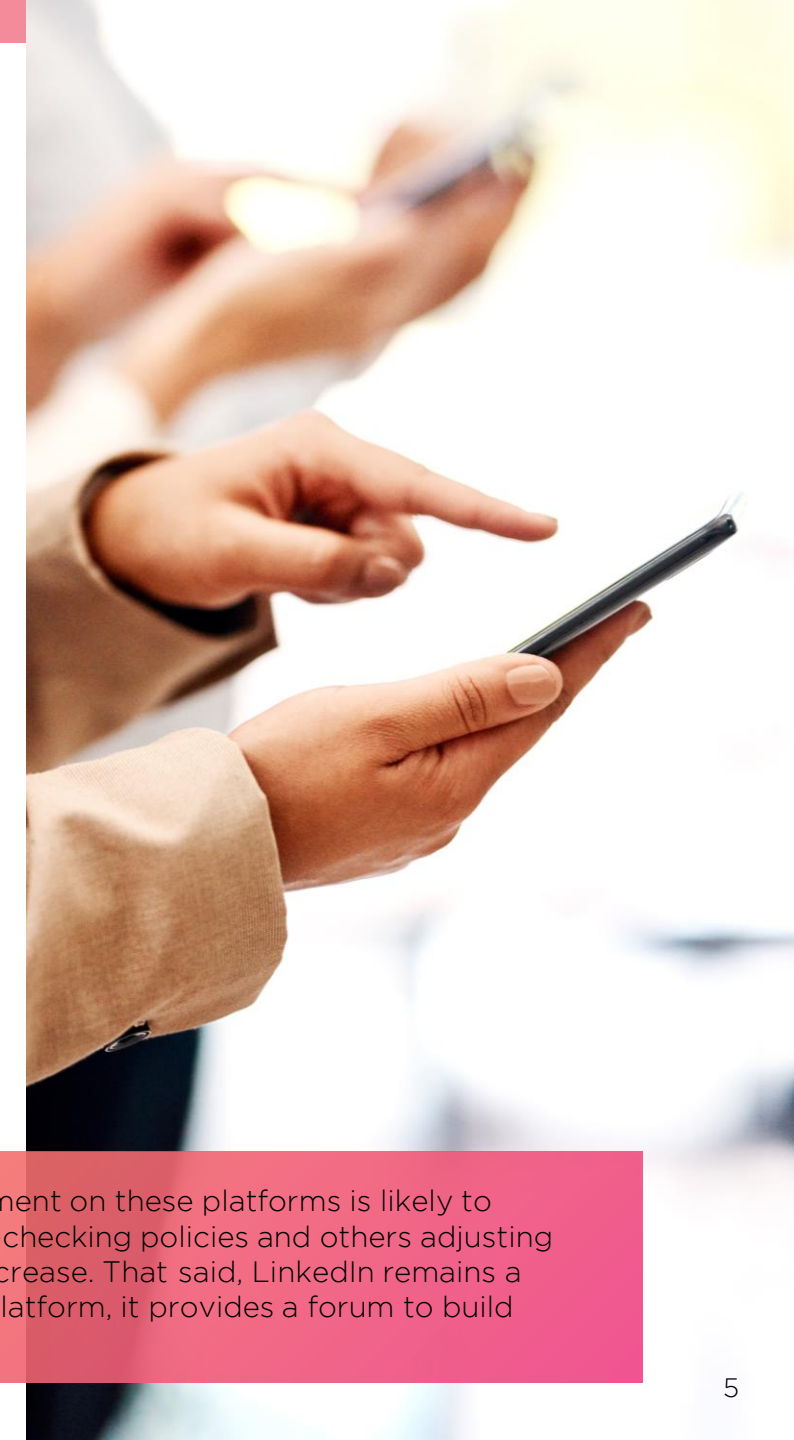
**KEY INSIGHT #2**

## LinkedIn remains CEOs' safe harbor in a fragmented social media landscape

While LinkedIn remains the social platform of choice for CEOs, adoption is declining. Currently, 52% of Index CEOs are either inactive or absent from the platform – up from 40% in early 2024 – with only 18% fully leveraging LinkedIn's capabilities. This hesitation reflects broader concerns about social media engagement among CEOs.

