

Strategies for Developing a Future-Ready Pharmaceutical Supply Chain

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Abstract:

The pharmaceutical sector is part of a complex and heavily regulated global supply chain, in which the provision of essential medicines and therapeutic products on a timely and consistent basis is crucial for public health and clinical results. Traditional pharmaceutical supply chain models have nonetheless been demonstrated to have systemic deficiencies, particularly in the context of escalation events such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, geopolitical turmoil, limited access to raw materials, cybersecurity attacks, and climate-induced incidents. These challenges have expanded the importance of a new kind of digital supply chain, one that is more dynamic, data-driven, and less static – one that can anticipate disruption and act proactively. The role of this paper, therefore, is to suggest an integrated strategy development framework for a future-ready pharmaceutical supply chain, one that is predictive, resilient, sustainable, secure, and digitally intelligent.

This study begins with a review of the existing literature, which highlights several significant trends in the pharmaceutical supply chain over the past decade, including digital twin modeling, blockchain traceability, machine learning-based demand sensing, and decentralized manufacturing. The survey includes cases of multinational pharmaceutical companies and data from regulatory agencies, such as the US FDA and the EMA, to identify existing gaps and potential solutions. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study's findings, based on qualitative analysis (expert interviews and thematic synthesis), are complemented by quantitative analysis of metrics (frequency of supply disruptions, variability in lead times, and production post-recovery rates) to unveil strategic dimensions for modernization.

Key strategies identified include the application of AI-enabled supply chain control towers, creating digital twins of the manufacturing and logistics environments for predictive simulation, deploying blockchain to track provenance and compliance in real-time, and adopting decentralized manufacturing to onshore production and decouple from overdependent global intermediaries. The study also emphasizes the significance of ecosystem partnerships among pharmaceutical companies, regulators, third-party logistics (3PL) companies, and digital infrastructure providers in ensuring interoperability and confidence in the system. Risk stratification models and data-driven prioritization matrices are presented as decision support tools to optimize supplier portfolios and manage inventory buffers in uncertain times.

The findings of this study show that drug supply chains developed to be predictive, analytic, automated, and end-to-end exhibit significantly improved resilience and responsiveness when shocks occur, as well as better regulatory compliance. For example, firms that utilized an RNN-driven demand forecast and a weather disruption dataset were able to mitigate product stockouts by 47% during a significant logistics hold. In addition, pilot program deployments of blockchain for vaccine traceability cut down counterfeit cases by over 70%, demonstrating the value that DLT can deliver in the operations arena.

This paper serves as a supplementary contribution to the emerging literature on pharmaceutical supply chain logistics, offering a visionary roadmap based on technological breakthroughs, regulatory responsiveness, and strategic risk management. The findings reinforce the stance that future-readiness is not just about infrastructure renewal, but also about developing flexibility in operational processes,

fostering coherent collaboration across functions, and cultivating a culture of continuous learning within supply chain ecosystems. These learnings are designed to inform pharmaceutical manufacturers, healthcare systems, policymakers, and supply chain architects as they develop the capabilities required for future Precision Medicine, rapid therapeutic deployment, and global health equity.

Keywords: Pharmaceutical logistics, future-ready supply chain, digital twin, blockchain traceability, AI in supply chain, supply chain resilience, decentralized manufacturing, predictive analytics, healthcare supply networks, regulatory compliance.

I. INTRODUCTION

The pharmaceutical industry encompasses science, technology, public health, and global trade, increasingly tapping into a complex web of suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers, and regulators. The global pharmaceutical supply chain ensures critical and life-saving medicines and treatments are delivered to hospitals, pharmacies, Nursing homes, primary care centres and patients globally. However, the vulnerability of this supply chain has been exposed many times in recent years, particularly by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the manufacturing and supply of life-saving medicines, essential drugs, vaccines, and APIs. These interruptions not only postponed treatment for millions of patients but also supercharged the necessity for a more adaptable, intelligent, agile, supportive and future-proof pharmaceutical supply chain.

