

Building human-centered experiences in today's digital-first healthcare world



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The global COVID-19 pandemic challenged healthcare and life sciences organizations in ways that few could have imagined at its outset. Health systems and hospitals confronted staffing shortages and critical-care capacity limits at the same time they saw budget shortfalls due to the cancellation of revenue-generating elective procedures. Front-line healthcare workers experienced unprecedented levels of exhaustion and stress. Supply chain disruptions impacted pharmaceutical companies, medical device manufacturers and other life sciences companies just as demand for vaccines, diagnostic tests and ventilators was soaring.

But these challenges also came with an unexpected silver lining. The pandemic set numerous large-scale shifts in motion, including significant changes in healthcare spending and utilization. These shifts in the economic models underpinning the healthcare industry enabled the adoption of more new technologies at a faster pace. This, in turn, has opened doors for technology leaders, giving them a more strategic role as organizations prepare to invest in digital-first initiatives.



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“We’ve been talking about digital transformation in healthcare for as long as I can remember,” said Susan Lucas Collins, global head of healthcare at Twilio. “We’ve called it different things — consumer-directed healthcare, consumer-driven healthcare, patient-centric care — and we had somewhat incremental success, but we never realized the idea’s full promise until the pandemic hit. Once we had to cope with COVID, we figured out how to do the kind of digital care delivery that people had only ever talked about in an aspirational way before.”

According to a recent [Twilio survey](#), the COVID-19 pandemic spurred organizations in highly regulated industries (including healthcare) to explore new strategies to serve consumers. Such organizations saw a 46% increase in digital customer engagement during the pandemic. And 87% of their leaders report that digital transformation will be very or critically important for success in the future.

Today, people expect healthcare providers and payers — as well as pharmacies — to provide them with the same caliber of digital experiences as banks, retailers and other consumer-focused brands do. These experiences are highly personalized, consistent across multiple digital channels, designed to enable ready access to online resources, and convenient because of a self-service approach.

Those healthcare organizations best able to provide these seamless and convenient digital experiences will win trust and build lasting relationships with people in local communities. Over time, this will improve access to care for all populations and foster improved health and wellness outcomes.

In a word, digital transformation is no longer optional for today’s healthcare industry.



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According a recent Twilio survey

Meeting today's patients where they are:

Consumer-centric healthcare



Before 2020, patients may have said they wanted greater access to telehealth or digitally enabled communications with care providers, but they've now realized that they needed it. Today's patients expect both convenience and control over their healthcare experiences: In a recent [Experian survey](#), 78% of respondents said they would like to schedule appointments online, 73% indicated they'd like to have access to provider communications and their own health information via a patient portal, and 58% said healthcare needed to catch up with other consumer service providers (including retailers and the entertainment industry).

Consumers are increasingly seeking out healthcare providers who offer digital services, and [research](#) has shown that the rate at which they're doing so has more than doubled since 2019.

Offering digital health services can not only make patients more likely to choose your practice or pharmacy over other options, but

can also make it easier for you to reach patient populations who would otherwise struggle to access physical office locations. This promises to extend access to care to previously underserved communities. It will also save time, make care delivery more efficient and reduce costs. Previously, undertaking truly proactive population health management was difficult. Today, it can be implemented at scale to build a sustainable model for longitudinal care.

"The notion of meeting patients where they are has long been talked about in healthcare," Collins said. "Today, we have the capability to meet them where they want, when they want, and how they want. The pandemic has really reshaped consumer expectations about the digital experiences they get from healthcare organizations. They're not willing to give the industry a pass anymore. Instead, they want the same level of convenience and personalization that they get from all the other service providers they interact with as they go about their daily lives."

Hybrid models are the future of healthcare delivery

Fueled by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and insurers' expansion of coverage to include telehealth and remotely delivered medical services, virtual care delivery soared during the COVID-19 pandemic. Telehealth usage in the U.S. increased from 0.3% of provider visits in 2019 to 23.6% in 2020. Although this trend is expected to partially reverse itself as provider offices and other clinical facilities reopen and return to normal operations, many patients have come to expect the ease and convenience that telehealth offers.

Of course, not all health conditions can be evaluated and treated remotely, but not all require in-office visits, either. Hybrid care-delivery models offer a best of both worlds approach that's likely to become the industry standard in the months and years to come. In hybrid care, minor conditions — or things like behavioral health — can be managed remotely, while patients can visit clinical locations for biopsies, lab work, surgeries or other hands-on evaluations and procedures. Online portals can also simplify appointment scheduling and patient registration and check-in. And they can be used to deliver test results and provide patients with access to information about improving their health and wellness.

Done well, hybrid care can enable patients to feel more connected to providers outside of clinical settings and regular business hours. In this way, it can enhance patients' feelings of trust while enabling better and more equitable access to care.

"We believe that we should communicate with patients and health plan members in the way they prefer," said Abner Mason, CEO of patient engagement firm ConsejoSano, speaking on the Managed Care Cast podcast. "If you ask them today, 9 out of 10 Americans will say they prefer asynchronous text messaging. It's easy for them to read text messages now and reply later, when they have time. They prefer this to email, snail mail, and phone calls. Historically, federal law constrained health plans from being able to communicate with patients in this way," he added, noting that the enforcement of sanctions was temporarily suspended during COVID.

