



Looking to Make Your Connected Hospital a Success? Time to focus on end-to-end digital document workflows

More than 40% of physicians report they are burned out, according to a survey of more than 12,000 doctors.¹ Dealing with too many bureaucratic tasks (58%) and spending too many hours at work (37%) were cited as the top two factors contributing to the unrelenting stress.² In addition, this burnout is negatively affecting finances, with each case costing healthcare organizations (HCOs) between \$500,000 and \$1 million.³

But wait: Wasn't the use of computers supposed to help alleviate stressors for healthcare professionals and reduce costs for HCOs? Yes, while EHRs and other technologies have been implemented based on the promise of making life easier for end users and operations more efficient for hospitals and other providers, it looks like computerization, in some respects, might be having the opposite effect.

“EHR adoption has shifted the physician from focusing on the patient to focusing on filling out a lot of electronic forms,” said Jayashree Ramakrishna, Head of Industry – Healthcare & Life Science: Document Cloud, Adobe. “We have converted these very passionate, well-educated clinicians into data-entry clerks – and that’s not what they went to medical school for. That’s not where their passion lies.”

Managing an abundance of electronic documentation is just one of the hassles that clinicians are dealing with in the digital world. In addition, a troubling dichotomy exists in healthcare, as paper processes still prevail, despite the fact that HCOs have adopted information systems en masse. For example, many digital documentation processes are interrupted as clinicians, other healthcare professionals and patients are forced to print out and sign various forms. The juxtaposition could become even more pronounced as the “connected hospital” – which relies on a host of information technologies to drive better decisions, improve operations and enhance outcomes – becomes the norm. The pandemic, rise in consumerism and growth of retail pharmacies have all prompted an accelerated uptake of digital products.



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JAYASHREE RAMAKRISHNA | Head of Industry – Healthcare & Life Science: Document Cloud | Adobe

So the key to connected hospital success is clear: produce ever higher levels of connectivity while also improving the digital documentation experience for all. To accomplish this, healthcare leaders must overcome a variety of challenges as they explore how to offer secure, reliable e-signatures that support the many digital documentation processes in today's connected hospital, while also making life easier for end users.

Making healthcare professionals' work easier

The pandemic has prompted HCOs to transition from a slow march to a quick sprint toward virtual care. In February of 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advised healthcare providers to adopt social distancing practices, specifically recommending that they offer clinical services through virtual means such as telehealth. Lockstep with these recommendations, payers, including the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), began reimbursing for virtual care. Telehealth increased by 154%, when comparing the number of virtual visits that took place during the last week of March 2020 to the same period in 2019, according to the CDC.⁴

“Many telehealth vendors had platforms out there for quite some time but didn't gain traction until the COVID-19 pandemic,” Ramakrishna said. “Before the pandemic hit, people wanted to have contact with their doctors, and they wanted to go see their providers in person. But COVID-19 forced patients to use virtual technologies and they discovered that they like the benefit of not having to plan a day away from work to drive to the doctor's office or not having to coordinate with their caretaker to get to the doctor's office.” Indeed, 60% of 2,700 patients recently surveyed said they want to continue to use digital technologies with healthcare providers in the future.⁵

Clinicians are more mobile now, as well. In fact, a 2021 report from Research Nester shows that 65% of hospitals either have or are planning to implement clinical mobility products.⁶

“Wireless technology is enabling the expansion of the connected hospital as it is offering so many new ways to do things,” Ramakrishna said. “Physicians are accessing the patient record on the go versus having to return to their offices to look

up information from their desktops. And, patients are receiving care and remote monitoring in the safety of their homes, which reduces their risk of infection and eliminates the hassles associated with getting to the hospital.”

With virtual care more common, digital documentation and e-signatures are needed as providers and patients process consent forms, intake forms, medical history questionnaires, health assessment forms and medical release forms electronically. “Think back to March of 2020. All of a sudden, patients no longer wanted to go into the hospital or the physician office. So all the paperwork had to be processed electronically with digital signatures,” Ramakrishna said.

Answering the consumer call for connections

Consumers are connected in everything they do – from managing finances to buying groceries to watching movies – and they expect a similarly connected healthcare experience. As a result of this rise in consumerism, “Health systems will need to double down on their ‘digital front door’ efforts, enabling patients to handle routine interactions such as scheduling an appointment, paying a bill, finding a doctor, renewing a medication, finding answers to health questions and navigating the health system itself,” according to a report in the *Harvard Business Review*.⁷

Increased connectivity also can help providers manage the paperwork for patients who are living in *medical deserts* – areas where the population has inadequate access to healthcare. Patients in these areas are being served by a growing number of retail pharmacy clinics.

“With COVID vaccinations, it became apparent that retail pharmacies had a broader reach than traditional healthcare providers and were able to serve patients in these medical deserts,” Ramakrishna said.

