

Healthcare Trend Report

Interoperability:
Create greater
connectivity through
more collaborative care



Interoperability is not a quick-fix, do-it-yourself project

While this initiative has been around for some time, it has become a top priority for the healthcare industry, due in large part to the rise of the healthcare consumer and the need for greater collaboration among providers. With so much information stored and shared electronically, the ability to collaborate for improved outcomes depends upon greater connectivity. Data is locked up in disparate systems, and there is no simple fix. Like any other large-scale endeavor, you have to view the journey to full interoperability through a long-term lens.

Today, few healthcare organizations and integrated delivery networks (IDNs) have the resources needed to solve the complex interoperability challenges. In fact, most organizations are focused on meeting specific compliance goals. And no wonder: It's hard to look beyond all the short-term dollars at stake.

While meeting compliance requirements is an important first step, it's only one of many to put you on the right path to interoperability. Additional evolving market forces — including standards and consumerism — will likely continue to shape the march toward interoperability over the next five to 10 years.

Market forces affecting interoperability

Healthcare is far more complex than many other industries, and it is built on a long history of siloed technology systems. As a result, technology standards will play a major role in advancing data sharing. The interoperability learning curve will likely get increasingly shallow in the coming years as various standards — such as HL7®, FHIR® and CCD®, for example — are developed and adopted by vendors.

Yet technology standards alone are not a silver bullet

On top of standards, market forces such as value-based reimbursement models, population health management, and collaborative care are compounding and further driving the need toward interoperability, especially for IDNs.



Interoperability check list:

Set the stage for interoperability success.
How many can you check off the list?

- Analyze
- Document
- Find gaps and inefficiencies
- Identify ways to bridge the gaps

In fact, one of the most powerful market forces is the rise of the healthcare “consumer,” which will likely create enormous pressure for greater data sharing and collaboration. As patients pay more for their own care and begin to shop competitively for providers, they undoubtedly will clamor for the same sorts of consumer transparency and convenience they already get from banks, retail stores and other service-oriented businesses.

Although some interoperability challenges are dependent on technology vendors to resolve, there are several ways you can take control. By improving your organization’s ability to share information, you can lower costs and improve collaboration for better outcomes. So how do you get started?

Four steps to achieve interoperability

The essence of full interoperability is the ability to capture data effectively. Healthcare leaders can help set the stage for success by considering a four-step approach to evaluate current processes for capturing data:

Step 1: Analyze

In the rush to get things done, it's easy to forget the crucial first step — analyzing your current state. A workflow and process analysis, which includes assessing your business processes and how you manage them, is one way you can walk through each phase of your existing information management processes from top to bottom.


Through this analysis, you can see how data moves within and across your organization, and identify cost-saving opportunities. You can also pinpoint the bottlenecks in information flow and their impact on throughput. From there, you can put a redesigned process in place — one that helps to bridge the consumption gap between what your technology can do and how it's actually being used today.

But this isn't the end of analyzing your workflows. While an important first step, it's also an ongoing step that you should conduct regularly to monitor your productivity.

Step 2: Document

Along with a workflow and process analysis, it's helpful to track and document all work efforts. If you have had a long-standing registration process in place, for example, you might be surprised to see how your resources are really being spent. Organizations often find that their processes contain many more steps, complexities and costs than they imagined.

Take an organization that realizes incomplete collection of patient information is a chief bottleneck in their process. Many organizations have standard paperwork and other processes for collecting patient information during every visit, and even how they treat images sent from another department. By documenting and tracking this process, you can see where there may be extra steps, or the specific areas where you are missing patient information when viewing their electronic health record (EHR).



Once you've discovered the inefficiencies within your workflows, you can prioritize which gaps to fill, and investigate what solutions may work best for your organization.

Step 3: Find gaps and inefficiencies

Partners trained in workflow analysis can use the results of the first two steps to help pinpoint gaps and inefficiencies, and to uncover opportunities for operational and financial improvement. For instance, consider a paper lab report that's faxed to another office, but not actually entered into the EHR for the provider to see until a week later. Gaps like this could result in a provider missing a vital patient diagnosis. Once you've discovered the inefficiencies within your workflows, you can prioritize which gaps to fill, and investigate what solutions may work best for your organization.

Step 4: Identify ways to bridge the gaps

Whether with existing or new technology, there are many opportunities for you to improve your organization's ability to safely exchange secured data in real time. These can range from streamlining workflows to employing technology that's better suited to your organizational needs. For example, information often gets lost or miscommunicated when being transferred from one EHR to another, or from paper to an EHR. By employing technology and strategies that help optimize your workflows, you can bolster the efficiency of your data management. It's also important to consider staff preferences and abilities when implementing new systems and strategies into your day-to-day, as this can affect how successful your new initiatives are.

Based on what we're seeing today, we might see the typical healthcare experience 10 years from now unfold something like this:

A patient downloads data from his personal health devices and schedules an appointment with his doctor from his smartphone. When he arrives at the hospital, registration staff already have the right information; no redundant paperwork. And while he's in the exam room, his physician accesses whatever data she needs and collaborates with other providers from her tablet.

In the future, interoperability will likely optimize the way healthcare organizations capture data across the entire continuum of care. The key is to proactively take steps toward interoperability now, focusing on greater collaborations to ultimately help improve care.



Interoperability quick facts:¹

- 40% of providers say patient health information is not always available when needed.
- 62% of hospitals cannot integrate care records into their own EHRs without manual entry.
- More than half of hospitals use patient health information that is electronically received from outside providers.