6 C-suite takeaways – Automation and workforce strategies for healthcare
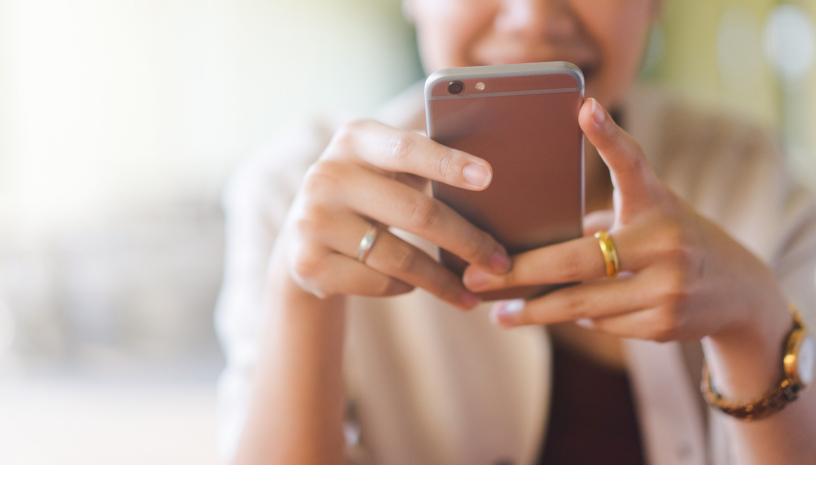
Automation has the potential to bring efficiency, ease and accuracy to every healthcare activity. It can speed the exchange of information, streamline clinical workflows and accelerate financial transactions. According to the Council for Affordable Quality Healthcare, the U.S. healthcare system could save $16.3 billion by using workflow automation to reduce administrative complexity. There is potential gain everywhere. And the capability for automating activities continues to get more sophisticated.

Healthcare leaders see the potential. According to a recent Optum survey, 98% of healthcare leaders have, or plan to implement, an AI strategy, and 99% expect that strategy to yield tangible cost savings. A full 80% of C-level healthcare leaders trust AI to support nonclinical tasks.

Given the enormous potential for savings and reducing administrative burden, it's no surprise that healthcare executives are integrating more automation technologies in their hospitals.

During a recent advisory call by *Becker's Hospital Review*, a panel of senior healthcare executives discussed their organizations' automation and workforce strategies. Here are six takeaways from the discussion:

1 **Big gains demand a holistic approach to automation.** Compared to other industries, healthcare is late to the automation game. Historically, healthcare organizations have applied automation to back-office processes, rather than taking a systems-thinking approach to front-end challenges. According to the senior vice president of a health insurance company specializing in Medicaid patients, "How we think about automation needs a giant infusion of rigor and a more expansive view. Big goals and challenges can be intimidating, but I believe it's possible to navigate the tension between an expansive vision and systematically attacking some of the root causes without getting stuck in maintenance mode."

2 **Partnerships and information-sharing accelerate success.** Alignment, collaboration and data-sharing are difficult for many health systems. These factors often hinder automation initiatives. "Much of the complexity comes from the lack of interoperability between healthcare systems," the associate CMO at a healthcare organization based in the South said. "There's complexity regarding patient privacy, franchising and organizational privacy. To move forward in the automation realm, we need aligned partnerships that prioritize information-sharing to create value and improve the delivery of healthcare." There is reason for optimism, however. According to John Kontor, MD, SVP of clinical technologies at Optum, data is beginning to flow more freely thanks to the interoperability rules and regulations enacted by the federal government.

3 **Automation is part of a competitive staffing strategy.** COVID-19 has shifted the focus of automation in healthcare to the workforce. In the past, clinicians tended to think about automation in the context of data and capacity. With today's dire talent shortages, however, attention has shifted to ways that automation can support greater workforce stability and reduce unnecessary tasks for skilled labor. "People who believe the workforce will return to the way it was pre-pandemic are kidding themselves," the chief clinical officer at a health system in the South said. "We have to think about how to get the most out of our skilled labor force and do more with automation."

Some healthcare organizations are leveraging AI, machine learning and automation to attract new talent. "Using automation to lure talent is something that I didn't see prior to COVID-19. Healthcare systems are telling candidates, 'We're more efficient and our workflows are easier. There are fewer onerous tasks that you'll have to do,'" the chief nursing officer for a large technology company said.

4 **Consumers want the ease and convenience of automated services.** Patients today have very different expectations. They feel more empowered and want clinical information at their fingertips. "Providers must use automation to support patients, as well as components of clinical care. If they don't do this, then technology companies will," Dr. Kontor said. When it comes to automation and digital tools, however, member and patient trust is an enormous issue. A lack of trust can prevent health systems from engaging members to do the right things for their physical and mental health.

5 **Automated accuracy can build swift agreement into every payer-provider exchange.** Automation of payer-provider interactions is advancing rapidly. On the administrative side of healthcare, automation has gained traction because money flows there. Robotic process automation, for example, has been widely adopted to automate revenue cycle processes. Looking ahead, Optum anticipates greater automation of processes related to risk adjustment capture and quality score capture. There is also considerable energy focused on automating interactions like prior authorization. "The technology has advanced to the point where we will see more real-time authorizations and more authorizations being submitted automatically," Dr. Kontor said.

6 **Collaboration and change management accelerate adoption.** Successful deployment of automation in healthcare requires more than just technology. A frustration on the clinical side is that some technology companies don't truly understand the healthcare work environment and employee pain points. Although many feel that automation has the potential to eliminate healthcare disparities, healthcare experts also worry that adding automated solutions on top of a broken chassis could actually make disparities worse.

Change management is another aspect of automation in healthcare that can't be overlooked. "I think much of the healthcare talent today needs a wholesale revamp when it comes to working with technology. Technological advances arrive well ahead of humans' ability to exploit them," the senior vice president of a health insurance company said.

Although healthcare leaders recognize the challenges associated with automation on both the provider and patient side of the house, they all acknowledge the importance of automation to organizational sustainability. As the chief nursing officer at a large technology company observed, "Whether you're on the payer, provider or consumer side, there's no way we can move forward without improving on automation." ●