

ARTICLE

How advanced engagement centers build a bidirectional digital bridge between patient needs and health system services

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Healthcare leaders recognize the urgency to better engage with healthcare consumers as digital channels of communication grow.

ADVANCED ENGAGEMENT CENTERS: DIGITIZING ACCESS AND COMMUNICATION WITH PATIENTS

While much of the digital health focus during the pandemic has been on telehealth for both routine and acute care, an advanced engagement center—a centralized, externally facing center that connects healthcare consumers with the health system—plays a critical role in offering consumers several avenues to manage their care needs through navigation, scheduling/registration, referral management, and ongoing communication with their care team.

In an ongoing discussion series, C-suite executives gathered in-person at the HIMSS21 conference in August to share insights and gain a collective understanding about how health systems are using engagement centers to better connect with their healthcare consumers, narrow access gaps, and develop and manage trusted relationships.

Highlights from the executive discussion groups include:

1. Pandemic-Driven Imperative to Remotely Engage Patients

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the patient shift from in-person interaction points to virtual channels. While health system executives acknowledged the growth of patient portals, online communications, and telehealth, there was also consensus that much of those engagement points are

uncoordinated across their organizations and not well integrated with in-person care when appropriate. As a result, patients are often confused and overwhelmed by the options to engage. Patients also have expressed frustration over a lack of seamless, easily accessible support across their care journey.

2. Standardized Processes are Paramount

Leaders recognized the need to standardize their underlying processes at the onset to make them more efficient before centralizing and digitizing them into a modern engagement center. Scheduling and registration is a prime example of where health systems need to standardize the underlying distributed operations to enable a streamlined approach to booking appointments and onboarding patients through an efficient registration and financial preclearance process.

3. Return on Investment from Engagement Centers Is Possible

The value proposition of an advanced engagement center can be captured across multiple domains. Health system leaders commented on the ability to efficiently manage a deluge of incoming patient calls during the pandemic by deploying an omni-channel approach to navigate them to the most appropriate care setting, including virtual options that helped to minimize COVID spread while maintaining adequate acute care capacity. Financial gains are most commonly seen from backfill of underutilized resources and load balancing across health systems, particularly on the ambulatory front as engagement centers become key to reducing wait times for appointments while ramping up utilization of ancillary and other outpatient services. Just as important are opportunities to improve the patient and provider experiences. Streamlined supporting processes and navigation make patient flows frictionless, while also minimizing the burden on providers to supplement care delivery with administrative tasks and documentation. The integration of advanced tools that automate patient follow-up appointment scheduling, registration, discharge, and ongoing care management allows clinicians to practice at the top of their licenses and introduce innovative staffing models that meet the unique needs of each patient group they serve.

4. Patient Preferences and a Targeted Approach for Implementation Are Foundational for Success

The session spotlighted two organizations that have successfully implemented advanced engagement centers. Kaiser Permanente (KP) emphasized the importance and value of understanding patient and consumer preferences to better transform care delivery. With a single number to call and unified technology and operational platforms, KP has effectively augmented their services by providing easy, personalized choices to meet consumer needs. University Hospitals of Cleveland (UH) embarked on a journey to provide seamless access, personalized experience, and affordable options to the communities they serve. UH took a programmatic approach to address key points, including operational visibility, coordination of services across verticals, and integration of technology platforms. By prioritizing key areas like radiology, UH used a targeted strategy to align tactics with impacts, regularly measuring progress to adapt and modify their efforts to meet the needs of their consumers. Both organizations illustrate the importance of standardizing diverse

workflows (when possible), centralizing functions, and leveraging technology to digitize the care continuum.

A CALL TO ACTION

Given the continued forcing function of the pandemic to push more interactions with healthcare consumers to the virtual space, having a well-functioning, bidirectional, and comprehensive engagement center is a differentiating factor to maintain continuity in relationships and provide ongoing support to their health needs. As nontraditional competitors (e.g., retail giants like Amazon and Walmart) increase their presence in the healthcare landscape, consumer expectations for high-quality service and on-demand access may be set by those entrants that have scaled businesses by orienting their entire platforms on a streamlined experience that drives immediate value for the end user. Advanced engagement centers offer the opportunity to do the same for provider organizations, so long as they offer dynamic communication channels and frictionless access points that adapt to consumer needs.

Health systems must also view engagement centers as potential revenue generators rather than simply cost centers, whereby proactive outreach to patients is driven by opportunities for relevant and personalized services that will immediately demonstrate value. Consequently, demand recapture, population health management, and long-term market position will hinge on provider organizations being able to successfully engage their patients while fostering a compelling experience for them to remain loyal.

As the role of digital grows in how patients experience care and providers deliver it, advanced engagement centers will only become more important to facilitating those virtual interactions and maximizing the value of transformed next generation care. Provider organizations must therefore act now to make their engagement center a cornerstone to their digital health and patient experience strategies that are fundamentally consumer-oriented and designed to simplify the traditionally complex tasks of accessing and delivering care.

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