

Going Virtual for Good:

TRANSFORMING HEALTHCARE'S OPERATIONS AND WORKFORCE

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The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated a number of industry trends such as digital adoption, automation and perhaps one of the biggest shifts — a ballooning of the virtual workforce and virtual operations. Many providers' longterm plans to grow their virtual footprint for both clinical care and business operations advanced almost overnight. Telehealth went from optional to essential, and entire supporting functions like business offices began working from home.

[Research from Huron](#) finds that nearly half of leaders indicate changing care delivery models is their greatest challenge. More than one-third state the same about changing business models. As leaders change how healthcare operates, they will need strategies that support not just their virtual workforce but an entire ecosystem of virtual operations.

In response to the coronavirus, healthcare leaders acted quickly to translate their operations to a virtual environment. Now, what leaders must do is re-imagine their businesses for a new world.

Taking Virtual Workforce Strategies to the Next Level

Across all industries, the initial shift to remote work was not necessarily intended to be transformational. Months into the change, that's exactly what virtual work has been for most.

For health systems, the innovation of virtual delivery is overdue. Virtual operations have the potential to fundamentally change cost structures, drive efficiency and productivity, deepen employee satisfaction, and expand the talent pool.

Evolving Metrics

Understanding the value of this transformation requires a broad, comprehensive strategy and commitment to tracking new metrics in real time. Key performance indicators that focus on employee connection, such as engagement survey results and effectiveness of training, also become more important in virtual operations. Where weekly and monthly metrics might have been sufficient in the past, now real-time monitoring of productivity, throughput and backlogs will be essential for leaders to manage effectively in a virtual environment. Leaders will need reliable tools for quantifying the

benefits of higher productivity, less absenteeism, a more scalable and flexible workforce, real estate savings, and recruitment and retention savings.

Leaders can start by rethinking how work gets done in several core areas of their businesses.

How and Where We Work: Communication, Collaboration and Innovation

In the future of healthcare, the employee, clinician and consumer experiences should flow seamlessly between the virtual and physical world. This includes how teams communicate and collaborate to get work done.

While the transition to remote collaboration may be challenging for those who have traditionally worked on-site, tools such as video conferencing and a strong change management strategy make the shift smoother. Once workers have adjusted to this new mode of collaboration, the opportunities to innovate increase as there are no longer physical walls separating departments, functions or even entire facilities.

Leaders are re-imagining not only how they conduct their professional work but how to replace the personal connections that organically occur in the workplace. Hardwiring tactics such as daily huddles create a forum that supports accountability and alignment to department and organizational goals. The [consistent practice of asking specific questions](#) of key stakeholders supports critical one-on-one time and meaningful connections that drive employee and patient satisfaction.

Changing Spaces

With physical barriers removed, leaders may find opportunities to integrate operations in ways that support efficiency and scale. And when key business functions are performed in different areas of the country or the world, it can provide options

for decisions such as expanded business hours or mitigate the risk of disruption from events such as natural disasters.

As organizations reduce their physical footprint, it will be imperative not to eliminate all collaborative space. Plans should be in place to repurpose and redesign offices and cubicles into spaces such as shared desks that promote interaction when people are together.

Technology and Security for a Virtual Workforce

The severity, sophistication and frequency of [cyberattacks on healthcare organizations](#) continues to rise. Historically, healthcare has not kept pace with other industries such as financial services in shoring up their defenses against data breaches and other incidents.

Virtual work environments pose additional and different data and cybersecurity risks. Compounding the problem is the concern that most programs were quickly launched during the first wave of the coronavirus crisis and therefore not set up for long-term success and safety. Healthcare organizations that have expanded telehealth or shifted part of their operations to a remote status now have to [think differently about security](#) and understand the role that employee culture plays in reducing the risks of attacks.

Who Works Where and Why: Talent and Culture in a Virtual World

Recruitment and Retention

Over a decade ago, when qualified coders became scarce, providers were forced to look outside their traditional on-site models and hire remote workers. The shift to a largely remote operating model for this function became the standard, but adoption stopped there. Now, there is urgency and opportunity for remote workforces across systems.

Going forward, an organization's ability to attract and retain top talent will be dependent on the strength of its virtual models. When anyone can work anywhere, competition for workers will only increase. Organizations that invest now in developing solid virtual workforce strategies will be the employers of choice in the future.

Leaders should be reevaluating the skills they need for the future of healthcare and taking advantage of access to national and global talent pools. Positions that traditionally carried vacancies now could be staffed adequately, paving the way for increased volume and revenue.

Performance Management

The importance of accountability and engagement increases significantly as employees transition to a work-from-home status. Processes, tools, technology and leadership all come together to create a culture that drives the performance of a virtual workforce.

Leaders should be considering how they will systematize the development and cascading of key performance goals, what metrics will be tracked and with what frequency, and even how performance in a remote environment might affect compensation.

Training and Development

Employee training and development tends to get de-emphasized during times of change, which puts new initiatives at risk for failure. Especially when transitioning people to a virtual work environment, leaders should be increasing investments in clear, structured training that emphasizes expected behaviors and provides guidance on reporting processes and use of new technology.

Pay special attention to midlevel managers and supervisors who may need leadership and coaching development as they transition from a primarily on-site experience to a remote leadership model. Closely aligning training and development to the monitoring and metrics mentioned earlier will create timely, relevant training. Real-time measurement goes hand in hand with more timely interventions with staff who need extra guidance.

Hybrid models that split training into virtual and physical components will continue to be refined. While portions of training for cohorts such as new hires may still require an on-site presence, the majority of ongoing education will occur in remote e-learning environments.

Key Takeaways

The world of virtual work is here to stay. For many organizations, transitioning to a virtual environment was done abruptly and out of necessity — but now is the time to rethink and refine a comprehensive intentional strategy for virtual operations.

Think differently.

Instead of trying to translate current operations to a virtual environment, leaders should use the momentum to transform how their businesses function in the future of healthcare.

Plan differently.

Rethink processes, systems and the use of physical spaces with the expectation that all stakeholders will be moving fluidly between the virtual and on-site world.

Act differently.

Invest in the training, technology and tools to build a culture prepared to thrive in a virtual world.



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