Empowering Healthcare Operations: Innovative Ideas for Workforce & Technology Optimization

Discover strategies for maximizing efficiency while addressing workforce challenges and technology fragmentation

CHIME DIGITAL HEALTH LEADERS

Healthcare leaders from across the U.S. gathered at the symplr 2024 Healthcare Operations Summit (HOS) in Phoenix, AZ, to address some of the industry's most pressing issues. A diverse group of clinical, administrative, and IT leaders shared their unique perspectives and explored strategies to enhance healthcare operations and tackle today's biggest obstacles to care – staff shortages and tech fragmentation.

When combined, these pervasive issues create a vicious cycle that directly impacts patient care. The healthcare industry's critical shortage of professionals leads to overworked employees who are difficult to retain, ultimately compromising the quality and consistency of patient care. Burnout and high turnover rates not only strain existing staff but also limit resources for training and supporting new hires, further degrading the overall standard of care. As this cycle intensifies, it threatens to erode healthcare outcomes, potentially leading to increased medical errors, reduced patient satisfaction, and poorer health results across the board. Breaking this cycle is crucial not just for the well-being of healthcare professionals and healthcare organizations, but for ensuring the delivery of safe, effective, and compassionate patient care.

The insights and strategies discussed at symplr's HOS offer a roadmap on how to navigate these challenges and achieve operational excellence.

MOVE TO "WE" TO OVERCOME PERSISTENT ISSUES

Leaders have had to find creative solutions to combat workforce challenges and recruit and retain top talent. The adoption of innovative solutions—some inspired by practices outside of healthcare—has allowed these organizations to set new standards for workforce development and move beyond traditional, tactical approaches that are no longer sufficient. This mindset not only addresses immediate shortages but also nurtures the next generation of caregivers to ensure long-term success.

CREATIVE RECRUITMENT: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO BUILD DEMAND FOR FUTURE HEALTHCARE WORKERS

EARLY EXPOSURE AND ENGAGEMENT

When working at Mercy Hospital in Springfield, Missouri, Linda Knodel, former Chief Nursing Officer, recognized the recruitment process begins early. Inspired by a community program from Johnny Morris, CEO of Bass Pro Shops, she and other leaders launched a similar initiative. She introduced a program that brings students to the hospital to spark their interest in healthcare careers to mirror Morris' strategy of integrating education with practical experiences.

"In collaboration with Springfield Public School System, we established the Health Sciences Academy at Mercy Hospital to support middle school education. Two classrooms on the hospital's top floor hosted students to observe hospital operations and apply their math and science lessons to healthcare scenarios in real-time," shared Knodel. "The result? A whopping 80% of participants went on to pursue a career in healthcare."

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Linda Knodel
former Chief Nursing Officer
Mercy Hospital

EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND INCENTIVES

High education costs often block career paths in healthcare. Seattle Children's Hospital addresses this barrier through education incentives. The IT department, under Chief Digital Officer & CIO Dr. Zafar Chaudry, partners with city colleges to offer high school students and underprivileged youths in Seattle a fully funded associate's degree in health IT.

Each year, the program awards about 30 full scholarships and provides scholarship winners with mentorship and a laptop. Upon graduation, these students can join the hospital workforce or explore opportunities with various tech companies. Now in its third year, this initiative has significantly benefited the hospital and community.

INTENTIONAL RETENTION: LEAN INTO YOUR BEST PEOPLE

Healthcare organizations can benefit big time from having "stay interviews" with long-term employees. By asking staff what makes them stay, organizations can uncover the great things they're already doing and make sure to keep those up. Plus, asking what could be better shows a commitment to making improvements and addressing any potential issues early on. These chats not only help in boosting employee satisfaction but also show that the organization truly values and cares about its staff. This friendly, proactive approach can lead to a happier, more engaged workforce, and ultimately, better patient care and smoother operations.

One essential element to retaining a happy and committed workforce is to create a safe workplace, especially in challenging environments like the emergency department. As Vicki Knox, Vice President of Clinical Outcomes and Operation Safety at Ardent Health, emphasized during a panel at symplr's HOS, the need for workplace security is more pressing than ever. Knox shared efforts they've made to help retain staff by creating a culture of safety and addressing workplace violence. She added that when she worked as a nurse, she would often finish a shift and say to herself, "Thank God everyone has a pulse, including me."

Knox explained how workplace safety is dependent on a balanced ratio of patients to providers, which has become more and more difficult to achieve. When staff is limited, technology is essential to help expand staff reach, enhance workflow efficiency, and achieve safer healthcare environments.

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Technology can also help existing staff adopt new roles within the organization. A nonprofit health system Chief Strategy Officer in attendance at the Summit discussed how their aggressive expansion of the virtual nursing model has helped retain experienced nurses who may no longer be able to meet the physical demands of bedside care.

"Yes, it's expensive to install the technology, but we're seeing great retention – which makes every CFO happy. We're also able to recruit some of these tenured nurses into the program who still want to provide care at the bedside but don't have the physical strength to do so."