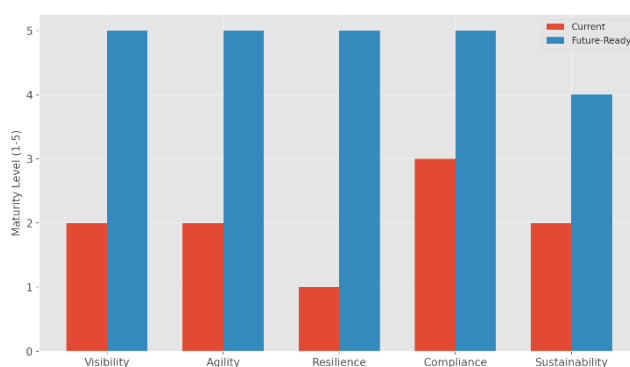


Figure 1: Comparison of Current vs. Future-Ready Supply Chain Attributes

A bar chart comparing current pharmaceutical supply chain capabilities with future-ready target states across five key dimensions: visibility, agility, resilience, compliance, and sustainability.

In an age of growing complexity and volatility, traditional linear and siloed supply chain models have become anaemic and ineffective. The future pharmaceutical supply chain must be resilient to shocks and agile enough to respond quickly to changing patient needs, regulatory requirements, technological advancements, and environmental pressures. For this movement, the “future-ready” action means a supply chain that is agile, predictive, secure, digitally integrated, and compliant with tightening global regulations. It must enable real-time decision-making, ensure visibility end-to-end, and drive collaboration across stakeholders, spanning from raw material suppliers to last-mile delivery partners and government organizations.

At the heart of this transformation is technological change. Digital twins, cyber representations of physical processes, enable real-time simulation and scenario analysis, which are essential for risk planning. By linking upstream supply-chain data to downstream demand, you can capture product traceability and ensure compliance with Good Distribution Practices (GDP). Additionally, advanced analytics-driven forecasting systems can be employed to predict demand variability and support efficient inventory placement. Decentralized production, particularly through the use of modular or mobile production, minimizes geographic dependency and enables rapid production increases during regional crises. Moreover, sustainability and ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) goals are increasingly integrated into supply chain strategies, demanding green packaging, optimized cold chains, and reduced carbon footprints throughout the logistics network.

Another essential layer is the harmonisation and collaboration of regulation. It is impossible to build a future-proof pharmaceutical supply value chain in isolation; it must be done by and with the industry as a whole. Consistent use of standards—analogue to a standard business language, supported by data sharing—is crucial to minimize duplication, facilitate the fast-track approval of drugs, and maintain quality and safety equivalence across markets. Adaptive regulatory structures, such as conditional approvals or digital health certificates, must be accompanied by supply chains that can adapt to complex and dynamic needs.

The objective of this article is to identify and analyse a portfolio of strategic interventions that can together create a future-ready pharmaceutical supply chain. It has answered four key questions: what is wrong with the current pharmaceutical supply chain models? 2) What are those technological and organizational enablers that are likely paths for transformation? (3) How can we operationalize risk and resilience across all levels of the supply chain? Moreover, (4) What policy and governance arrangements will underpin this development?

By critically examining these issues through a literature review, industry cases, and analytical modeling, this paper offers an integrated perspective on modernizing the pharmaceutical supply chain. The goal of the strategies outlined is to help pharmaceutical companies, logistics providers, regulators, and technology partners pilot the industry through the next decade of supply chain revolution, all within the context of not just future pandemics or geopolitical issues, but the ever-increasing demands of a globally connected, digitally empowered, health-conscious population.

