Technology Is Transforming the Patient Experience in Healthcare

From the research lab to the patient room, and from the operating room to the waiting room, technology is deeply enmeshed with healthcare, playing a central part at every stage of care. The role technology plays in healthcare and the factors driving innovation, however, are evolving.

Traditionally, technology in healthcare has been used to advance care and improve patient outcomes, as well as to create efficiencies in the administrative back office and comply with government regulations regarding privacy and portability of patient information. More recently, however, focus has been shifting to include the patient-as-customer experience and technologies that amplify patient-centric interactions.

The shift is due largely to evolving customer expectations taking place in other industries that are further down the path to delivering exceptional experiences. In healthcare, which traditionally has valued patient outcomes over patient experiences, this shift continues to be monumental for many organizations.

Experience drivers such as personalization and convenience will determine much of the technology spending in healthcare going forward. And healthcare organizations are catching on: healthcare IT executives are increasingly prioritizing budget for patient experience initiatives.

The technologies necessary to drive exceptional patient experiences require a **robust network designed to handle data-intensive requirements**. A slow or inefficient network can lead to a poor experience and low satisfaction, which can be detrimental to a healthcare provider's reputation and, ultimately, its bottom line.

Customer Experience: A Growing Priority in Healthcare

Healthcare as a sector traditionally has not paid as much attention to customer experience as other industries such as retail. Most providers focused more on treating patients from a clinical perspective, treating the illness with less focus on the individual. At the same time, healthcare plans made it difficult for patients to switch providers if they were not happy or satisfied with their care. Today, however, it is much easier to do so.

Exacerbating the situation is an often bureaucratic administrative environment that can be complex and difficult to navigate. Seemingly simple tasks such as processing insurance claims can get bogged down with paperwork and approvals, delaying coverage and inflating costs.

That's changing, however, as patients are becoming more digital-centric and self-reliant—and, as such, they have a growing sense of empowerment regarding their healthcare experience. The industry, too, is being disrupted— new, non-traditional healthcare providers offer an alternative to the staid, appointment-only doctor's office experience.

Putting the Patient First

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Care Aligned with Convenience

The acquisition of insurer Aetna by CVS Health is a prime example. The combined entity provides patients with not only their prescription and over-the-counter medications, but also plans to **open expanded healthcare facilities** within stores to help customers manage chronic conditions and provide more primary health services.

Additionally, the recent proliferation of urgent care centers is drawing more patients away from doctor's offices, lured by the promise of faster service at lower cost. For patients with minor ailments who can't get in to see their primary care physician immediately, the no-appointment-necessary model of urgent care centers offers quicker relief. And for patients with chronic conditions, urgent care centers are an alternative to more costly emergency room visits for immediate treatment, such as a diabetic attack.

Giving Patients Power Over Their Care

Patients are using technology to take control of their healthcare, as well. Wearable devices that keep track of user health data such as blood pressure and heart rate are providing patients with data they need to better understand their overall health—and to know when they need to visit their doctor for treatment of any ongoing condition. Increasingly, patients are also looking for apps that better connect them with their healthcare providers and their own healthcare data, such as the ability to view lab results online or make appointments.

There is also a plethora of health-related apps enabling patients to bypass going to the doctor altogether. These "doctor on demand" apps provide advice from medical practitioners and some also include the ability to communicate with physicians or other healthcare providers to discuss symptoms and determine whether the user should seek care at a hospital or urgent care center.

Tools that streamline tasks are high in demand by patients, such as:

1. Payment processing
2. Prescription refills
3. Access to test results

# Improving Patient Experience with Technology

The disruption in the healthcare sector is forcing healthcare providers to reassess their patient care strategies in the context of patient experience, ensuring patients are not simply being treated but also treated well. That includes ensuring visits occur on-time, simplifying appointment-setting and billing, and creating personal and engaging interactions, whether with a receptionist, nurse, lab technician, doctor or billing specialist.

Certain technologies, such as online bill pay and online scheduling, have already been adopted by healthcare facilities in an effort to provide more streamlined processes for customers. In general, consumers are inching closer toward DIY healthcare, **according to PwC**, turning to home-monitoring solutions and taking greater control over their own health data.

Tools that streamline tasks for the patient—such as payment processing, prescription refills or access to test results—are in demand, as patients increasingly want convenience in their healthcare dealings. Additionally, technologies that provide a faster route to healthcare, such as AI-enabled chatbots, are helping patients and caregivers alike.

Chatbots can be used for any number of tasks in healthcare, from answering simple questions such as location information or hours of operation via text to sharing information on prescriptions or lab results.

The combination of chatbot technology and AI can create powerful results. For example, clinics working with IBM Watson could utilize chatbots to provide patients with basic diagnoses for minor ailments, such as viruses or ear infections. The patient then could be connected automatically to an online scheduling system, where they could make a follow-up appointment for treatment with their primary care physician or receive directions to the nearest urgent care center for more immediate treatment.
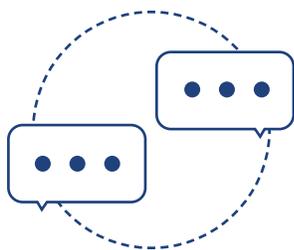
When connected with an electronic health record (EHR) system, chatbots also could provide personalized interactions and be proactive in helping patients manage their health. AI-connected chatbots could scan records for a patient's last scheduled appointment and alert the patient if they're due or overdue for an examination. Alternatively, chatbots could scan EHRs for medication information and alert a patient if a prescription needs to be refilled (or even offer to process the refill) or flag their healthcare provider to any potential drug interactions.

The Network's Role in Improving the Patient Experience

As providers look to enhance the patient-provider relationship with the latest technologies, they are realizing the transformation cannot be sustained on legacy networks and IT architecture. Chatbots, patient self-service, and EHR systems, not to mention high-res medical imaging files that need to be shared in real time, put a new strain on connectivity networks.

To reap the benefits promised by these tools, healthcare organizations—from hospitals to doctor's offices to insurance providers—need sufficient bandwidth and smart, **software-defined architecture** to move data quickly and securely. Many healthcare providers are also tapping into the power of managed services to ease the stress on IT departments. Only with the resulting increased capacity, flexibility and control of business applications running across the organization, can they enable streamlined processes and more meaningful patient and provider experiences.

Conclusion

The focus of technology in healthcare is shifting, as more organizations recognize the importance of the patient-as-customer experience and technologies that amplify patient-centric interactions. Increasingly, patients expect their healthcare digital experience to be on par with retail, and organizations that put their efforts toward technology solutions that promote convenience and personalization will be better able to navigate the changing healthcare landscape.

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