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The Urgent Need for Digital Skills in Healthcare



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Technology is playing a larger role than ever in healthcare, and with the latest iteration of the NHS's Long Term plan stating that it intends to integrate technology to previously unprecedented levels, the fact that workforces are still significantly lacking in digital skills is worrying. While admirable steps have been taken in recent years, such as the Royal College of Nursing's 'every nurse is an e-nurse' [campaign](#), raising the digital literacy of staff is still not enough of a priority. The fact that fax machines were still in common use across the service until the Health Secretary's [blanket ban](#) last year is indicative of the wider situation within the service, and Trust leaders will need to ensure that future staffing strategies prioritise digital learning as we move forward.

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Shortages across the board

According to a Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index [report](#), an estimated 21% of the UK population lacks at least one basic digital skill, equivalent to 11.3 million adults. As the largest employer in Britain, the NHS is reflective of wider society, so it's hardly surprising that these shortages are also prevalent in the service. For healthcare organisations, digital skills and literacy are extremely valuable in improving patient outcomes. There are many case studies to attest to this, with one recent [telehealth hub](#) rolled out across 210 care homes bringing a 35% reduction in hospital admissions and a 59% reduction in hospital bed days.

Innovations useless without skills to match

Many innovations proposed for use in hospitals are fundamentally simple and the technology to implement them is already available. For instance, ditching fax machines and providing staff with new ways of communicating,

introducing fit for purpose platforms for recruitment and the digitisation of referrals are all achievable. However, without a digitally literate workforce, these innovations will have no utility. Unless there are staffing strategies in place which prioritise digital skills, simply introducing things like an NHS app and Skype appointments will not cut it.

Staff retention

Training staff to be proficient in digital skills can also play a large role in job satisfaction, and therefore staff retention. Adequate training and development will motivate staff to remain within the NHS, with one [survey](#) suggesting 70% of workers are influenced to stay in a role due to job-related training. Therefore, making digital skills a cornerstone of future CPD efforts will prove doubly effective as a tool for not only increasing efficacy of healthcare, but also helping to solve the challenges around retention.

Flexible working

This will also help to implement flexible working, a key area currently influencing workers to remain within jobs. In fact, a recent survey showed that [67%](#) of millennials claimed 'flexi-time' was something they expected from a job. Not only will increased digital literacy help those who are in charge of technology such as e-rostering and e-job planning in managing shifts, but it will also contribute to the wellbeing of healthcare professionals and patient outcomes. There are concrete examples of this, with research showing that one [mobile working solution](#) for community nurses resulted in a 60% reduction in time spent on paperwork and an increase of 29% in time spent with patients.

Can't be ignored

Ultimately, digital skills are extremely valuable to the NHS, and equipping staff with the right skills is something that can't be ignored going forward. The role of digitally competent staff is only going to become more important as technology improves, and the thousands inadequately prepared staff could be left behind. At a time when Trusts are already struggling to attract and retain the professionals they need, this cannot be allowed to happen. Therefore, introducing measures that ensure digitally literate talent is pipelined effectively will help the NHS to meet the pledge laid out in its 10-year plan of saving half a million lives, vastly improving patient outcomes and boosting staff satisfaction.

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