Yet for those who do engage, LinkedIn's impact is growing. The platform's B2B focus and professional community continue to drive meaningful discourse, particularly when CEOs share content that sparks discussion. While the overall number of CEO posts has decreased, engagement levels have reached new highs, suggesting that quality of interaction matters more than frequency of posting. LinkedIn remains a valuable space for strategic engagement, offering a professional forum to build trust, establish authority and mitigate reputational risk.

LinkedIn is generally a source of positive and constructive discourse for CEOs, but not all social media environments are favorable. While platforms like Facebook and YouTube mirrored traditional news with only 15% negative coverage, others, such as X and Disqus, contributed disproportionately to negative narratives. X stood out as the primary driver of negative exposure, with 37% of content on the platform about Index CEOs being negative, despite being one of the most accessible and highly engaged platforms. This landscape leads many CEOs to remain cautious or abstain all together.



**What to do next:** CEOs need to approach their social media strategy with caution and precision. The environment on these platforms is likely to become more political and more fractured in the year ahead. With several major platforms curtailing their fact-checking policies and others adjusting their algorithms to prioritize select topics and voices, the share of negative commentary on CEOs is likely to increase. That said, LinkedIn remains a valuable space for CEOs to invest in strategic platform development. As the only professional-focused social platform, it provides a forum to build trust, establish authority and mitigate reputational risk.

KEY INSIGHT #3

# The AI conversation has matured from concept to execution

The latter half of 2024 marked a significant evolution in AI discourse, characterized by a shift from theoretical discussions to practical implementation strategies across multiple sectors. While overall coverage volume associated with Fortune 250 CEOs decreased slightly from 51% of coverage in H1\* to 43% in H2, AI remained the most covered of all megatrends. And despite the reduced volume, engagement metrics grew from 5M to 8M interactions, indicating continued heightened public interest in AI developments.

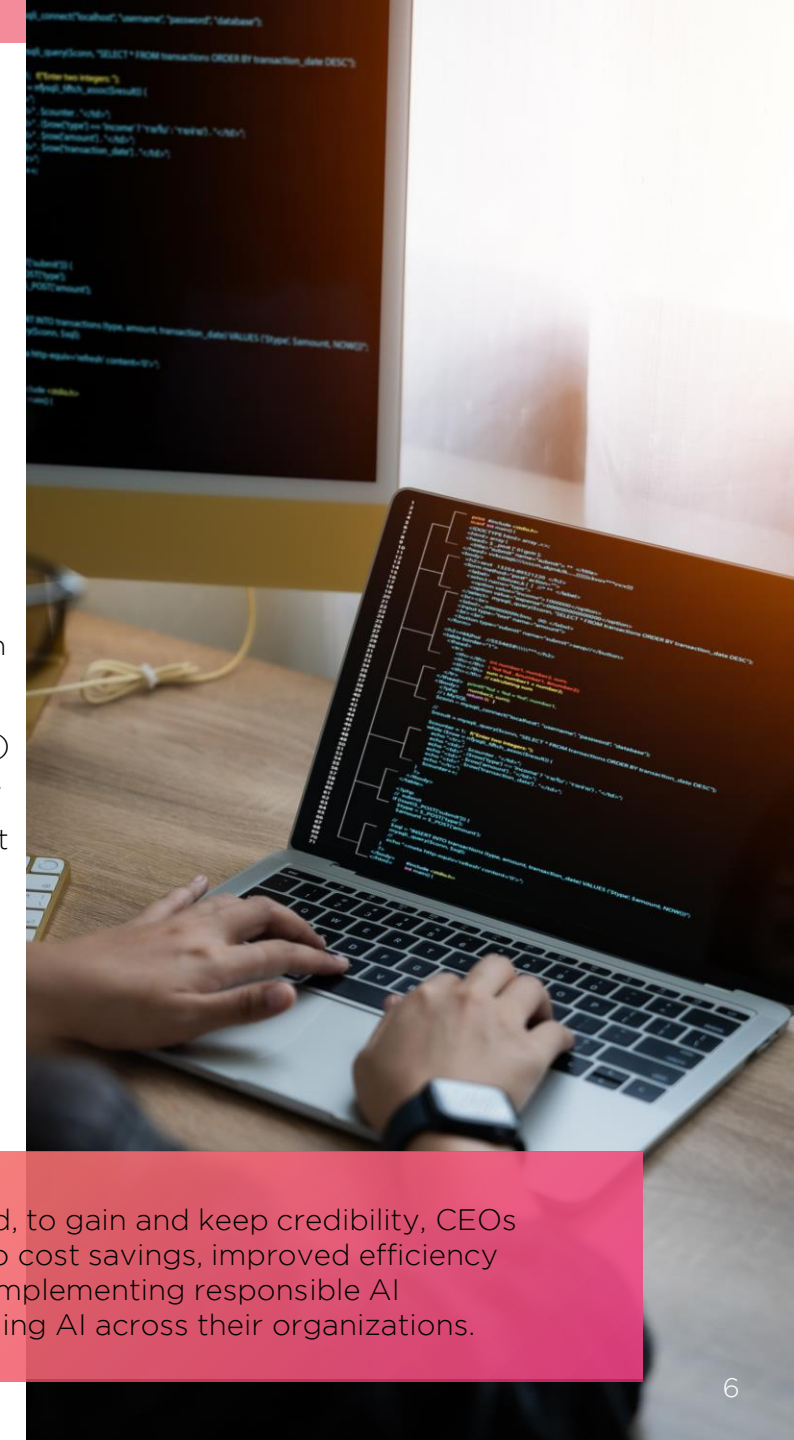
The Top 10 CEOs in the Index — primarily tech leaders — account for a disproportionate 40% of all coverage on this topic. In fact, AI commands nearly two-thirds of these leaders' megatrend coverage for all of 2024 (69% in H1, 64% in H2), overshadowing all other trends combined. This concentration reflects both the technology sector's inherent role in AI advancement and a broader dynamic: as AI interconnects with societal and commercial topics, AI-focused CEOs experience a halo effect from broad media coverage and social media discourse. By comparison, CEOs in other sectors, such as Healthcare (where AI comprised only 11% of megatrend coverage) and Retail (where AI comprised 13%) were relatively absent from the discourse and, accordingly, received less overall coverage and less of a reputational lift.