Healthcare organizations must start thinking about hybrid care-delivery models for the long term: Patients want this flexibility as well as for their individual needs and preferences to be respected.



Digitally transforming healthcare will boost health equity while improving patient experience, care quality, and outcomes



Healthcare was never at its most effective when it was one-size-fits-all, but in today's data-driven world, it's especially important to personalize care delivery, communications, and the channels over which provider interactions take place. This type of personalization can greatly improve patient engagement as well as health outcomes. When patients and providers choose the channels over which they interact, both groups can save time, have better experiences and enjoy stronger relationships.

If providers can target their messages by delivering them over the channel where they're most likely to receive attention and a response, they can have a far greater effect on patients' lives and well-being. Something as simple as an SMS message can make a critical difference to an individual's health.

In today's world, where healthcare extends far beyond the walls of the doctor's office or clinical care setting, it's especially important to offer patient-centered choices: Not all populations have internet access, not all are comfortable speaking (or messaging in) English, and not all can easily travel to a provider's office. Providing support to historically underserved populations, perhaps by helping them access a patient portal, take advantage of readily available medical interpreters or use telehealth services without needing to download software, can remove barriers to equitable care access.

Reducing vaccine hesitancy by cultivating public trust in healthcare

COVID-19 vaccine uptake is directly related to infection, hospitalization and death rates. This makes vaccine hesitancy one of the most significant public health issues we currently face. While 69% of adults had received at least one shot by the end of July 2021, [surveys](#) indicate that between 14% and 26% of Americans say they have not been vaccinated and will not be in the future.

Building trust—particularly with members of communities that have suffered from bias and health disparities in the past—is the key to overcoming this hesitancy. Healthcare providers who listen, provide emotional support, acknowledge uncertainties and share their own experiences are better able to engage patients and ultimately overcome their hesitancy.

“If we want to increase vaccination rates in underserved communities, we have to treat people like who they are matters,” said Mason. “The way that healthcare worked in the past, it was one-size-fits-all. That approach is not going to work in 2021.”

Education and engagement don’t happen immediately, Mason explained. “To reach people who are hesitant and uncertain, the conversations need to be two-way. It takes time to build a relationship. You can’t start the conversation by talking about the vaccine. Humans don’t like it when you start a conversation with something that matters to you — you need to start with what matters to them.”



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Removing roadblocks: How an integrated platform approach enables digital transformation in healthcare and life sciences organizations

Technology leaders in healthcare and the life sciences have long understood the benefits of digital transformation. They knew that offering telehealth visits and supporting multi-channel communications with healthcare consumers, among providers and with other industry stakeholders could increase efficiencies for their organizations. And they were aware that digital technologies held the key to building empathy-centered experiences at scale.

All too often, though, internal silos, difficulties with change management or reimbursement issues got in the way. Today, it's possible to surmount many of these obstacles by choosing a comprehensive platform-based solution - one that can evolve with your organization to help you overcome tomorrow's challenges - even those you haven't yet imagined.



In particular, a platform approach can help you move past:



Data and solution silos.

Since electronic health record (EHR) systems came into widespread use, they've become the primary information repositories for healthcare payer and provider organizations as well as pharmacies around the world. A solution that can be configured to work with your EHR system will enable you to seamlessly integrate omnichannel care and appointment management capabilities with your existing health record system to automate and streamline workflows and information-sharing.



Inconsistent communications from various providers and departments within your organization.

Because a centralized, platform-based approach enables you to create a single source of truth for your entire healthcare organization, it can help you eliminate redundant or contradictory communications from different parts of the organization. At best, such inconsistencies can breed frustration; at worst, they can cause large numbers of healthcare consumers to lose trust in your facility or even the entire industry.



Not communicating often enough.

Effective communication is a primary vehicle for building trust between providers or pharmacists and healthcare consumers. By communicating with people as often as they'd like, using their preferred channels, providers can deliver empathy-centered experiences that bolster confidence in their competence, reliability and caring.



Difficulties with change management.

When it's easy to integrate a new solution into your existing operational and clinical workflows, you won't need to jump through as many hoops to get your employees - whether they're physicians, nurses, pharmacists or support staff - to embrace it. Ease of use is key, as are highly automated, integration-ready workflows.

Conclusion

Digital transformation in healthcare has long challenged organizations facing resource and compliance constraints. In the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it's now possible to envision a digitally enabled future, but figuring out which steps to take first toward that future isn't always simple. It is entirely possible to make a transformative shift in a piecemeal, step-by-step fashion, but to do this successfully, it's important to start with the projects that will have the biggest effect on the quality of patient experience.

In particular, it's essential to enable patients and providers to communicate over the channels where they're most comfortable. This means letting people choose video, text messaging, email, online portals and/or voice communications, depending on their individual preferences. Choice is key when it comes to reaching historically underserved populations, building trust, and supporting relationship-based care.

Selecting a well-vetted platform from an experienced vendor can minimize the security and compliance issues you'll face, and it will also make it easier to integrate the solution with your clinical workflows and current electronic health record system.

The benefits of digitally transforming include improving patient satisfaction and outcomes, fostering deeper engagement and better relationships between patients and providers, and reducing costs. And the time is now. Healthcare organizations can no longer afford to wait to ready themselves to meet the needs of tomorrow's patients.



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