



CHIME convened a group of leading healthcare IT executives to share their perspectives on how positive partnerships make it possible to manage their digital infrastructure and support smooth operations across the enterprise.

The participants included:

Terri Coutts

RN-BC, MHA, CHCIO, CDH-E
SVP & Chief Digital Officer
The Guthrie Clinic

Keith Givelekian

CHCIO, PMP
Executive Director of Digital
Business
Cleveland Clinic

Theresa Meadows

FCHIME, CHCIO, LCHIME, CDH-E
SVP & Chief Information Officer,
Cook Children's Health Care System

Craig Richardville

MBA, FCHIME, LCHIME, FACHE, CHCIO,
CDH-E
Former Chief Digital and Information
Officer
Intermountain Healthcare

Chris Plaisance

Chief Information Officer
Black River Memorial Hospital

Andy Crowder

CHCIO, CDH-E
SVP, Chief Digital Officer
Advocate Health

SUMMARY

“No man is an island,” said English poet John Donne. The fundamental interconnectedness of the human condition was evident in early 17th century England and remains today in the modern world – perhaps more so than ever as technology brings us closer together in ways Donne could hardly have imagined.

These days, businesses and individuals continually rely on a complex web of tools, technologies, and relationships to meet their needs and accomplish their goals. In the healthcare industry, this often takes the form of strategic partnerships with complementary organizations and digital solutions providers whose expertise in specific areas can expand capacity and augment in-house skillsets.

But finding the right partners to rely on can be a challenge, especially when there can be serious risks from choosing incorrectly. Healthcare organizations cannot afford to expose themselves to interruptions in patient care, cybersecurity flaws, or revenue roadblocks that could impact their ability to remain viable in an incredibly difficult market landscape.

“We’re probably in one of the hardest times to be working in healthcare,” said Russ Branzell, President and CEO of CHIME, who moderated a recent executive roundtable hosted by CHIME and sponsored by Optimum Healthcare IT. “The economics are not favorable, qualified staff are hard to come by, and patient care is becoming even more challenging. That means we need good partners more than ever to get us through these tough circumstances, because none of us can go it alone.”

PARTNER VS. VENDOR: WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

Relationships come in many different forms across health systems, especially as digital infrastructure expands to include hundreds or thousands of different products that all play a unique role in the organization. And while responsive and respectful interactions are a requirement of all these relationships, not every CIO needs to be on a first-name basis with their counterpart at every service provider.

“There are vendors and there are partners,” explained Terri Coutts, SVP & Chief Digital Officer at The Guthrie Clinic in Pennsylvania and New York. “A vendor is someone who provides a service to the organization. A partner is someone who understands our unique needs and helps us grow. Both are vital for our operations, but we can rely on partners more to work closely with us to solve problems, be adaptable and flexible, and really help us drive toward specific goals.”

Collaboration and shared perspectives are the hallmark of a meaningful partnership, agreed Keith Givelekian, Executive Director of Digital Business at Cleveland Clinic. “A vendor relationship is more purely transactional. We know what we’re getting; they know what they’re getting,” he said.

“With a partner, it’s more about providing mutual aid,” he countered. “They lend us their expertise and provide their services, but we might give them room to innovate within our organization or refer our colleagues to them, so that we can both challenge ourselves and each other to keep moving forward together.”

Sharing risk and reward is key, according to Theresa Meadows, SVP & Chief Information Officer at Cook Children’s Health Care System. “If I’m going to take on a risk, I hope my partner is going to take on an equal risk so that we’re both invested in the outcome,” she said. “Most vendor relationships aren’t going to have that element to them — and that’s fine. There’s a limit to the risk we want to expose ourselves to, so we must be selective about who we share that with.”

The same can be said from the perspective of the technology solution provider, said Jason Mabry, President, Founder, and Board Member of Optimum Healthcare IT. “We have almost three hundred clients, and not all of them are going to be at that partnership level,” he noted. “We are always available to work with our clients however they need us, but effective, trusted strategic partnerships have to be cultivated carefully over time.”

“Not every vendor can be everything for every client, and not every client needs us to be everything to them,” he added. “Understanding those dynamics and being transparent about expectations is crucial for having a successful agreement where both parties can execute on their responsibilities.”

LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS TO OVERCOME ECONOMIC STRESSES AND STAFFING SHORTAGES

The healthcare industry is currently experiencing wide-ranging effects from an uncertain economic environment, including shrinking financial margins, staffing shortfalls, and challenging reimbursement models. To overcome these issues, executive leaders are relying on their strongest partners to assist with innovation, streamline resource usage, and help reduce extraneous costs.

“We are trying to maintain more complex models with fewer people,” Meadows said. “We need to find solutions that standardize and automate our workflows and allow us to focus on our highest priority issues knowing that we have limited resources to deal with them.”