The AI narrative landscape encompassed multiple domains. Entertainment and content creation experienced significant AI integration, particularly in voice generation and storytelling innovation. Corporate strategy discussions matured to focus on implementation opportunities, challenges and practical applications, while global partnerships highlighted the growing importance of localized AI development capabilities and deploying AI responsibly and ethically.

Political intersections became increasingly prominent, particularly in relation to the U.S. elections and European regulations, while ethical considerations and responsible deployment remained central to leadership discussions. Notably, AI-related coverage maintained a positive trajectory with a net sentiment of +20.7%, even as conversations tackled these complex implementation challenges and ethical considerations.

**What to do next:** AI discussions have matured, balancing potential with practicality and ethics. Moving forward, to gain and keep credibility, CEOs must move beyond hypotheticals to demonstrate tangible AI results - from deployment across the company to cost savings, improved efficiency and enhanced employee and customer experiences. Equally important, leaders will need to show how they're implementing responsible AI governance frameworks that protect privacy, eliminate bias and ensure transparent decision-making while scaling AI across their organizations.

\*H1 results extracted and optimized based on updated H2 criteria to ensure a like-for-like comparison. Percentages from previous reports may differ.



KEY INSIGHT #4

# CEOs pivot to a results-driven approach amid growing scrutiny around DEI

2024 marked a watershed moment for corporate DEI initiatives, characterized by shifting public sentiment, legal challenges and strategic pivots in business approaches. The landscape shifted dramatically when SHRM's decision to remove "equity" from its DEI framework sparked widespread reassessment across the business community. This, coupled with the U.S. presidential election cycle, amplified existing debates, while shifts in corporate, military and law enforcement sectors sparked renewed discussion about organizational culture and hiring practices. Because of this sociopolitical dynamic, DEI-related discussions accounted for roughly 10% of CEO megatrend coverage in both the first and second half of 2024, indicating that this topic continues to impact the public and corporate dialogue.

