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LIFE SCIENCES ICON 2026

ED FRANCIS

Global Managing Partner

REDEFINING TECHNOLOGY FOR LIFE SCIENCES

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Redefining Technology For Life Sciences

Life sciences has always run on a tension between two forces: the urgency to innovate and the discipline required to prove that innovation is safe. Artificial intelligence hasn't removed that tension, it has raised the stakes, putting more pressure than ever on organizations to move quickly without breaking the trust of regulators, clinicians, and patients.

That tension is no longer theoretical. The FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research has received more than 800 drug application submissions with AI components since 2016, a volume that has turned AI from an experimental side project into a standard part of how life sciences organizations bring therapies to market. The organizations still treating AI as a future consideration are already behind where the regulator itself has moved.

Few people have spent as much of their career inside that tension as Ed Francis, Senior Strategy and Business Advisor to the CEO of AiRo Digital Labs and Strategic Advisor at Essence Patient Solutions. Over more than 25 years in global consulting and technology leadership, including senior and partner-level roles at Accenture, IBM, West Monroe Partners, Infosys Consulting, and NTT DATA North America, Francis has helped health plans, providers, and life sciences companies translate emerging technology into operating models that hold up under regulatory and clinical scrutiny.

His perspective extends beyond today's AI headlines. It is centered on building the data foundations, regulatory confidence, and workforce capacity that will define whether life sciences organizations can turn AI's promise into durable, patient-centered impact.

FOR HIS LEADERSHIP AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO ADVANCING AGING SERVICES,
ICONS OF INDUSTRY
RECOGNIZES ED FRANCIS AS A
LIFE SCIENCES ICON 2026.

When you think about the future of life sciences, what excites you the most?

ED FRANCIS

What excites me is that the industry's relationship with AI is maturing. A few years ago, nearly every conversation started with whether AI belonged in a regulated environment at all. That question hasn't fully gone away, but it's narrowed considerably, and the regulator itself has done a lot of the work narrowing it.

That's a more useful starting point than the one we had even two or three years ago, and it's the one I find most energizing to work on right now: not whether to use AI, but how to build it so clinicians and regulators actually trust it.

Q **Your path runs from Partner roles at Accenture and IBM, to Senior Director of West Monroe Partners' Healthcare and Life Sciences practice, to Global Practice Lead for Life Sciences at Infosys Consulting, to Vice President and Global Managing Partner for Health and Life Sciences at NTT DATA. What's the throughline across that path?**

ED FRANCIS

Every one of those roles came down to the same problem: getting three groups who rarely agree, regulators, clinicians, and finance, to sign off on the same operating model at the same time. Technology is the easy part. Getting a life sciences organization to trust a new way of working is the hard part.

That's the throughline. Whether I was inside a global systems integrator or now advising a smaller AI-native firm like AiRo Digital Labs, my job has always been building the trust layer underneath the technology, not just the technology itself.

Q **Artificial intelligence adoption in life sciences is accelerating fast. Where do you see the real opportunity, beyond the headlines?**

ED FRANCIS

McKinsey estimates gen AI could unlock $60 billion to $110 billion a year in economic value across pharma and medical products, and a meaningful share of that sits in the parts of the business nobody writes headlines about: real-world evidence generation, clinical data engineering, and regulatory submissions.

That's where the data is messiest and the trust bar is highest, which is exactly why it's underinvested relative to its actual value. Drug discovery gets the attention. The data foundation underneath everything else is where the real money is sitting.

Q **The FDA has now received AI-related submissions in the hundreds. What does that momentum tell you about where the industry actually stands?**

ED FRANCIS

It tells me AI in life sciences has already cleared the hardest bar there is, regulatory acceptance, and most of the industry hasn't caught up to that fact yet. Eight hundred-plus submissions since 2016 means the FDA has built real muscle memory reviewing AI-supported work.

The organizations still treating AI as a future consideration are behind where the regulator already is. That's a strange position to be in, and it's a competitive opening for the ones paying attention.

Q **Real-world evidence and decentralized clinical trials are reshaping how new therapies reach patients. What's the biggest opportunity you see here?**

ED FRANCIS

They compress the two things that make drug development expensive: time and uncertainty. Decentralized trial models cut down the recruitment and logistics bottlenecks that used to stretch timelines by years, while real-world evidence gives sponsors a continuous picture of how a therapy performs once it's out of a controlled trial setting.

That's part of why I stay close to Essence Patient Solutions as well. Their work connecting providers and patients through claims and health record data is a good example of what real-world evidence actually looks like in practice, closing care gaps at the individual patient level, not just informing a study after the fact.

The organizations that build the infrastructure to capture and act on that evidence responsibly will move faster through every subsequent stage, regulatory, commercial, and post-market, than the ones still running on traditional trial timelines alone.

Q

Workforce is consistently named one of life sciences' biggest constraints. How should leaders think about it differently?

ED FRANCIS

The numbers are more alarming than most leaders realize. The Society for Clinical Research Sites, citing CareerBuilder labor data, found roughly 35 open regulatory affairs roles for every one experienced candidate seeking work, and about 7 open roles for every experienced clinical research coordinator. That's not a hiring gap, that's a structural shortage.

You can't recruit your way out of a ratio like that. The leaders who get ahead of it are building internal career paths and using AI to absorb the administrative load on existing teams, so the scarce, experienced people can focus on the judgment calls only they can make.

Q **Looking ahead, what gives you confidence about the future of life sciences?**

ED FRANCIS

I've watched this industry move through five different consulting seats over 25 years, and this is the first stretch where I've seen the regulatory, data, and workforce conversations converge instead of competing for attention. That convergence is what actually moves an industry, not any single breakthrough.

If organizations keep pairing regulatory confidence with real investment in their people and their data foundations, I think we'll look back on this period as when life sciences finally closed the gap between scientific ambition and operational reality.

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