

[Home](#) >> [Opinion](#) >> NHS 'missing A Great Technology Opportunity'

NHS 'missing a great technology opportunity'

Paul Bensley, managing director at cloud communications firm X-on, says where sick patients are concerned there can be no compromise

Jonathan Symcox

8:30am 14th Oct 2016



"Practices must spend wisely if they are to use tech effectively to improve the service they provide"

Without a doubt, the standard of service in the healthcare industry should be prioritised more than in any other sector.

Where sick patients are concerned there can be no compromise, yet many local surgeries are falling at the first hurdle and struggle to communicate effectively with those getting in touch to book appointments.

The misuse of technology is a significant factor contributing to this problem. With budgets stretched across the health service, practices must spend wisely if they are to use tech effectively to improve the service they provide.

In order to help practice managers make better use of the technology at their disposal, there are some fundamental differences between GP surgeries and other businesses that technology vendors have to understand.

First of all, technology providers selling into a healthcare business must recognise that the sector needs to be approached differently.

Many of the organisations that vendors deal with in other sectors, will have a technical member of staff already in place, dedicated to overseeing an organisation's use of technology. This is where GP surgeries differ.

With budgets and time stretched, many do not have an employee that can regularly review how technology is performing or indeed, how it could be used more effectively.

As a consequence, there is not often a clear connection between the challenges a surgery faces and the technology it purchases to provide the solution.

To counteract this problem, practice managers should be demanding an extra layer of consultancy from vendors to ensure that a system is designed that fits the specific needs of the organisation.

Without this added consultancy before the implementation of a new service or product, technology risks becoming a lame duck in general practices throughout the UK and patients will lose out.

Even when organisations do get it right with regards to technology purchases, management cannot afford to think that one correct decision will be the silver bullet that solves their problems for several years to come.

Business pressures and priorities change rapidly so technology and how it is used needs to be adapted accordingly.

However, there can be a tendency not to make a change to existing technology deployments unless something goes drastically wrong.

As a result, practices can be left with underperforming technology that no longer suits their patients' needs, purely because it is not causing them significant problems.

This is a dangerous policy to adopt, especially when patient service in the NHS is under such scrutiny.

A good example of where healthcare organisations are struggling to meet demand is in patient communications.

Over the past four years, it has been getting progressively more difficult for patients to contact their local surgery, according to the latest GP Patient survey from the NHS.

Did Not Attend (DNA) rates are costing the NHS around £300m a year and this is largely because communications systems are not being used to their full potential.

It is not that GP surgeries don't have the technology in place to deal effectively with patient enquiries, it is that the systems they have implemented are not being utilised to provide the best service.

For example, many surgeries have automated SMS systems to remind patients of their appointment details.

What they don't have is a system that requires the patient to accept or decline the appointment, a feature that behavioural research suggests has a significant impact on DNA rates.

It is a subtle difference that has the potential to make a big impact.

Another reason why many surgeries are not making the most of the technology at their fingertips is a lack of training. Too often, technology is merely sold in and plugged in without a thought being given to how it will actually affect the working life of an employee.

In this scenario, even if the deployment works on a basic level, surgeries will only scratch the surface of what is possible in terms of the technology helping them to meet their objectives.

It is essential that GP surgeries always have the problems they are aiming to solve at the forefront of their minds when purchasing technology, otherwise there is a grave risk that the implementation will fail to meet the expectations of the patients.

It's certainly not that they don't care or don't want to provide the best level of service.

You only have to visit GP surgeries around the country to see how much it does matter to the people that work there. There is a big responsibility on vendors.

They need to be aware that selling technology to organisations within the healthcare sector requires a tailored approach to take into account the unique challenges that are faced within it and the personalities that make it work on a local level.

If these factors are taken into consideration then patients will see a positive change; if not, it will be another missed opportunity for the NHS.