While the volume of the coverage did not increase substantially, the tone of these conversations grew increasingly critical. Engagement with DEI-related discussions also rose significantly in the second half – up 82%\* from the first half of 2024, reflecting heightened conversations around the U.S. elections and shifting public sentiment on the topic. Because of these factors, DEI sentiment dropped sharply, with negative coverage outweighing positive by nearly two-to-one across online platforms, especially on platforms like X. Overall, the net sentiment around DEI related to CEOs fell to -13.9%, more than triple the -3.9% observed in the first half of the year.\*

While a November post-election Pew Research study shows that 52% of Americans favor DEI programs, public sentiment continues to shift rapidly, with recent polls indicating either a stabilization of or further decline in support of DEI. Companies and CEOs are reflecting this dynamic and have started to shift toward a more measured approach in their DEI communications and program commitments.



**What to do next:** CEOs are shifting how they approach DEI amid changing legal and political pressures. Success requires being crystal clear about what's changing, why it's changing and how it impacts stakeholders' experience, especially employees. Rather than making broad public statements focused on societal issues, leaders are focusing on tangible results—showing how inclusive practices drive business growth, develop talent, enhance customer experience and create market opportunities. This reflects a more practical leadership approach that ties diversity and inclusion directly to business value and measurable outcomes.

**KEY INSIGHT #5**

## Top CEOs mobilize their employees as advocates

Employee sentiment is a powerful indicator of CEO effectiveness, with unsolicited feedback from current and former employees revealing a strong link between highly-rated CEOs and positive workplace perception. The most successful companies tend to have employees who not only rate their CEO highly but actively recommend their company as a great place to work.

Specifically, CEOs in the Top 50 of the Index enjoy an average approval rating of 76% from their employees – a full 10 basis points above those in the bottom 50. This favorable view seems to translate to workplace morale: The Top 50 see a similar benefit in their employees' willingness to recommend their company – averaging 74% versus 64% among the Bottom 50. This suggests that the most effective CEOs cultivate workplace cultures where employees feel engaged and become advocates for both leadership and the organization.

This pattern extends to broader workplace excellence as well, with Index leaders showing particularly strong representation on the annual Forbes World's Best Employers List. More than 80% of the top 50 CEOs on the Index (41 of 50) claimed a spot on this prestigious ranking. Conversely, among the bottom 50 CEOs on the Index, only 4 companies earned this recognition.

Overall, CEOs in the top half of the Index are three times more likely to have an above-average score in this metric. They are also five times more likely to have their company ranked on Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For list. These strong correlations lead us to believe that attention to employee engagement has a wide ripple effect, impacting a CEO's reputation in meaningful ways.



**What to do next:** CEOs should view employees as natural brand ambassadors. By fostering authentic workplace experiences and measuring employee advocacy, leaders can transform their workforce into powerful surrogates. This shift requires moving beyond traditional metrics of leadership visibility to actively cultivate and measure employee advocacy as a core component of executive effectiveness. When employees feel genuinely valued, they amplify both company and CEO messaging, creating a multiplier effect that extends the CEO's influence far beyond direct communications.



**KEY INSIGHT #6**

## Visible CEOs are associated with transformation and growth – regardless of sector

Finally, the Index underscores the Golin perspective that business transformation and corporate reputation are now inseparable – and this extends to CEO reputation, too. Among the Top 10 CEOs in the Index, ‘transformation’ is a frequent, global and largely positive (40%) discussion topic around large language models, economic growth, unlocking potential and industrial transformation. Accordingly, one might assume that only tech CEOs rise to the top. But this is not the case.

While tech CEOs hold many of the top spots in the Index rankings, those CEOs ranked first in their sectors *all* had compelling transformation stories to tell. The media sector, which has revolutionized the way consumers experience content and entertainment worldwide, consistently outperforms all others, ahead of both the technology and telecom sectors. In fact, sectors with the strongest transformation narratives saw remarkable upward mobility in the rankings. Aerospace, food services and financial services all recorded substantial gains, suggesting successful adaptation to changing market conditions and consumer preferences. Conversely, materials, wholesalers and engineering and construction finished at the bottom of the list, suggesting that more static industries have greater challenges to build CEO impact.

