Swinging the Digital Front Door Open to Drive Patient Satisfaction

A human-centered-design approach can help healthcare organizations make the most of access technologies

Approximately 70% of patients are willing to switch to another healthcare provider if they can get more convenient access and improved care coordination.[1] The subtext for healthcare organizations: "They need to step up their game," said Rodina Bizri-Baryak, Director of Patient Access and Technology, Tegria, at the education session, "Is Access a Strength? Get Results from Your Front Door," at HIMSS22 in Orlando, Florida.

Unfortunately, healthcare organizations (HCOs) are struggling to deliver the experiences that patients want.

"We, as an industry, really need to create a frictionless front door," she pointed out. To do so successfully, HCOs need to not only invest in technology, but also leverage a human-centered design approach that ensures optimal utilization of these tools.

Bizri-Baryak explained how HCOs can move access to care initiatives in the right direction by: recognizing the pain that patients currently experience when interacting with HCOs; taking cues from more digitally advanced organizations in other industries; and understanding how the right design approach can maximize return on investment (ROI) associated with creating a successful digital-front-door experience.

Considering the consumers' struggle

Realizing how subpar the typical care access experience is for patients should be enough for HCOs to take action. Indeed, consumers are clearly frustrated with their initial interactions with

HCOs. "First-contact resolution is still far below the industry benchmark of 80%,[2] meaning I, as a healthcare consumer, cannot achieve what I need in a single phone call," said Emily Tempels, Director of Patient Access, Growth and Retention at Tegria.

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EMILY TEMPELS | Director of Patient Access, Growth and Retention | Tegria

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Typically, when reaching out to an HCO, a patient is faced with navigating a website with hundreds of phone numbers and service offerings. Upon calling those numbers, they may reach someone and be told that a provider cannot see them for multiple weeks, or they may not reach anyone at all.

Making appointments with providers is just the tip of the frustration iceberg. Patients typically become even more overwhelmed when trying to coordinate their overall care. "Our healthcare system is still challenging to access, but then navigating it can be even more opaque once you're in. This is not what you expect, nor what you deserve," noted Tempels.

Exploring technology's potential

Technology looms as the solution to this long-standing problem. Indeed, according to a Harris study cited during the presentation, three quarters of Americans state that technology would be helpful when navigating transactions and interactions such as scheduling appointments, obtaining test results, asking medical questions, paying bills and establishing care with a new provider.[1]

The good news is that HCOs are recognizing the need to move forward, and many have started digital transformation journeys. Unfortunately, they haven't come far enough. Most HCOs are still in the early "initiating," "reacting" or "emerging" stages of digital maturity, while organizations in other industries are in more advanced "maturing" and "leading" stages.

The problem is that technologies that can improve access to care exist, but HCOs haven't fully leveraged them yet. "Healthcare organizations are still struggling with their clinic-based phone rooms that terminate voicemails half of the time. Online scheduling volume is still trailing appointments made by phone. We still have referrals that get lost going from Point A to Point B, generating delays and rework," Tempels said. "We haven't solved for consistent financial transparency and the ability to receive a cost estimate at the time of service."

Learning from other industries

Patients, however, expect to get more satisfying front-door experiences in healthcare because they are already interacting digitally in other industries. "Our patients are drawing

inspiration every day from external experiences," Bizri-Baryak pointed out. "Patients want more online communication mediums for facilitating everything."

HCO leaders could advance technology initiatives by following best practices from leading organizations in other industries.

"Healthcare is exploring parallels within other industries to see what we can leverage to develop digital tools for better interactions and transactions," Bizri-Baryak explained. "Healthcare has traditionally depended on the EHR to facilitate care and to promote communication, but the EHR has its limitations. So, we are still investigating what care coordination applications exist, and if they can actually be embedded within the EHR instead of simply bolted on."

Indeed, by analyzing other industries, HCOs might discover other potential technologies to leverage such as machine learning, which is prolific in other sectors. "If we use machine learning within our scheduling algorithms and embed that capability within our EHRs, we could largely error-proof the scheduling process and please our providers and our patients along the way," Tempels recommended.

Adopting the right approach

Many HCOs are stuck in a holding pattern as they struggle with flawed or incomplete execution of these tools. To successfully move forward on this journey, HCOs need to adopt a human-centered-design approach. With this approach, HCOs should leverage market research and commission studies to create profiles for patients, providers and front-end users. By including feedback from all stakeholders in this process, they can develop profiles that illustrate stakeholders' willingness to adopt new technologies.

HCOs need to make sure the design effort includes patient journey mapping, investment, governance and marketing phases. By doing so, HCOs can identify key touchpoints where the patient experience can benefit from an infusion of technology, which communication mediums are ideal for patients, and which technologies and investments can accommodate the preferred experience in accordance with patient profiles.

That said, leaders need to address possible hurdles as well. "You need to anticipate and think about possible constraints associated with regulations, lobbying, rising cost of healthcare, change management and lack of cultural buy-in from consumers," Bizri-Baryak advised.

Investing intelligently

HCO leaders also should realize that innovations in digital front-door technology will require investments. However, to realize ROI, leaders should adopt a design process that ensures technology actually gets used. "While we have plenty of patient portals and online tools in healthcare, they're still not widely adopted. We work with clients all the time whose patient portal adoption is far below 50%," Tempels noted. Indeed, just 40% of individuals nationwide accessed a patient portal in 2020, according to the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology.[3]

The problem frequently boils down to design flaws. Patients often realize that even if they complete forms online, they will have to go through these forms again in person. "You go to your doctor and just redo all the forms while sitting there in person," she said. "We really need to reconsider our approach so that we can get to interoperability and integration of consumer empowerment tools and implement them effectively."

Finally, to continue providing superior patient access experiences, HCOs need to stay out in front of the curve. "Stop thinking about today; start thinking about tomorrow. What do you think healthcare will look like 10 years from now? It is very difficult to conceptualize, but think about the preferred future for patients, providers, organizations, front-end users and our care teams," Bizri-Baryak said. "Not everything needs to stay as it is today. Be a little bit of a maverick. Be bold and invest in your front door."

To learn more about how Tegria can help your healthcare organization implement and manage healthcare IT systems, go to tegria.com

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