



At a recent Thought Leadership Roundtable hosted by CHIME and InterSystems, executives from leading HCOs came together to discuss how they are addressing the shift to consumerism and creating digital experiences that meet – and exceed – rising expectations.

Participants::

Russell Branzell
President and CEO
CHIME

Michael Rosenblum
Clinical Executive and Director
of End User Healthcare
InterSystems

Eric Gardner
Former SVP, Chief Innovation
and Transformation Officer
WellMed Medical Management

James Gaston
VP and Chief Data Officer
Parkland Health & Hospital
System

Rick Schooler
Chief Information Officer
Lee Health

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare's digital revolution has brought significant changes to every aspect of industry operations, from clinical decision support at the point of care to sophisticated forecasting algorithms that help organizations plan for future growth.

However, the most impactful transformation has less to do with what's happening in the IT office and much more to do with what's going on in the waiting room. In the modern healthcare environment, patients aren't just patients anymore. Instead, they have evolved into a new type of consumer with increasing digital awareness, heightened demands for personalized experiences, and a keen eye for quality, value, and satisfaction with their care.

As a result, healthcare organizations (HCOs) are starting to rethink their processes for working more proactively and collaboratively with the people they serve – and in many cases, they will need to adjust their digital health strategies accordingly.

To do so, they have been taking tips from other sectors that have more experience providing consumer-focused experiences. Retail, banking, and hospitality all offer glimpses as to what consumer-driven healthcare might look like. But getting there isn't easy, especially when resources are scarce, organizational inertia is strong, and technical challenges remain an issue across the care continuum.

OPENING THE DIGITAL FRONT DOOR TO PATIENTS TURNED CONSUMERS

The transformation into a consumer-first organization starts by understanding how patients are changing the way they engage with care. For example, the pandemic poured fuel on the fire of virtual care, accelerating the shift to digital health and creating broader expectations of online access to key health services. While telehealth use has dropped since [its peak in 2020 and 2021](#), virtual care utilization remains far above pre-pandemic levels.

Both providers and patients agree that virtual care is here to stay, with 72% of providers in [an MGMA survey](#) believing that demand will stay the same or increase and 84% of patients in [a separate poll](#) saying that telehealth will be a regular part of how they receive care in the future.

“Simply put, the baseline expectations have changed for how HCOs deliver seamless, personalized, tech-enabled care,” said Michael Rosenblum, Clinical Executive and Director of End User Healthcare at InterSystems. “Consumers want convenience, choice, and access. But they also want to feel like their providers know who they are and what they need.”

“That means being mindful and intentional about developing both the technical infrastructure and the organizational culture to deliver experiences that are efficient for staff while being warm, welcoming, and effective for patients,” he added.

For James Gaston, VP and Chief Data Officer at Parkland Health & Hospital System in Dallas, Texas, that means eliminating the distinction between in-person care and virtual services.

“We can no longer have separate strategies for the people who walk in the door and the people who use digital health,” he stated. “Most patients now engage with both depending on their needs at the moment, so why would we treat one type of interaction so differently from the other? We need a new approach that unifies the entire spectrum of experience instead of offering different things based on the site of care.”

More and more health systems are building on this idea in the form of a “digital front door” for patient services: a multi-faceted virtual gateway that incorporates traditional public websites, patient portals, chat bots, and other features to help consumers navigate their way through the care journey.

“It’s all about establishing your online presence in all the places that consumers need it, whether that’s the digital front door of your own website or the ‘side door’ of community partners, providers, and others that interact with us to support the care team,” said Rick Schooler, CIO at Lee Health, a public, non-profit health system based in Fort Myers, Florida.

“A great website is essential, but we also need to think about creating interoperable data connections with partners so that those side doors and back doors are just as integrated into what we do as a health system.”

Reaching patients where they are is critical for ensuring access and encouraging ongoing relationships designed to meet comprehensive care needs, agreed Eric Gardner, former SVP, Chief Innovation and Transformation Officer at WellMed Medical Management, a primary and preventive care group serving older adults in Texas, Florida, and New Mexico.

“There should be no ‘wrong’ way to enter the care space,” he said. “There are no wrong front doors. We need multiple channels that are knitted together in a way that allows for seamless handoffs and navigation to the right place at the right time.”

Gardner noted consumers’ experience with other sectors provides an example for healthcare. “When you go to Amazon, you can search for books, go to the music player, get to their pharmacy, or view your shopping cart from one single entry point,” he said. “We want to replicate that ease of use. If a patient goes to our website and they want to book an appointment, they can engage with the chatbot which might send them to the patient portal or direct them to the right department depending on what they need. We want to create a simplified navigational experience so the user feels like we really understand how it should work.”