This association may echo another finding of the Index. Since 2023, Golin has compared the financial results of the top scoring Index CEOs with their comparable peers on the Fortune 250 to explore connections to business impacts. Our analysis suggests that those companies led by top ranking Index CEOs seem to enjoy better annual share price growth and annual revenue growth than their Fortune-ranked peers. Specifically, in H2 2024 the top 25 CEOs on the Index enjoyed higher average annual share price growth over their Fortune 25 peers (35% vs. 15% - a 20 bp advantage). These companies also showed better average annual revenue growth than their Fortune 25 peers (1,491% vs. 1,049%). The relationship appears to be mutually reinforcing rather than purely causal in either direction. Strong business performance provides resources and opportunities for better communication, while effective communication helps drive business success through enhanced stakeholder trust, employee engagement and market positioning. What’s particularly telling is that CEOs maintaining high Index rankings consistently outperform peers across market cycles, suggesting communication effectiveness is a key component of sustained business success rather than merely a reflection of it. This favorable trend was seen in our 2023 analysis as well.

**What to do next:** For CEO communication strategies in 2025, success requires being crystal clear about transformation priorities and progress, regardless of industry, with non-tech sectors needing to be especially deliberate in building narratives that address their stakeholders’ greatest concerns. Furthermore, communicators should evaluate their business performance and the potential impact it can have on the perception of their CEO, and vice versa, recognizing these elements as fundamentally interconnected.

# Actions for 2025

## 1: PLAN A WELL-ROUNDED APPROACH

While media presence matters, the strongest CEO reputations are built on multiple pillars. In 2025, CEOs who can orchestrate a robust positioning program reaching multiple stakeholders while navigating an increasingly polarized environment will emerge as the most influential voices in business.

## 4: ANCHOR DEI IN BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

When commenting on DEI, focus on tangible business results—showing how inclusive practices drive growth, develop talent, enhance customer experience and create market opportunities. This reflects a more practical leadership approach that ties diversity and inclusion directly to business value and measurable outcomes.

## 2: TAKE A MEASURED APPROACH TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Approach CEO social media strategy in 2025 with caution and precision as content on these platforms becomes more political and fractured. Changing algorithms and fact-checking policies will likely make these environments more prone to negative commentary for CEOs. That said, LinkedIn remains a valuable space for CEOs to invest in strategic platform development.

## 5: MOBILIZE EMPLOYEES AS ADVOCATES

By fostering authentic workplace experiences and measuring employee advocacy, CEOs can transform their workforce into powerful surrogates. This shift requires moving beyond traditional metrics of leadership visibility to actively cultivate and measure employee advocacy as a core component of executive effectiveness.

## 3: ADVANCE YOUR AI NARRATIVE

To gain and keep credibility, CEOs must move beyond hypotheticals to demonstrate tangible AI results. Equally important, leaders will need to show how they're implementing responsible AI policy and governance frameworks that protect privacy, eliminate bias and ensure transparent decision-making while scaling AI across their organizations.

## 6: STAY FOCUSED ON YOUR TRANSFORMATION + GROWTH NARRATIVE

To remain relevant, CEOs should sharpen their transformation narrative, regardless of which industry they sit within. Business performance can have an impact on CEO perception, and vice versa, both in the near and long term. Evaluate and manage both in concert.

## About Golin Corporate Affairs

In an era of constant transformation, marked by blurring industry boundaries, increased activist demands, shifting workplace dynamics and reduced consumer loyalty, we believe business transformation and corporate reputation are now inseparable. This convergence demands that companies approach every decision through a dual lens of operational excellence and reputational impact, recognizing that these elements are inextricably linked in driving long-term business impact. Success requires maintaining business discipline — balancing responsiveness to emerging trends with smart strategy.

Our team of seasoned advisors have deep experience across key disciplines and industries, delivering a pragmatic, results-driven approach. We partner with clients across every aspect of communications — strategic counsel, executive positioning, earned media, digital storytelling, investor relations, purpose and sustainability, issues and public affairs and transformation communications — to shape reputation and deliver business results that last.

