



Mobile Connectivity and the Future of Hybrid Healthcare

Unlocking the power of 5G cellular technology to drive long-term success in healthcare

The healthcare industry has experimented with hybrid care models incorporating both virtual and in-person care for quite some time. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, patients and providers fully embraced these models – and started clamoring for increased use of mobile technologies. Now it's become apparent that hybrid care has staying power, and the next big challenge for healthcare leaders is determining what a successful hybrid care future looks like.

“It's abundantly clear that, in many cases, patients prefer virtual modalities, and that clinicians are learning how to use virtual care models more effectively to enhance their own workflows and help reduce feelings of burnout,” said Robert Havasy, Senior Director, HIMSS Thought Advisory Group, and Managing Director, Personal Connected Health Alliance.

With these new hybrid care models, however, healthcare leaders face new challenges. “The problem is often not bandwidth or connectivity. The problem lies in the many logistical issues around virtual care,” he said.

To successfully support hybrid care, healthcare leaders need to decide how they will:

- Get blood pressure cuffs on telehealth patients' arms
- Ensure providers' in-person and virtual schedules are in sync
- Efficiently transfer telehealth patients' vital signs into Electronic Health Records (EHRs)
- Manage both staff members' mobile devices and patients' Internet of Things (IoT) medical devices
- Determine the optimal physical layout of medical facilities, possibly including dedicated telemedicine rooms

The long haul

While each healthcare organization (HCO) will likely resolve issues differently, to experience long-term success, leaders should:

Consider trade-offs between convenience and cost.

“Laptops are more expensive than desktop computers because it's harder to make things more portable and rugged.

High-quality smartphones cost more than basic ones. If you want to arm your workforce with the tools that can offer them the most flexibility, you may incur slightly higher costs of entry into that mobile realm,” Havasy said.

HCOs on a tight budget might consider repurposing existing devices, upgrading or purchasing in bulk and finding a cellular provider that offers the best business plan for their needs and budget.

Leaders must also consider cost versus convenience as they compare WiFi to more expensive wireless 5G networks. “Cellular mobility is a convenience feature. It allows me to connect wherever I am, right at home, outside in the parking lot or on vacation. And, for a variety of reasons, that costs more money. Part of the decision in front of any organization right now is how to fund that convenience premium. That's the big question confronting the current generation of CIOs,” Havasy said.

Focus on business challenges. Business mapping can help leaders determine when advanced technologies can support organizational goals. For example, physicians who move from location to location might need 5G connectivity, but such technology might not be worth the expense for nurses who always treat patients within the four walls of a facility.

Account for changes in the economy. Previously, venture capitalists would fund technology companies and wait for them to pull in customers and become profitable. Under this model, HCOs could tap into emerging technologies at a relatively low cost. “Leveraging emerging technologies originally was cheap. As investors again focus on returns, costs will go up,” Havasy noted.

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ROBERT HAVASY | Senior Director, HIMSS Thought Advisory Group and Managing Director, Personal Connected Health Alliance



In addition, capital projects could become more expensive as interest rates rise. With this in mind, leaders need to determine if wholesale rip-and-replace projects are financially viable, or if it is advisable to gradually proceed with digital transformation. "Hospitals might want to space out these more expensive capital projects over time," he advised.

Keep employees happy. In this age of staffing shortages, it's important to meet employee needs. Clinicians and other staff members now expect to have the ability to use mobile technologies to work remotely. And as technology evolves, staff members will demand the most cutting-edge equipment.

"You can't hire topnotch [clinicians] and data scientists and give them outdated WiFi and a flip phone. They're going to expect to be handed the latest generation smartphone and super high-powered laptops to do their work wherever they feel like it," he said. 5G cellular technology can provide the low-latency computing that many staff members require, and clinicians might demand to leverage these low-latency networks to implement innovative care delivery programs.

"Low-latency networks could, for example, allow for better command and control from a centralized hub out to ambulances. With this technology in place, EMS personnel could provide more extensive service to patients in the

field. Patients would then be in better shape and need less intensive care when they enter the more expensive four walls of the hospital," Havasy said.

Looking toward tomorrow

While leaders need to strategically invest in technologies that support hybrid care, they must do so with an eye toward the future. Investment in advanced technologies such as 5G cellular could position HCOs to succeed in the years to come.

"With these investments, the network will be a little snappier and people will be a little happier ... but it really pays off when you implement AI in your EHR or you enable things like autonomous delivery vehicles in your hospital, where meals are delivered by robots. So, it's really an investment in the future," Havasy concluded.

To learn more about how UScellular® Business provides connectivity solutions tailored for hybrid healthcare, visit <https://business.uscellular.com/solutions/industry/healthcare/>.



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