Finding efficiencies is also the name of the game for Chris Plaisance, Chief Information Officer at Black River Memorial Hospital in Wisconsin. “We’re looking for partners who can provide automation through artificial intelligence for back office processes so my employees can work at the top of their skillsets and licenses without spending unnecessary effort on the mundane.”

He added, “We’re in a small community where it’s difficult to find staff because of the limitations of things like childcare availability in our area. If I can’t bring in new people to manage some of the routine tasks that have historically been manual, I need to think about how to deploy technology instead so that I can use the people I do have for more challenging work that can’t be automated.”

Some organizations are solving the problem with engaging a digital workforce through a combination of digital tools and people performing fractional work. “In addition, partnerships aren’t just between big technology companies,” said Craig Richardville, former Chief Digital and Information Officer at Intermountain Healthcare. “They’re also with individual contract caregivers to the organization and with other organizations that might share that person’s time. If I have a need for a fractional skillset, I can take the other fraction of a person’s working time, and share them with another organization, that’s a unique type of partnership where everyone involved gets what they need, and everyone wins. We need to be intentionally innovative and open-minded to many considerations.”

“If I can take 20 hours a week of a person’s working time and share them with another organization across the road that takes the other 20 hours, that’s a unique type of partnership where everyone involved gets what they need, and everyone wins when it’s tough to find traditional full-time employees.”

ASSESSING POTENTIAL PARTNERS TO FORGE POSITIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

When asked what makes a good partner, the attendees used words like “transparency,” “responsiveness,” “agility,” “willingness to learn,” “trustworthiness,” and “integrity” to describe their ideal relationship.

And when asked what would make them reconsider working closely with a solutions provider, similar but opposite themes emerged. One participant said that any partner who puts the organization at risk, including risk related to cybersecurity, compliance, or patient safety, would be shown the door immediately. Another noted that missing the mark on performance metrics would lead to a reevaluation of their relationship. A third spoke to the economic return on the investment (ROI) and the need to see the numbers trending in the right direction after a period of time before considering moving forward into more robust conversations.

Interestingly, most of the attendees pointed out that even the best partnerships can quickly devolve after a vendor acquisition, highlighting the importance of cultural alignment between organizations when searching for success.

“It all comes down to trust and a shared vision for success, whatever that means in your unique situation,” said Andy Crowder, SVP & Chief Digital Officer at Advocate Health. “When distrust creeps in, which can happen when an organization changes hands and the culture or the goals start to drift away from what you had before, that can be really problematic for a working relationship.”

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Andy Crowder
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“Partnerships are like muscles that need to be worked and flexed and strengthened,” he continued. “If you start putting a different type of strain on that muscle that you’re not prepared for, you might end up with an injury that’s hard to heal. That can happen sometimes when things change unexpectedly on one end or the other, so it’s important to keep your lines of communication open, meet often to stay in alignment, and work together to make sure you’re prepared for any changes that might come your way.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF PARTNERSHIP-DRIVEN HEALTHCARE

All the executives agreed that partnerships are an integral part of their digital maturity plans and will continue to be vital for success for the foreseeable future — especially as financial models continue to change and bring additional challenges to the industry.

“Whether we like it or not, finances dictate how we make business decisions and how much we’re able to invest in innovation,” acknowledged Meadows. “We always want to do the right thing and implement technologies in the ideal manner, but sometimes the reality of legacy systems and resource limitations will interfere with that a little bit.”

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“We need to lean into partners who understand those challenges and work with us creatively to do the best we can with what we have,” she added. “Those are the relationships I value the most and will continue to invest in over time.”

Relationships that grow through adversity are often the strongest, giving both participants the chance to show their strengths and develop new skills, concluded Givelekian.

“There is no future in healthcare without collaboration,” he stated. “We have to lean on each other and continue to innovate together if we’re going to work through some of the issues we’re facing as an industry and make sure we’re meeting the needs of our communities. That mission has to drive us forward together so we can keep hitting our marks and pushing the boundaries of what’s possible.”

KEYWORD: COLLABORATION

The insights shared by these healthcare IT leaders underscore the transformative power of strategic partnerships in digital health. The consensus is clear: collaboration and innovation are not just buzzwords, but essential ingredients for success in an era of shrinking margins, staffing challenges, and evolving patient needs. By fostering trust, transparency, and a shared vision for success, healthcare organizations and professional services firms can forge powerful alliances that drive efficiency, improve patient outcomes, and pave the way for a more sustainable and equitable healthcare system. The path forward is paved with collaboration, and the healthcare leaders who embrace this reality will be the ones who lead the charge toward a brighter future for all.