## About the CEO Impact Index

The CEO Impact Index (the Index) was conducted in partnership by a team of experts from Golin’s Global Data & Analytics and Corporate Affairs practices. The CEOs analyzed were selected from the top 250 companies of the 2024 Fortune 500, which ranks U.S.-based companies by total revenue for their respective fiscal years that ended on or before December 31, 2024. Each Fortune 250 CEO was then analyzed and scored based on eight areas of quantifiable executive visibility criteria, including: top tier earned media coverage, trade media engagement, LinkedIn presence, business awards & rankings, participation in top global and industry forums, employee engagement, megatrends and overall CEO sentiment. These eight individual scores were then used to determine an overall score and rank for each CEO on the Index, based on Golin’s proprietary weighting system. A secondary analysis was then undertaken to evaluate the top Index CEOs’ business performances versus comparable sets from the Fortune 250 ranking.

## APPENDIX: THE CEO IMPACT INDEX METHODOLOGY

The CEO Impact Index (the Index) was conducted in partnership by a team of experts from Golin's Global Data & Analytics and Corporate Affairs practices.

The CEOs analyzed were selected from the top 250 companies of the 2024 Fortune 500, which ranks U.S.-based companies by total revenue for their respective fiscal years ended on or before March 31, 2024.

Each Fortune 250 CEO was then analyzed and scored based on eight areas of quantifiable executive visibility criteria, including:

1. **Earned Media Exposure** – The CEO's exposure in business and consumer press in H2 2024. Additional consideration was given to coverage with a positive sentiment, feature coverage where a CEO's voice was prominent, as well as in non-financial news outside of obligatory quarterly earnings coverage. Scores were amplified based on publication readership levels (i.e., the number of monthly readers).
2. **LinkedIn Presence** – The CEO's prominence on LinkedIn, including number of posts, comments and followers in H2 2024.
3. **Awards & Rankings** – Their company's inclusion and ranking on Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies, Fortune's World's Most Admired Companies, Time's Most Influential Companies and Drucker Institute Management Top 250 lists.
4. **Employee Engagement** – Their company's rank on the Fortune Best Companies to Work For, Forbes' Worlds Best Employers and LinkedIn's Top Companies lists, as well as an analysis of the company's presence, score and CEO approval rating on Glassdoor.
5. **Events** – The CEO's presence and visibility at core industry and global events in H2 2024 (e.g., Mobile World Congress for a CEO in the telecommunications industry; World Economic Forum for any CEO).

6. **Trade Media Engagement** – The CEO's visibility in trade media outlets for his/her respective industry in H2 2024. Additional consideration was given to media coverage where the CEO's voice was featured prominently, and scores were amplified based on key message inclusion and reach of the publication.
7. **Megatrends** – The CEO's visibility on megatrends, as identified by AI as the most prominent topics raised across the business landscape in H2 2024. In a similar way that the Consumer Price Index selects a different "basket of goods" as consumer preference changes over time, this index selects the 6 topics that were most prevalent over the period. For this study, it included: Artificial Intelligence; Economic Policy & Market Volatility; Sustainability & Climate; DEI; Leadership, Talent & Organizational Culture; and Geopolitical Uncertainty. To score well, a CEO does not need to discuss every topic but needs to have strong visibility on at least one. Additional consideration was given to media coverage where the CEO's voice was featured prominently.
8. **Sentiment Towards CEO** – The overall sentiment of each CEO's exposure in business, consumer and trade press in H2 2024.

These eight individual scores were then used to determine an overall Index score and rank for each CEO, based on Golin's proprietary weighting system. A secondary analysis was then undertaken to evaluate the top Index CEOs' business performances vs. comparable sets from the Fortune 250 ranking.

**Important Note on the Index Methodology:** Elon Musk represents a significant outlier in the CEO Impact Index analysis. His multiple leadership roles (Tesla, SpaceX, and X Corp), appointment to the Trump administration and unique position as a global cultural figure generate unprecedented media coverage and engagement levels that dramatically skew Index findings. Unlike traditional CEOs who typically avoid controversy, Musk's intentional engagement with contentious issues and the resulting volume of coverage – both positive and negative – create data patterns that are incomparable to other Fortune 500 CEOs. For these reasons, Golin has removed him from the core findings and trends.