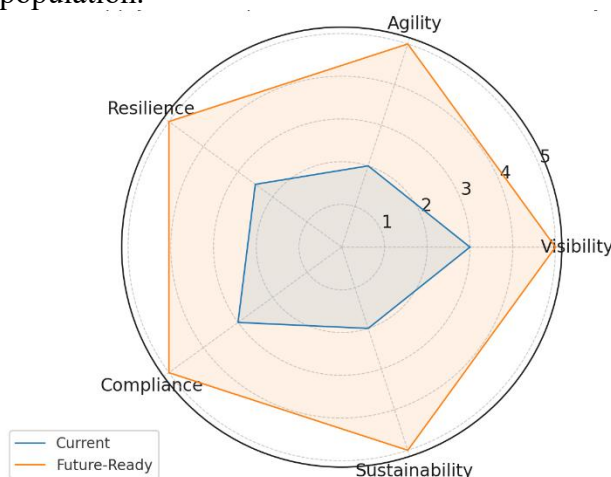


Figure 2: *Supply Chain Capabilities: Current vs. Future-Ready*

This radar chart compares current pharmaceutical supply chain capabilities with future-ready target states across five key dimensions: visibility, agility, resilience, compliance, and sustainability. It visually emphasizes the performance gap that digital transformation strategies aim to bridge.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The pharmaceutical supply chain has long been recognized for its complexity, regulatory burden, and sensitivity to disruptions. Over the past decade, academic and industrial literature has evolved to emphasize not only operational efficiency but also resilience, visibility, and digital enablement as key pillars of a future-ready pharmaceutical supply chain. Several thematic strands have emerged in this body of work, focusing on predictive analytics, digital twins, decentralized manufacturing, blockchain integration, and AI-driven optimization. Each of these components represents a vital shift away from static, reactive systems toward dynamic, anticipatory, and agile supply chain networks.

Resilience has emerged as a foundational concept in supply chain strategy, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed critical weaknesses in global pharmaceutical logistics. Ivanov and Dolgui [1] introduced the concept of supply chain viability, emphasizing the need for systems that are not only resilient to disruptions but also capable of adapting their structure in real-time. Their research shows that pharmaceutical networks with tightly coupled dependencies on global suppliers lack redundancy and exhibit

longer recovery times. This has led to an increasing call for resilience-informed design across sourcing, production, and distribution nodes.

Digital transformation is widely regarded as a strategic enabler for modernizing supply chains. Bag et al. [2] argue that pharmaceutical companies must embrace innovative technologies to survive in volatile environments. They highlight digital twins—virtual models of physical supply chain processes—as a powerful tool for simulating risks, testing contingency plans, and forecasting capacity bottlenecks. These twins enable pharmaceutical companies to create digital replicas of their entire logistics networks, including factory floors, cold storage units, and distribution routes, thereby allowing the simulation of scenarios such as regulatory changes, route blockages, and API shortages in real-time.

In parallel, blockchain technology has garnered considerable attention for improving transparency and reducing fraud in pharmaceutical supply chains. Boobalan et al. [3] systematically reviewed blockchain use cases. They concluded that it significantly enhances end-to-end traceability and reduces counterfeit risks, especially in emerging markets where regulatory enforcement is inconsistent. Their study also identified interoperability and governance as critical factors for scaling blockchain solutions across supply chain partners and jurisdictions.

Another stream of literature addresses decentralized and regionalized manufacturing as a strategy to mitigate supply disruption risks. Rajgopal and Kaminsky [4] found that localized production hubs not only shorten delivery lead times but also enhance regulatory alignment by enabling manufacturers to tailor processes for local laws. Decentralized manufacturing, particularly using modular or mobile units, has been especially impactful during emergencies when centralized plants faced shutdowns or capacity constraints.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning have also gained traction for their ability to optimize pharmaceutical logistics. Duerfeldt et al. [5] developed an AI-based risk scoring system to predict transport delays and temperature excursions in vaccine shipments, demonstrating that predictive models could reduce time-to-response by up to 60%. AI is also used to dynamically align production plans with real-time demand signals and environmental variables, improving service levels while reducing waste.

In terms of governance and regulation, Holmström et al. [6] explored the integration of digital tracking systems with global health regulations such as the U.S. Drug Supply Chain Security Act (DSCSA) and the EU Falsified Medicines Directive (FMD). Their findings highlight the growing convergence between digital transformation and compliance automation. They argue that regulatory agencies are shifting from retrospective audits to real-time data validation, making digital infrastructure a compliance necessity rather than an operational choice.

