# Successful Digitalisation Pathways

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# Unlocking Digital Tools to Expand Access to Healthcare

An overview of the emergence of digital front doors, their potential and key points to bear in mind during the technological transition.

## ⚑ Key Points

- For decades, basic healthcare interaction has been a human one. However, the limitations of this system are now becoming more and more apparent.

- Patients today are demanding fast, convenient, easy and affordable service.

- Primary care physicians are no longer the first option for finding and navigating care.

- Patients are seeking alternative front doors to obtain care. These digital doors can take many forms, including a website, an online portal, a mobile app or a techno-logical interface.

- Digital front doors can serve as an alternative to a conven-tional doorway leading to a brick-and-mortar facility.
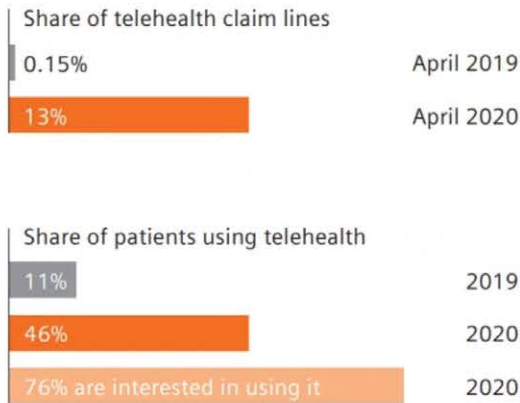


Image Credit: Siemens Healthineers

## Introduction

Traditionally, patient access to healthcare has been a one-on-one interaction where patients visit their healthcare providers. The adoption of digitalisation in healthcare has been quite slow. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed this and has accelerated the pace of digitalisation throughout the

**The usage of telehealth has increased dramatically in the U.S.**

Share of telehealth claim lines

| | |
|---|---|
| 0.15% | April 2019 |
| 13% | April 2020 |

Share of patients using telehealth

| | |
|---|---|
| 11% | 2019 |
| 46% | 2020 |
| 76% are interested in using it | 2020 |

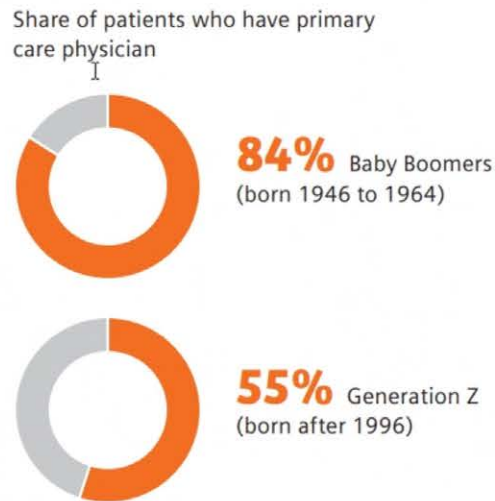Source: Bestsenny et al. 2020; FAIRHEALTH 2020.

healthcare system. Due to this rapid acceleration, the point of access to care has now shifted. In 2019, only 11% of patients in the U.S. used telehealth solutions. Today, that number has increased to nearly 50%. 76% of patients are now interested in using virtual health solutions such as telehealth (Bestsenny et al. 2020). According to an Accenture survey, nearly 60% of patients who used virtual tools during the pandemic said they wanted to use the technology more for communicating with healthcare providers. 90% of patients who tried new devices or apps to manage their medical conditions liked them (Accenture Patient Survey 2020).

## Possibilities for Digital Front Doors

Digital front doors allow healthcare providers to engage with patients throughout their healthcare journey. A strong digital front door strategy is not limited to a single solution but should

leverage different virtual health solutions to create a digital ecosystem for patients. This can help transform care delivery, improve access to care, optimise clinical operations, better manage population health and increase workforce productivity.