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Taking the next steps to deliver a consumer-focused digital health experience



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ESTABLISHING A STRATEGIC VISION FOR DIGITALLY ENABLED EXPERIENCES

When developing the next generation of consumer-centric experiences, health system leaders need to look back on the lessons learned over the past decade of rapid digital transformation, the roundtable participants asserted, particularly in terms of avoiding piecemeal data analytics development and fragmented, siloed workflows.

“Too many health systems say they want to ‘engage with consumers’ without a detailed strategy with clear priorities and accountability for specific steps along the way,” Schooler said. “They get lost in the array of available technology platforms, and then they get bogged down in the challenges of interoperability without really seeing results, which doesn’t help the organization with its business goals or the consumers with their health goals.”

“Don’t underestimate the operational complications and challenges of ‘doing consumerism,’” he urged. “Health systems cannot afford to start stepping all over themselves with technologies that sound like what consumers want but aren’t backed by a solid vision fully endorsed by leadership. Start with the strategy, then bring in technology to get you there.”

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A solid strategy must start with strong governance and active buy-in from both executive leaders and clinical champions, advised Gaston. “For the leadership team, the challenge is how to push the gas pedal in a way that will make a difference in access to care and the quality of care in the patient population,” he said.

“You must have a comprehensive business plan that maps to the organization’s short- and long-term priorities; project owners that embrace each challenge; and an overarching governance structure that includes checks and balances in a collaborative way. Only then can you start to architect the infrastructure that will provide actionable insights and deliver the consumer-centered experiences that everyone is looking for.”

Buy-in from across the organization is foundational for success, especially when implementing new workflows that aim to combine traditional, in-person care with digital services. In a time of workforce shortages and widespread burnout, it’s important to ensure that staff members are treated as an integral, highly valued part of the process.

“It has to be a cultural initiative as much as a health IT project,” said Gardner. “At WellMed, we established an innovation academy to democratize our transformation work so that it became part of our mission and identity as an organization. We want our people on the front lines to understand what we’re trying to do and contribute their ideas to the process. That’s the start of true change that percolates outward to what consumers are seeing from our organization.”

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DIGITAL HEALTH LEADERS

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO CREATE A TRULY CONSUMER-FOCUSED FUTURE FOR HEALTHCARE?

Becoming a fully consumer-centric health system will take time, dedication, and investment from all stakeholders, including regulators, payers, providers, technology companies, and patients themselves.

In the near term, the industry will need to focus on overcoming persistent technical and cultural barriers that have historically hindered the move to a person-centered healthcare ecosystem.

“We need to find the levers that will catalyze change. Reimbursement is going to be the big one,” said Schooler. “Payment models that truly bring accountability to both the consumer and to the provider will motivate health systems to get really serious about how to manage care. Full capitation seems likely to be a driving force in the very near future, and thinking about consumerism is going to be necessary to prepare for that.”

Interoperability must also remain on the agenda, added Gardner. “We need the same level of data exchange and seamless interoperability that we use in the banking industry,” he said. “These days, we can use any ATM no matter who owns it, because they all share information, and you can have an extremely similar experience at any ATM in the country – or the world, for that matter. If we want to simplify the consumer experience and make it easy to get any care anywhere, we need to aspire to that level of interoperability and secure, appropriate data access for the folks that need it.”

Above all, leaders must ensure that their activities prioritize health equity and accessibility for consumers from all backgrounds with all levels of investment in their personal health, said Gaston.

“I work in a safety net hospital where we have limited resources and many of our patients are facing significant socioeconomic stresses and circumstances that limit their ability, or their desire, to engage with the health system,” he explained. “We work very hard to reach patients where they are, especially on the digital front. But as an industry, we have to be cautious about biasing digital health and consumerism toward more affluent populations.”

HCOs need to avoid bias and make sure they’re employing strategies that are applicable to all people, wherever they are in their health journey, he advised. “A consumer approach can help us do that by giving us the data we need to know more about our patients, their challenges, as well as the workflows to proactively close gaps in care and collaborate with people to address their opportunities for better health.”

As the consumer-focused environment continues to evolve, health system leaders will need to focus on defining high-impact strategies for helping patients navigate the complex care environment, whether in-person or online.

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WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO CREATE A TRULY CONSUMER-FOCUSED FUTURE FOR HEALTHCARE?

CONTINUED

From the digital front door to the interoperability infrastructure that supports seamlessly coordinated care, organizations taking the consumer-first approach will have to identify their goals, carefully chart out the ideal consumer journey, and engage both their staff and their patients in delivering elevated digital experiences that complement and augment traditional in-person care.

“Consumerism is about leveraging technology to put people first,” said Rosenblum. “It hasn’t always been easy to do that in the healthcare sector, but the digital tools are now available. The reimbursements are moving in the right direction, and the emphasis on equity, access, and affordability is stronger than ever. We’re in the best possible place to make this work, and I’m optimistic that we will be able to blend physical and digital care into something truly special for both care providers and the patients they serve.”



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