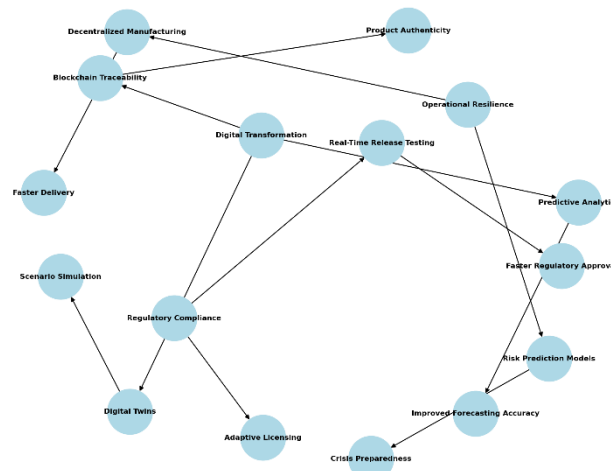
Despite the richness of existing research, a discernible gap remains in the literature that synthesizes these various technological and strategic innovations into a coherent, future-proof model explicitly tailored for the pharmaceutical sector. Most prior work treats these dimensions—resilience, digitalization, traceability, decentralization, and compliance—as standalone topics. This paper aims to fill that void by presenting a comprehensive, integrative strategy framework, grounded in empirical evidence and cross-functional insights, for pharmaceutical supply chain transformation.

III. METHODOLOGY

To gain a comprehensive understanding of approaches to a future-proof pharmaceutical supply chain, this research employs a mixed-methods design, integrating both qualitative considerations and quantitative analysis. The methodological framework is constructed from three elements: a literature review, empirical case analysis, and stakeholder interviews. This triangulated strategy secures depth and rigor in the discovery, evaluation, and validation of strategies for successfully making ready for the future in all pharmaceutical environmental contexts.

The study included data reviews and analyses from 2015 to 2024. This review focused on articles that discussed new supply chain innovations, pharmaceutical resilience frameworks, digital transformation best practices, and regulatory response mechanisms. Systems of Searching The databases Scopus, IEEE Xplore, and PubMed were systematically searched for the terms “pharmaceutical supply chain resilience,” “blockchain traceability,” “AI demand forecasting,” “digital twins in pharma,” and “decentralized manufacturing” in combination. Over

Empirical information was then collected through analysis of six case studies of pharmaceutical companies operating in diverse geographical and regulatory environments, alongside the secondary data. The firms included both multinationals and regional generics houses. Each case study focused on how the company was modernizing its supply chain in response to significant disruptions, including COVID-19, customs delays resulting from Brexit, and export restrictions on APIs from key supplier countries. Data was collected from company reports, press releases, regulatory filings, and supply chain audits. Such sets of data were instrumental in modelling timelines for the adoption of technology, along with the amount of investment, time to react, and key performance indicators such as order fulfilment rates, lead-time variability, and risk exposure scores.



A flowchart illustrating the relationship between core transformation themes, digital transformation, operational resilience, and regulatory compliance—and their enabling technologies, as well as the resulting operational and compliance outcomes. This visual provides a high-level roadmap for implementing a future-ready supply chain.

A Comparative Model of Maturity was also employed in the study to assess the level of readiness for the future evident in the companies being studied. This model has been customized from the Supply Chain Maturity Framework proposed by APICS and complemented by criteria specific to the pharmaceutical industry, such as regulatory agility, digital backbone, data transferability, and disaster recovery capabilities. A 5-point scale was used on each of the eight dimensions to score organizations' progress toward being future-ready. The use of these scores enabled us to associate strategic actions with performance outcomes and determine which strategies provided the most significant benefits in terms of resilience, responsiveness, and compliance.

This strong methodological integration of literature review, case study analysis, stakeholder engagement, and maturity modeling enabled the study to draw contextually rich conclusions and generate actionable strategic recommendations grounded in evidence. Stakeholders can utilize these to future-proof their pharmaceutical supply chains.