Specifically, digital front doors can enhance four different areas of provider-patient interaction (Meinhardt and Staehr 2021). . These include:

**Younger people are less likely to have a primary care physician**

Share of patients who have primary care physician

**84%** Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964)

**55%** Generation Z (born after 1996)

Source: Accenture 2019.

**Directing patients:** Patients often need to be directed to the proper provider or source of care. Digital front doors can function as navigation signposts, triaging and directing patients to the appropriate level or type of care.

**Engaging with patients virtually:** A successful digital front door strategy would allow care teams to engage with patients virtually. This would mean patients could reach out to care teams any time, from anywhere, and healthcare providers would be able to respond with the click of a keyboard.

**Monitoring patients remotely:** Telehealth and tele-visits would allow patients to easily make appointments and reduce waiting times while delivering quality care to patients. Over 60% of patients and 59% of clinicians report no differences in the overall quality between virtual and office visits (Donelan et al. 2019).

**Managing population health:** Digital front doors also offer the opportunity for health systems to better manage overall population health, identify and respond to trends and establish new care delivery models. Healthcare providers would be able to analyse and operationalise digital data to identify vulnerable cohorts and pave the way for proactive and targeted engagement.

## How to Unlock the Digital Front Door?
Successful utilisation and adaptation of digital front doors can be achieved by focusing on five key areas (Meinhardt and Staehr 2021):

### Enabling patients
In order to make the transition to digital care successful, patient buy-in is essential. Real-time monitoring and easier access to physicians can have a positive impact on unplanned readmissions, patient quality of life and mortality. However, older patients, many of whom suffer from chronic diseases, are not always comfortable with new technology. They may require education and stronger engagement compared to younger patients. In any case, enabling patients to adopt digital care avenues would require offering them different options and different providers. More virtual care portals are likely to emerge to help patients navigate the marketplace. Digital marketing efforts would also have to increase, such as brand management, search-engine optimised marketing, social media engagement, and platforms for patient reviews to convince patients to choose digital front doors.

### Empowering the workforce
In order to unlock digital front doors, existing workforces would have to be trained to work with new technology. They will have to be more aware of how new digital options can make their workplace more flexible. This will require incentives and motivation and the hiring of digital experts to make the transition smooth.

### Upgrading infrastructure
Digital front doors will need to be integrated into existing infrastructure. This will require investment in new hardware and software as well as improvement in wireless capabilities for better connectivity. A shift to cloud-based storage may also be needed. These technology upgrades could prove to be a barrier, but this can be managed through flexible funding alternatives or partnership models.

### Optimising workflows
In order to utilise the true potential of digital front doors, there will be a need to reorient parts of a provider's work and revenue streams. Workflows will change, and infrastructure, data, workforce and patients will have to be incorporated within this process.

### Protecting data
Medical data is particularly sensitive. Healthcare systems must ensure patients are confident that their digital data is being treated securely. Internal data security governance capabilities will be essential, and a thorough understanding of data management will be required to anticipate any security vulnerabilities.

## Conclusion
Digital access points to healthcare are not new and were not created as a response to COVID-19. However, the pandemic has provided a strong incentive for patients and providers to look at alternative models of care that have been underutilised. While face-to-face contact has its advantages in healthcare, digital alternatives can help fill this need if such contact becomes unavailable or too risky.

During the pandemic, patients have seen that alternative access platforms are safer, convenient and effective. The increased use of digital front doors has also reduced pressure on hospital emergency departments and has allowed a more efficient allocation of healthcare resources. The most important benefit has been improved patient outcomes, which is the ultimate goal of health services.

Healthcare systems worldwide have now seen how care can be proactive and how healthcare data can be better utilised to improve decision-making, better identify those at risk of certain illnesses or conditions, and develop a greater understanding of different therapies and treatments.

Digital front doors can provide a safe, convenient and effective access platform to healthcare services. Adoption was already underway before the pandemic, but it has gained further momentum and is likely to accelerate further in the years to come.

*For more insight on this topic, please read Herbert Staehr's exclusive interview here.*

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