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Time to Start Your m-Health Strategy

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For many HIT Managers, the stars are aligning as colleagues and their patients, fuelled by the buzz of iPhones and Appstores, are beginning to show interest in using the mobile technologies that they're all familiar with. But what are the fundamentals and what's the best approach?

Mobile is the Newest Mass Media

The mobile phone has emerged as the newest and least understood of all the mass medias. With attributes that are distinct from the Internet, mobile phones have a natural synergy with the needs of healthcare. For example, mobile phones are always turned on and permanently carried; they display the personal status of the user while being available at the point of creative impulse.

To avoid creating wasteful and disappointing experiences, healthcare institutions (and solution vendors) must adapt to serve these unique attributes. Instead of trying to force concepts from the previous media (the Internet, television, print) we must develop services that leverage the unique power and potential of mobiles to deliver radical new concepts.

Workable mHealth Solutions Already Present

Cutting GP no-shows in the UK by 90 percent = Reduced patient waiting times The effectiveness of SMS Appointment Reminders is being widely reported by healthcare providers. In the UK General Practitioners are reporting reductions in appointment no-shows by as much as 90 percent. This is delivering millions of pounds of savings and, in turn, directly helping reduce patient waiting times.

Mobile Books for medical texts: More popular in the US than electronic records Mobile Books show the speed of adoption that mHealth technologies are having with healthcare professionals. Already in the USA (a country in which less percent of all doctors use electronic patient records), a higher share (20 percent) of doctors report they are accessing textbook data via their mobiles.

One good example is MedHand.com which offers Nurse Companion, Doctor Companion, Pharmacist Companion, titles which enable professionals to carry up to date, made-for-mobile versions of all their familiar medical texts on any Smartphone.

Secure Systems for Organ Donors

As a nod to where this is all going, University Hospital Birmingham has built a bespoke transplant management solution in conjunction with BlackBerry Enterprise Solutions. This solution enables access to real time information with end-to-end encryption across a multitude of different platforms to maintain, search for and profile patients/organs for organ donation.

The program has eliminated confidentiality risk, increased ease of use and improved the speed of donor/recipient matching. The team is now working to extend the application to other transplant teams, replacing the hospital paging system with BlackBerry smartphones and integrating the BlackBerry solution into its emergency preparedness plans.

BlackBerry solutions are also being used in a variety of other settings, for example by midwives to securely edit the patient records of pregnant women.

M2M (Machine-to-Machine)

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Mobile Data means that a healthcare organisation's mobile strategy is no longer restricted to just mobile phones.

3G Data Dongles are helping ensure that staff who are out and about can access the data they need when they need it, while eliminating the additional costs or security risks of unsecure WiFi Hotspots.

Wireless Module specialists such as Cinterion.com show the future impact of mobile data in the healthcare industry by connecting medical devices such as ECG, Glucose/Blood Pressure Monitors, Weight Scales, Pedometers, etc. through the GSM network.

As a result, they have eliminated the installation costs/problems of fixed line communications and barriers of mobility. Once connected, medical devices have the potential to be part of robust, aggregate, secure and flexible new way to manage medical data on web-based platforms.

Lone/Community Workers

As care moves to the community and becomes more mobile, the need to seamlessly connect staff is being driven by a range of demands including personal safety, timely response and more effective allocation of resources and personnel.

Blackberry Enterprise Solutions are reporting some dramatic achievements in this space with a community worker solution involving a 'Bluetooth Pen' that enables data written on paper forms to be automatically entered into hospital electronic data systems - removing the need for behaviour change, enabling patients to keep physical records of encounters and eliminating the paper, cost and time inefficiencies previously associated with remote data collection.

Patient Participation/Feedback

While the days of one-way communications are clearly over, the costs and quality of call centre services can quickly mount. Fortunately 1-2-1 communication via SMS is very popular with patients - so healthcare institutions would do well to include them in their strategies.

In addition to appointment reminders, other areas for immediate application include feedback and suggestions to help identify problem areas and learn how to improve the quality of service being offered. A good example here is the mobile patient surveys from Questback.co.uk.

YouTube and Skype have shown consumer appetite for video content and quality healthcare content is proving a great way of communicating what to expect of healthcare facilities. Institutions can go the extra mile and syndicate content from specialists in healthcare video content such as HarleyStreetTV.com.

One quick point of entry to the world of mHealth lies in substituting the Contact Us page 'submit' box with a secure messaging platform. This avoids the security issues which are inevitably bound to arise with email. In turn, the platform can be leveraged further, for example, by using patient interviewing questionnaires to improve the patient care benefits and the quality of data that is collected.

Next Steps

The following four steps describe relatively easy-to-implement initiatives which will help prepare a healthcare institution for the mHealth future:

Begin by analysing customer/visitor/patient/patient family needs. What would you like to find if you were a visitor? Would a map of the location be helpful? Opening times? Car parking options/costs? Contact us details? Make sure to also include suggestion and feedback survey links.

Launch a mobile web presence for mobile visitors to your website. The costs for this pale in comparison to developing/testing and implementing platform specific applications. Instead, it gives access to early adopting customers and, crucially, to their feedback. Rather than paying consultants, such real-world customer feedback is clearly far more useful to hone what you're offering.

Add electronic patient registration services and then progress to mobilise these.

With a touch screen, your patients can check in for their appointments automatically. This, in turn, would translate into saving receptionist time, reduce queues and relieve some of the frustrations of both patients and staff. One source of information on integrated touch screen devices for hospitals and clinics can be found at www.wiggly-amps.com/touchscreen

Add secure messaging to your services. Bid farewell to the costs and security headaches of other systems. Push SMS to your customers, asking them to log in to view sensitive results or other information For example: "Your test results are now available. Log in with your Mobile Number and Password at AnyClinic.com to view".

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