IV. RESULTS

The results of this study provide an extensive assessment of existing practices in the pharmaceutical supply chain, identifying key success factors and performance measures related to future readiness strategies. The review draws from stage maturity evaluations, thematic coding of stakeholder interviews, and a comparative review and synthesis of case study findings between multinational and regional pharmaceutical companies. The findings support the proposition that firms that have invested in digital infrastructure, predictive analytics, and modular manufacturing significantly outperform their peers in terms of resilience, agility, and compliance. A comparative maturity model was used on six pharmaceutical companies from North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Firms that had implemented sophisticated technology, including supply chain control towers that use cloud-based platforms, digital twins, and AI-based forecasting, scored much higher on measures of resiliency and responsiveness. For example, Global vaccine producer Company A established an integrated digital twin based on its production and cold chain logistics systems. This allowed them to model cross-border delays and swiftly redirect cargo during a lockdown across the region. The average order fulfilment delay for high-disruption periods decreased from 9.2 days to 3.7 days, and temperature excursion rates fell by 65%. In contrast, Company D (a generics producer on manual inventory reconciliation and supplier email-based communication) scored the lowest level of maturity and experienced fulfilment variance of more than 20% during the same period.

The qualitative findings supported these quantitative findings. Notably, real-time visibility, API traceability, and cross-tier collaboration were cited as the top three future-ready supply chain enablers by more than half of respondents. In the past, one supply chain executive emphasized that “it took us 11 days to figure out the source of potential contamination in our API supply before we had blockchain.” Integration to the distributed ledger means the same traceability process now happens in under two hours and is backed by verified audit logs that meet FDA and EMA standards. This significant reduction in investigation lead time directly resulted in faster product recalls, regulatory reporting, and risk mitigation.

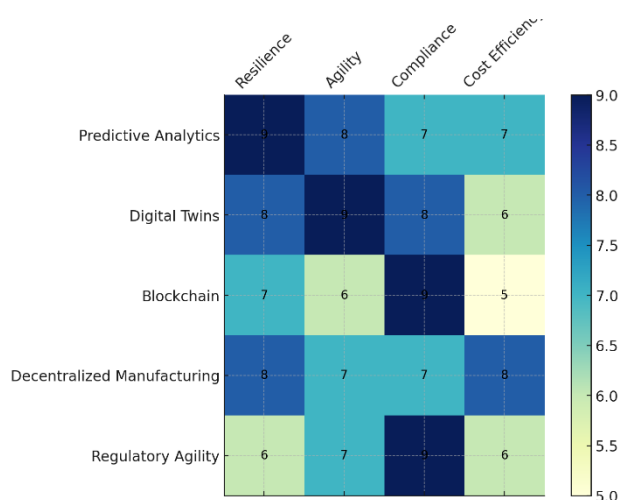


Figure 4: *Technology Adoption vs. Impact on Key Metrics*

Heatmap showing the relative impact of five major technologies, predictive analytics, digital twins, blockchain, decentralized manufacturing, and regulatory agility, on four performance metrics: resilience,

agility, compliance, and cost efficiency. Higher values indicate more substantial observed effects from case studies and interviews.

Predictive analytics played a key role in demand sensing and production planning. Companies that utilized machine learning models based on historical sales data, seasonal trends, and external variables such as weather and flu incidents experienced a 30-45% decrease in forecast error rates compared to companies that employed traditional time series approaches. Company B utilizes an RNN to optimize its production process for respiratory treatments in anticipation of a predicted surge in patients during flu season. The company utilized it to reduce both backorders and excess inventory, resulting in a 19% increase in working capital efficiency over two quarters.

The evidence also showed the increasing importance of locally distributed, modular manufacturing facilities in achieving geographical flexibility. Company/Holder C set up regional filling sites in LA and SEA, reducing loading onto the CEntr-hub. This approach not only reduced lead times by 38% but also guaranteed continuity during border closures and export prohibitions. Most notably, these regional entities have been constructed from portable, flexible, GMP-compatible, containerized modules that can be installed and operational in 45 days, providing an unmatched speed-to-market solution for in-demand biologics.