The added benefit of retaining experienced nurses is the invaluable workplace wisdom they impart to new nurses, which can only be acquired through years of experience. When healthcare organizations lose experienced nurses, they also lose this unique knowledge source.

TECH OPTIMIZATION: DON'T AUTOMATE DYSFUNCTION

Choosing the right technology and managing its rollout carefully is key; otherwise, what should be an improvement can end up being an added complication.

"[Healthcare leaders] have a very myopic view of technology, which oftentimes tends to enhance the problems that were already there," shared Phil Hampton, Chief Supply Chain Officer at Presbyterian Healthcare Services. "We don't want to automate dysfunction. We have to start with the fundamentals."

THE VALUE OF MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES AND PRIORITIES

One key strategy to avoid automating dysfunction is to form multidisciplinary teams for buying decisions. Naturally, different roles have unique perspectives and priorities when it comes to technology. According to a survey taken by symplr HOS attendees, clinical leaders prioritize outcomes and ease of use, while IT and administrative leaders focus on cost, interoperability, and security.

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Considering everyone's needs can help prevent disruptions and fragmented strategies. Clinical, administrative, and IT leaders often approach problems from their unique perspectives, which can sometimes overlook the broader impact on other stakeholders. When frontline workers are involved in technology decision-making processes, utilization significantly improves.

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Rachelle Longo, Assistant Vice President of Virtual Care at Ochsner Health, shared her experience with a technological solution that missed a crucial perspective. They initially implemented centralized telemetry monitoring to expand the reach of their existing staff. This approach allowed one technician to monitor multiple patients across several units, saving money and allocating resources more effectively.

"Instead of there being a technician on seven West and another on five West monitoring 25 patients, I have one technician monitoring those 25 patients," Longo shared. The decision was easy – the approach saves the organization money and allocates resources more effectively.
However, when the technology was rolled out it left the bedside nurses with additional tasks not identified during the project planning. The added responsibilities led to discontent among the nursing staff.

"Now we ensure that we bring all stakeholders together to review the processes to make sure that doesn't happen anymore," said Longo.

CONSOLIDATION MATTERS

While optimization remains important, consolidation—and subsequently, simplification—has become the primary objective for healthcare organizations that aim to streamline their operations.

"Technology can offer some solutions, but you still need people to implement it," stated Niel Oscarson, Director of Research and Strategy at KLAS. "When organizations can't hire their way out of a problem, optimization is the only solution."

Karen "K" Marhefka, Deputy Chief Information Officer at RWJ Barnabas Health, discovered the importance of consolidation when she addressed challenges within her organization's call centers. In looking for ways to improve patient access to 400 medical group and hospital outpatient department locations, they discovered they had multiple call centers all doing similar functions—scheduling, billing, coding—which presented an opportunity to improve efficiency.

"We uncovered 17 separate call centers that already existed in our organization, and very few of them knew the others existed," Marhefka explained. The fragmented system led to patients receiving multiple notifications per appointment from various automated sources. By identifying and eliminating such inefficiencies, including redundant call centers and excessive patient notifications, Marhefka and her IT colleagues worked in partnership with Ambulatory operational leaders to streamline operations and significantly enhance patient and staff experiences.

Leaders emphasized that by focusing on identifying and resolving common causes of dissatisfaction – such as inefficient processes, communication gaps, or technology hurdles – healthcare organizations can create a more positive environment without necessarily introducing new initiatives. One of the sentiments shared among leaders participating across panels at HOS was, "If you can remove dissatisfaction, it can be as impactful as adding satisfaction."

SHARED GOVERNANCE FOR SEAMLESS SOLUTIONS

Recognizing the value of diverse perspectives is key, not just for tech decisions but for all organizational strategies. This well-rounded approach is especially important in AI governance.

"The number one lesson I learned is don't let IT establish [AI] governance by itself," warned Chero Goswami, Chief Information and Digital Officer at the University of Wisconsin Health System.

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> **Chero Goswami**
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Dr. Robert Bart, Chief Medical Information Officer at UPMC, shared similar views. He explained that UPMC's AI governance team initially had a strong tech and informatics focus, but he soon realized they needed clinicians to really succeed. They even brought in clinical ethicists later to review the algorithms in use.

"The other key piece to our governance was adding two financial analysts that our CFO trusts," Bart explained. "We're always doing the process of financial modeling. It doesn't mean that there has to be a financial ROI. It's preferred that there's a financial ROI, but there has to be some tangible ROI for the organization."

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> CMIO
> UPMC

"We really are trying to analyze what is the return to the organization," he continued. "When I say the organization, that includes the patients we serve. Keeping patient care and outcomes as our North Star has allowed our team to be one of the most functional committees or groups within our hospital structure quite quickly."

