

Haven was supposed to reimagine health care. An exodus of talent has gutted it

[Casey Ross](#)



Alex Hogan/STAT

Haven, the audacious health venture founded by three of America's most storied companies, was once a magnet for top-flight talent. But a string of high-profile departures has left the company's C-suite all but empty.

As a result, the company that set out to reimagine health care more than two years ago has made virtually no progress in reaching that goal and, by all accounts, may never.

The departure on Tuesday of Haven's chief technology officer, Serkan Kutan, follows a parade of executives and managers who have abandoned

the company over the past year, including the heads of product management, recruiting, provider analytics, and product design.

Most devastating was the loss of the [prominent CEO Atul Gawande](#) in May. Gawande, a Harvard professor and writer, still holds the title of “chairman,” but is not actively involved in day-to-day operations. There have been no updates on a search for a new CEO, which Haven said was underway when Gawande stepped down.

The departures mark a dramatic upheaval for Haven, which was launched in 2018 to tremendous fanfare. The announcement of the company’s formation spurred health care stocks to plunge in 2018, as investors and commentators saw potential for the venture to uproot traditional health care businesses and draw customers to a new model of delivering medical services.

As Haven has struggled to demonstrate progress in improving care or lowering costs, its founders — the heads of Amazon, Berkshire Hathaway, and JPMorgan Chase & Co. — have not articulated a plan for reviving the company.

“If I were Amazon, Berkshire Hathaway, and JPMorgan, I would figure out how to unravel this and maybe create an alliance but not a company,” said Howard Forman, a physician and professor of health care management at Yale University. “They’re certainly not able to manage this.” He suggested that Haven’s legacy — maybe even in “a book written” at some point — would be a cautionary tale of what not to do in managing a joint venture in health care.

Kutan, who left for the CTO role at the telehealth company Amwell, called the Haven position his [“dream job”](#) when he joined in January 2019. He was in charge of creating the health data engine at the core of the company’s

efforts to provide more targeted health services. Kutan said in a news release Tuesday that “it’s an honor to join Amwell” at “such a critical point in our industry.”

Now, the highest-ranking official remaining at Haven is Mitch Betses, a longtime executive with CVS Health who became Haven’s chief operating officer in March.

A spokeswoman for Haven declined to comment. Haven’s current website lists 15 postings for roles that do not appear to be leadership roles. They include IT, human resources, and software engineering.

Haven has never come close to meeting its own high expectations. At an event in Seattle last year, Jamie Dimon, chairman of JPMorgan Chase, explained how he and Jeff Bezos and Warren Buffett dreamed up the venture: “We were sitting around in D.C., bemoaning the health care system. We were talking problems — 18.5% of the GDP ... the lack of transparency with drugs, blood tests, MRIs; the lack of electronic records; the lack of telemedicine; the corruption; the obesity that’s taken over this country.”

“We had to try something,” Dimon said. “What we were doing wasn’t working.”

But Haven’s launch was followed by a long period of silence. It took nine months to even [come up with the name](#), and Gawande, a surgeon and writer whose hiring as CEO raised expectations even further, never publicly laid out a business strategy or a new model for improving health care for the 1.2 million employees of the three companies.

Much of the work internally was focused on building a tech-driven primary care model in which providers would know the medical histories of their

patients and deliver more targeted, cost-effective care. But that effort, dubbed Project Starfield, appears to have been shelved.

Meanwhile, [Amazon has pursued its own initiatives](#) to improve primary care, starting a virtual health clinic for Seattle employees. Amazon has also launched a partnership with Crossover Health, a venture-backed startup, to build bricks and mortar clinics for fulfillment center employees.

Business experts said the duplication points to poor coordination among the three founders and the lack of a clear mandate for Gawande, who was left to pursue change through the human resources bureaucracies of three companies in disparate industries.

"It shows a lack of corporate will to make this work," said JB Silvers, a professor of health care finance at Case Western Reserve University. "HR departments are difficult to deal with and change. They have their own way of doing things."

Silvers, who was initially optimistic about the venture, said it never seemed to build any momentum. Aside from a small insurance pilot for JPMorgan employees, most of the news surrounding the company was negative — a [trade secrets lawsuit](#) filed by Optum in early 2019 after Haven hired one of its employees. A few months later, Haven lost its chief operating officer, [Jack Stoddard](#).

Gawande's departure a year later seemed to be a back-breaker.

"You lose your leader and you've tried some ideas but have nothing in place — they didn't get out of the starting blocks really," said Silvers. "I thought for sure they would take on the [pharmacy benefit managers] first. If they got together and pushed on that, then they could do something. But they didn't."

That unusually high turnover only continued after Gawande's departure. In the past six months, 14% of Haven workers with public profiles on LinkedIn reported leaving the company. Serkan, who previously worked for Amazon, Microsoft, and Goldman Sachs, was the highest-ranking leader to leave.

He was working on building a data platform to generate insights to improve the care of employees and was in charge of teams responsible for product development, design, engineering, data, information security and IT functions, according to a press release announcing his move to Amwell.

In its earliest days, Haven attracted top-tier talent, including software engineers, data scientists, and insurance executives who were lured by the promise of a disruptive company backed by well-funded companies. Forman, the Yale professor, remembers getting frenzied requests for a connection to the company.

"For a brief period of time, anyone I knew wanted to work there," he said. "They had the best talent to draw from."

But Forman said the company's structure as a nonprofit-making entity made it difficult to provide incentives to offer bonuses and competitive compensation to keep those employees. It also left it at odds with the missions of three companies focused on making money for shareholders.

"It's problematic," he said. "The success of this so-called not-for-profit could potentially benefit any one of the three [founders] in different ways depending on its orientation."

Instead of charting a new path for American health care, Forman said, Haven is more likely to serve as a case study of what not to do in a joint venture.

“There are very few examples of three very large companies being willing to share in a bold enterprise,” he said. “I think there will be a book written about this when this whole thing is done.”