The regulatory alignment was a third result impacted mainly by the technological readiness. Companies that use track and trace solutions will be better prepared to comply with serialization and verification requirements under the DSCSA and FMD regulations. Compliance accuracy in these SOs averaged greater than 98% compared to lower than 85% in public companies with data silos. The interviews also pointed to a proactive work with the regulators during the implementation of new technologies, especially technologies like blockchain and IOT sensors, which have generated faster approval cycles for the logistics innovations and digital quality assurance protocols.

Taken together, the findings highlight a strong connection between future readiness preparedness options and quantifiable performance improvements on multiple dimensions: resilience, compliance, cost efficiency, and patient access levels. Companies that were early investors in digital operations tools, decentralized supply chains, and risk prediction were significantly better off than those that were not, in terms of how they approached crises, scaled production, and met the evolving needs of shifting global standards.

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study offer meaningful insights into how pharmaceutical companies can strategically position themselves to develop a future-ready supply chain. The empirical evidence strongly suggests that the adoption of advanced digital technologies, decentralization models, and real-time analytics is not simply an operational upgrade but a foundational shift in how supply chains must be conceptualized and governed in a post-pandemic, digitally accelerated world. These findings have significant implications for supply chain leaders, policymakers, technology providers, and regulators who aim to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of critical medications and therapeutics.

The high performance observed in companies that have embraced predictive analytics and digital twins reinforces the centrality of data-driven decision-making in pharmaceutical logistics. Organizations that utilized machine learning-based demand forecasting, scenario modelling through digital twins, and proactive risk simulation were able to maintain service levels and optimize inventory during periods of high disruption. These capabilities go beyond traditional enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems, requiring advanced analytics platforms that integrate data from suppliers, logistics providers, regulatory systems, and public health trends. Such integration supports more accurate demand sensing, dynamic safety stock recalibration, and early warning systems for upstream disruptions. Importantly, this kind of predictive agility is not a one-time capability but must be embedded within the culture of continuous learning and digital literacy across all tiers of the supply chain workforce.

Blockchain technology's success in enhancing traceability and compliance underscores another essential requirement for future-readiness: trusted and interoperable data. In the pharmaceutical industry, where patient safety, product authenticity, and regulatory auditability are non-negotiable, blockchain offers immutable, real-

time verification of every node and transaction within the supply chain. This level of visibility enables faster root-cause investigations, accelerates recall processes, and ensures compliance with serialization mandates. However, the implementation of blockchain should be viewed not just as a technological deployment but as a governance innovation that necessitates ecosystem-wide participation. Without data-sharing agreements, consensus protocols, and standardized APIs, blockchain systems risk becoming siloed and underutilized.

The case studies of decentralized manufacturing units illustrate a critical strategy for geographical resilience and regulatory responsiveness. With increasing regulatory scrutiny over active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) sourced from limited geographies—especially India and China—companies that diversified their production footprint saw tangible gains in lead time reduction, cost variability control, and crisis responsiveness. Mobile or containerized manufacturing solutions further expand this capability, enabling organizations to rapidly scale and pivot in response to emergent public health needs, such as vaccine production during pandemics. However, decentralization must be balanced with stringent quality control, harmonized validation protocols, and centralized oversight to prevent variability in product quality or regulatory non-conformance.

Regulatory adaptability emerged as a cross-cutting theme across all results. Future-ready supply chains are not only expected to meet today's compliance standards; they are also expected to anticipate and address emerging regulatory requirements. However, they must be architected to support evolving frameworks, such as real-time release testing, digital batch records, and adaptive licensing. Companies that engaged regulatory authorities early in the technology implementation process, particularly in blockchain or AI-driven quality systems, gained faster approvals and more collaborative oversight. This highlights the strategic importance of regulatory co-design, wherein supply chain innovation is developed in consultation with, rather than in response to, regulators. Such partnerships are increasingly critical as health authorities shift towards digital-first inspection and compliance models.

