

The Future of Work in Healthcare: A Strategic Approach to Bridging the Generational Divide

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As the progression of technology in healthcare gains momentum, the definition of patient care has evolved in tandem. In a world where clinicians now spend a great deal of time in a patient's electronic health record, it begs the question: Is a provider's experience with health IT of equal importance to his or her skills in personalized patient care and bedside manner?

The answer is not cut and dry, but the fact remains that the increasing integration of technology into care delivery has contributed to a cross-generational divide. Aging clinicians, who started their careers in a healthcare environment that prioritized spending time with patients above all, maintain excellent relationship-building skills but may not stay on top of all the technological developments. On the flip side, younger clinicians are generally comfortable and competent in the use of technology, but may not have spent as much meaningful time at the patient's bedside as their seasoned colleagues.

To add to this complexity, many healthcare professionals are approaching retirement age—the number of active physicians over age 65 quadrupled from 1975 to 2013, and nearly one-third of practicing doctors in 2016 were 60 or older. Undoubtedly, aging physicians provide immeasurable value to a health system, and their wisdom and experience should be leveraged. However, young clinicians also provide value through their ability to adapt and easily integrate technology into their workflows. Organizations need to determine how best to tap into younger clinicians' technology proficiency and encourage more experienced clinicians to share best practices for bedside patient care, creating an ecosystem where collaboration and the exchange of ideas and skill sets is fundamental to operations.

Acknowledging the generational divide

Feelings about healthcare's digital evolution differ among generations. According to a recent Philips Future Health Index, younger healthcare professionals (HCP) are hopeful about the

promise of technology—81% agree that the right digital health technologies have the potential to reduce their workload. In contrast, in a recent Medscape report, baby boomers cited the increasing computerization of their practice as a major factor of burnout and identified the introduction of new technology as a top stressor. Although in-person doctor visits are getting shorter and shorter due to administrative requirements, the industry is starting to reprioritize personalized patient care, as patients and clinicians across generations crave healthy, productive relationships. In fact, the Philips Future Health Index also found that younger HCPs feel their career does not live up to their hopes and expectations, largely due to nonclinical demands that pull them away from direct patient care—a reality for which their medical education did not prepare them.

To improve staff satisfaction, it is important that healthcare organizations recognize what generational gaps exist when it comes to comfort with technology, what each generation identifies as a top stressor, and how to leverage each generation's unique strengths and perspectives. A big opportunity exists in the medical field to explore HCPs' transition into retirement and how their role may shift to better suit their preferences; organizations also have an opportunity to ensure investments in technological innovation live up to their promise, improving communication and streamlining workflows across generations.

Bridging the gap

When bridging the technology divide between generations, much of the responsibility falls to the technology vendor. Vendors should take time to respectfully educate senior physicians who may not be as tech savvy and even offer private trainings. As technology becomes a larger part of every physician's workflow, reporting becomes critical to reimbursement, and solutions such as telehealth or remote patient monitoring evolve to become the standard model for patient interaction—making vendor decisions more

important than ever. Organizations should be sure to work with technology companies who listen to their needs, understand the age demographics of their staff, and collaborate to develop customized training programs.

As HCPs get older, retirement is often a loose concept for providers who have practiced their entire lives, with their profession often defining who they are. Before HCPs approach retirement, organizations should engage in open and honest conversations about their future roles early and often to help identify and predict staffing needs, while also making sure each clinician feels valued. The discussion can be used as a way to brainstorm the best path forward together, whether it is reducing their responsibilities, transitioning to teaching, or taking on a mentorship role.

During these conversations, it is important to convey that senior HCPs' journey in medicine does not have to end the moment they retire from practice, and it is vital to respect the unique insights they can provide. The American Medical Association offers resources for HCPs thinking about retirement on ways to continue making an impact in medicine, whether it's inside the hospital, with a technology company to develop new tools for physicians, or as a consultant for startups. Their experience and knowledge of the ins and outs

of a hospital's operations can make them great consultants for workflow optimization, as no one understands workflow challenges more than experienced clinicians. Aging physicians could also be paired with young residents to offer guidance and mentorship, especially when it comes to patient relations.

Finding a happy medium

In any work environment, there will be generational differences in working style, expectations, and analog versus digital preferences. In healthcare, this contrast has become increasingly evident over the last decade. While healthcare technology has proven its value for care delivery, its use does not come easily to everyone. Rather than letting these differences fester and interfere with patient care, organizations should recognize the opportunities that exist and host transparent conversations about ways to ensure clinicians of all ages feel valued and heard.

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