SHIFTING FROM RETURN ON INVESTMENT (ROI) TO VALUE ON INVESTMENT (VOI)

More and more, healthcare organizations are shifting their focus from ROI to VOI. This perspective acknowledges that the benefits of technological advancements extend beyond financial returns and provide qualitative improvements like reducing providers' "pajama time" (the time healthcare professionals spend working outside the office on administrative or compliance tasks). The traditional emphasis on immediate financial ROI can neglect transformative initiatives that, while not immediately profitable, are vital for long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

"I'm more of a fan of the value of investment – the VOI model – versus the ROI model," Goswami said of his experience implementing ambient technology for his physicians. "For example, imagine a physician who has just completed a 10-hour workday. After attending their child's baseball game or ballet practice, they return home at 8 o'clock and need to respond to 50 messages, each taking about two minutes. If we can save that physician 80 percent of that time – around 80 minutes – is that considered an investment or an expense?"

"My colleagues asked me how we're going to pay for this," Goswami explained. "They said there's no ROI on this if the physician doesn't see another patient. I asked, 'What's the opportunity cost that no analytics tool captures when the physician falls sick once every three months and misses eight appointments? My ROI – or VOI – is those eight patients back.'"

INNOVATION: HYPE WITH HOPE

When asked if AI is overhyped, healthcare leaders were quick to disagree, and with good reason. Dr. Zafar Chaudry shared an example of how they used AI to create a model that can predict with 95+% accuracy whether a child will have a postoperative stroke.

"We have reduced post-brain surgery strokes at Seattle Children's. This discovery improves operations because you don't have to keep patients in the ICU as long and provides a better outcome for the child."

While some IT leaders found AI to be overhyped, administrators offered a balanced perspective between skepticism and hope.

symplr has identified several workflows that could be positively influenced by AI capabilities. The symplr Workforce team is actively exploring how to best leverage AI capabilities that enhance efficiency during the scheduling process. The system will generate shift suggestions to help nurse managers build schedules that optimize employees' committed hours and assist employees with self-scheduling -- ultimately saving time, increasing satisfaction, and reducing administrative burden.

Clinical, administrative, and IT leaders agreed that more than any other technological force in healthcare, AI requires ethical considerations in its governance.

"Not many people on the tech side, who work with LLMs (large language models) realize it, but in order to have effective, equitable, and ethical use of AI, strong governance is required," said Goswami.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT AI PROJECTS

Healthcare organizations can start by asking the following questions when considering new AI solutions:

- Does it make me or my organization more efficient?
- Does it empower and upskill employees?
- Is it equitable, empathetic, and human-like?
- Will the vendor work transparently with me, including allowing access to the training data set to confirm it is not biased?
- How is it part of my connected cloud strategy?

SECRET TO SUCCESSFUL HEALTHCARE OPERATIONS: TEAM UP AND WIN!

This group of leaders made one thing clear: optimizing healthcare operations requires a unified approach. Clinicians, administrators, and IT leaders have a unique opportunity to join forces, aligning their diverse expertise to revolutionize how healthcare systems function. By doing so, they can achieve the ultimate trifecta: enhanced caregiver satisfaction, improved business outcomes, and most crucially, superior patient care.

The key to this operational transformation lies in dismantling organizational silos and fostering collaborative strategies. The success stories and lessons shared by these leaders underscore the critical importance of integrating varied perspectives to address the intricate operational challenges facing healthcare today.

By focusing on these operational improvements, healthcare organizations can streamline processes, optimize resource allocation, and create synergies across departments. This operational excellence translates directly into smoother workflows, reduced burnout, enhanced care coordination, and ultimately, a healthcare system that's better equipped to meet the needs of both its staff and patients.

About symplr Healthcare Operations Summit

The symplr Healthcare Operations Summit is an exclusive, annual gathering that unites healthcare's brightest minds in operations, technology, and clinical leadership. Our goal is to deepen our understanding of healthcare operations and its profound impact on hospitals, payers, clinical staff, patients, and outcomes.

Improving healthcare outcomes often begins with what patients and providers experience. However, many healthcare challenges are fundamentally operational, rooted in tasks like provider credentialing, scheduling, and clinical communication. Neglecting these fundamental functions wastes resources and creates inefficiencies, which can have severe consequences, particularly during crises, leading to understaffing, quality breakdowns, and financial instability.

Effective healthcare operations are the key to substantial positive change. Enhanced efficiency empowers care providers to focus on patients and drive better outcomes.

The 2024 symplr Healthcare Operations Summit took place May 5-7, 2024, in Phoenix, Arizona. The Summit hosted leaders from 34 healthcare organizations, representing all 50 states, 1100 hospitals, 150k hospital beds, 250k providers, 900k employees, and $500B in revenue.

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About symplr®

symplr is the leader in enterprise healthcare operations software and services. For more than 30 years and with deployments in 9 of 10 U.S. hospitals, symplr has been committed to improving healthcare operations through its cloud-based solutions, driving better operations for better outcomes. Our provider data management; workforce management; compliance, quality, and safety; and contract, supplier, and spend management solutions improve the efficiency and efficacy of healthcare operations, enabling caregivers to quickly handle administrative tasks so they have more time to do what they do best: provide high-quality patient care.

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