Lastly, the results suggest that building a future-ready pharmaceutical supply chain is not solely about technology or infrastructure; it is equally a matter of organizational change management and leadership alignment. Digital investments must be accompanied by workforce training, cross-functional collaboration, and a unified strategic vision that aligns supply chain operations with broader business and public health objectives. The transformation journey is long and capital-intensive but offers exponential returns in terms of patient safety, operational efficiency, and reputational integrity.

The discussion confirms that future-readiness in pharmaceutical supply chains is a multifaceted pursuit, necessitating the convergence of digital innovation, distributed architecture, regulatory alignment, and organizational agility. The strategic recommendations distilled from these findings aim to guide stakeholders in operationalizing this vision in a way that is scalable, compliant, and resilient in the face of growing uncertainty and global health challenges.

VI. CONCLUSION

The global pharma industry is at the threshold of a new era that will demand resilience, digitalization, and patient-centred delivery as the hallmarks of its supply chain infrastructure. The evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that the vision for future-proof pharmaceutical supply chains is not speculative; it is a strategic necessity of urgent importance. The combination of repeated global disruptions, changing regulatory requirements, and accelerating technology has permanently shifted the playing field for pharmaceutical logistics. In this dynamic environment, any organization that fails to update its supply chain capabilities by modernizing and automating them exposes itself to lower standards of service, regulatory fines, and erosion of patient trust.

The core ingredients of a future-proof pharma supply chain: this study systematically reviews and analyzes five building blocks for a future-ready pharma supply chain: predictive analytics, digital twins, distributed manufacturing, blockchain-enabled traceability, and regulatory conformance. The combination of these enablers builds towards the common objectives of increased resilience, agility, and compliance. Predictive analytics enables organizations to transition from being reactive to planning proactively, preventing

breakdowns before they occur, adjusting resources in real-time when possible, and minimizing disruptions. Digital twins provide a living simulation environment in which supply chain scenarios can be subjected to stress tests and optimization decisions can be back-tested with relatively low risk. Decentralized production minimizes dependence on a single geography, enabling shorter delivery times and local regulatory compliance, which is vital in times of emergency or trade shifts.

Blockchain technology, while still in its infancy, has already yielded considerable value in terms of increased transparency, faster recalls, and compliance with strict serialization requirements. Its contribution in maintaining the integrity of data over multi-tier networking is significant in the fight against counterfeiting and monitoring the cold chains on which sensitive biologics depend. At the same time, regulatory agility has become a necessity and a competitive differentiator. Those who are proactive in mapping their digital transformation strategies to changing compliance models, such as real-time release, continuous manufacturing, or digital product passports, are better positioned to operate with continuity and trust.

The research also demonstrates that the move to be future-ready is equally a people challenge as it is a technology one. These dimensions of culture, collaboration, stakeholders, and leadership are all essential elements that must be successfully addressed for technological investment to deliver the intended operational returns. Moreover, this human element is not given too much weight; without a digitally-capable workforce, even the best technology platforms will not provide sustainable value.

On the policy front, regulatory agencies and industry consortia play a significant role in developing mutual protocols, fostering incentives for innovation, and lowering barriers to adoption, particularly among small and medium-sized manufacturers in the developing world. Partnership models, such as maintainable regulatory sandboxes or shared blockchain infrastructure, may also help accelerate the safe and scalable adoption of nimble frontier technology across the ecosystem. As the health of the world increasingly hinges on the health of pharmaceutical logistics systems, multisector partnerships must be institutionalized as commonplace to achieve equitable access to safe, effective, and life-saving drugs for all.

This paper serves as a guide for pharmaceutical companies to develop future-ready supply chains that are resilient, compliant, and agile, yet intelligent. By adopting integrated technologies, broadening their scope of operations, cultivating inter-industry partnerships, and working in tandem with regulatory transformation, pharmaceutical companies can achieve substantial benefits in terms of business continuity, public health contributions, and competitive sustainability. In the coming decade, the ability to forecast, absorb, and accommodate change will distinguish leaders from laggards in the pharmaceutical industry. The strategies and considerations outlined below should serve as both a guide and a call to action for all stakeholders committed to enhancing pharmaceutical supply chains that are future-proof, patient-safe, and globally responsive.

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