

Long NHS waiting times are killing UK productivity: Harnessing emerging technologies



Jonathan Pearson

*****@**PACONSULTING.COM

UK Head of Healthcare - PA
Consulting, UK

[LinkedIn](#) [Twitter](#)

We now live our everyday lives in a digital world where new technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality are taken for granted. They have transformed the way we receive services and, in many cases, made them more convenient and more efficient. In contrast, much of the UK healthcare system is failing to keep pace with these developments and has been unable to harness the benefits of this technology to deal with growing demand and increasing waiting times.

The NHS's [recently announced plan](#) to use Skype for hospital appointments is a step in the right direction. Equally, the app GP at Hand, which allows virtual consultations with a GP, is another welcome development that will mean more people have access to high quality and faster care.

We are also seeing individual trusts beginning to innovate with new technologies. The Hillingdon Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has adopted a system of sending appointment reminder texts to patients, which reduced clinic no-shows by 18 per cent in three months. The Trust also deployed innovative new software tools at its two hospitals, which led to 80 additional hours of surgery and 430 more outpatient appointments per month. Theatre use also improved from 75 to 82 per cent.

Yet these tend to be the exceptions, the NHS as a whole isn't effectively embracing advancing technologies such as mobile apps, wearables, and virtual consultations which could make a real impact on reducing waiting times. What is needed now is a careful examination of where particular technology can add value to the organisation and, in particular, how it will work with the existing IT systems and ways of working. This also means being aware of the pitfalls and avoiding the temptation of simply embracing the latest shiny, new product. Any decision about technology needs to be based on the understanding that its successful implementation is not about the device but its ability to drive certain behaviours. In order to do this, it needs to be seen as effective and easy to use by practitioners and patients. If it is not, it will simply be a waste of money.

The NHS has a real task ahead of it in educating staff and patients on the benefits of different technologies and understanding what will make the difference. However, it will be worth the effort as it is clear that injecting innovation into the sector will make a real difference to treatment, reducing sickness at work and improving the productivity of the economy.

Jonathan Pearson is UK Head of Healthcare at PA Consulting. For more information visit: www.paconsulting.com/healthcare

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