Hospitals, however, need to connect to these clinics. “When care information needs to be sent back to an individual's primary care doctor or information that needs to be reported to the National Health Safety Network [NHSN] – doing so electronically makes the process more efficient,” Ramakrishna said.



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In addition, as value-based care permeates the industry, HCOs are under increasing pressure to achieve better clinical outcomes. Digital documentation can help in this endeavor. For instance, digital tools can help speed up referral and prior authorization processes, which can help to improve timely access to services and, therefore, improve outcomes.

"Think about what happens when you need a surgical procedure. You need to get referrals and prior authorizations for imaging tests and for the procedure and then for the follow-up care. Getting all those documents filled out and signed can be arduous and time consuming," Ramakrishna said.

While many hospitals already are leveraging patient portals to offer online access to documents, many of these platforms are riddled by "opaque user interfaces and erratic performance," according to a report from the American Academy of Family Physicians.⁹ And therein lies the challenge: To make electronic processes more user friendly, hospitals need to give digital documentation and e-signature processes the attention they deserve.

Shining a spotlight on digital documentation

"When it comes to the connected hospital, big data and digitizing your website are often premier projects. Digital documentation and e-signatures are seen as that 'non-sexy project,'" Ramakrishna said. "But with the pandemic, digital documentation and e-signatures became a top priority because it just wasn't possible for a staff member to go down a hallway and hand a piece of paper to a physician to get it signed. And it wasn't possible for a patient to show up at a brick-and-mortar hospital to sign documents."

To make digital documentation and e-signature efforts successful, though, hospitals need to adopt strategies and technologies that empower them to meet a variety of challenges, including:

1. **Fully tapping into the benefits of digitization.** Simply taking a paper process and making it electronic doesn't produce the efficiency benefits that HCOs are looking for.

"Hospitals need to take a process and make sure that they're getting the full benefits of digitization and they are having the technology work for them, not the other way around with end users working for the technology," Ramakrishna said. To accomplish this, leaders need to analyze myriad digital documentation processes – from prescription orders to patient registration to release of information – and make sure the signing step is digitized in each of these and doesn't remain a fractured analog experience.

2. **Implementing reliable tools.** "When digitizing in healthcare, it's not like a retail organization where if the technology doesn't quite work, it might disrupt the business but there is no real risk. Because HCOs are highly regulated and patient facing, there is additional risk and they need to test the technology to confirm and ensure that it is doing what it's supposed to do," Ramakrishna said.
3. **Ensuring interoperability.** The success of the connected hospital hinges on how well clinical and business systems work with each other. As such, with so many digital documentation processes in play, it's important to have a platform that connects to existing and new systems so everyone can easily access, e-sign and share documents.
4. **Following the rules.** HCOs don't merely need to exchange documents with patients, they need to do so in compliance with industry regulations. Adobe Sign supports compliance with HIPAA by enabling hospitals to authenticate identity; suppress information access via email; require authentication to view completed agreements; and require a strong document password. And HCOs can set up the platform to meet the 21st Century Cures Act of 2016, which requires HCOs to quickly share documents with patients by making it possible to speedily send and sign forms through interoperable electronic connections.
5. **Protecting against fraud and abuse.** When HCOs digitize, the scale at which fraud and abuse can be committed is multiplied 10 times or more, according to Ramakrishna. Consider the following: According to a worldwide survey of fraud examiners conducted by Statista in August of 2020,

47% reported a significant increase in cyber fraud risk since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased use of digital technologies. Plus, 60% of respondents expected a significant increase in cyber fraud risk in the upcoming year.⁹ Therefore, security and privacy become more important than ever. So e-signature technology needs to reach beyond signing processes and focus on identity management, as well. Adobe Sign helps to verify user identities by:

- Partnering with certificate providers that validate individual identities
- Leveraging two-factor authentication, which requires individuals to verify their identities through two channels, such as email and text
- Relying on knowledge-based authentication, which requires patients to verify their identities by answering personal questions

6. Supporting “anywhere, anytime” access and signing.

Hospitals need tools that can successfully provide secure, reliable and compliant access to documents and e-signature experiences across desktop, web and mobile

devices. Adobe Sign is a cloud-based platform that makes it possible for healthcare professionals and patients to quickly access, approve and sign documents from anywhere and on any device.

By meeting these challenges, hospitals can confidently move forward with connectivity initiatives by offering e-signature processes that provide the speed, security, interoperability and compliance needed to successfully transform document workflows across a wide range of business and clinical processes.

“Digitizing signatures are taking what was once a very disjointed experience and connecting it,” Ramakrishna concluded.

“Patients used to receive documents electronically, download them, sign them and then mail them at the post office.” Now e-signatures can be completed digitally on platforms like Adobe Sign, without having to install a new app on a phone or computer and with which patients and clinicians are “experiencing the next level of connectivity,” she said.

To learn more about Adobe Sign, visit adobe.com/sign/business.html.

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