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Digital Health Data: The Key to Driving Healthy Outcomes and Engagement

Industry leaders discuss the opportunities and challenges for digital health in engaging consumers and improving health outcomes

In recent years, digital health solutions – particularly wearables and other connected devices – have captured the attention of consumers, providers and payers alike as an essential tool in improving health and offering better care for people with complex health needs. 46% of consumers are now considered active digital health adopters, up from 19% in 2015,¹ suggesting that as consumerism in health and wellness grows, people will continue to see the use of digital health data as critical in informing their health-related decision making.

Healthcare stakeholders are utilizing data from digital health devices to create comprehensive, personalized health insights and motivators for behavioral change. Validic, the industry's leading digital health platform, joined client WebMD and integration partner Fitbit to deliver insights on digital health data and its power to drive healthy outcomes and engagement. WebMD Health Services' Director of Product Management, Validic CEO Drew Schiller, and the Fitbit Wellness Strategic Partnership Manager discussed what digital health means and how it is changing the patient-provider relationship, how the industry can increase patient/consumer engagement, and what the future holds for digital health technology.

Marrying technology and expertise to improve health

Today's wearables and connected health devices empower consumers to more actively monitor and engage in their health and wellness in a way unthinkable even five years ago. New devices and applications are incorporating more sophisticated tracking, analytics and algorithms to create a more engaging and informative consumer experience. Digital health “marries technology and healthcare expertise to meet consumers wherever they are on their health journey and give them the information they need at their fingertips,” said the Strategic Partnership Manager at Fitbit Wellness.

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The value of digital health comes from its ability to combine disparate data into meaningful, personalized information, added the Director of Project Management at WebMD Health Services. “It’s about pulling laboratory data, wearables data, and leveraging technology to drive a personalized experience that engages the user and drives outcomes that improve or maintain health,” he said.

Drew Schiller agreed. Digital health platforms “enable individuals to gain deeper insights and collaborate with others to become healthier. It’s about making the data meaningful and individualized for consumers.”



Changing the patient-provider dynamic

Digital health and consumer interest in fitness and overall wellbeing are generating a seismic shift in patient-provider relationships. “For decades, healthcare was something performed on us rather than something we took ownership of,” Schiller said. “Physicians tell us that patients now have a BYOD [bring your own device] approach when they come in. [Patients] want to know how they can better use their digital health data to increase their overall wellness, how can they improve their nutrition based on the data they’ve been tracking for six months.”

The instant availability of data and interpretive feedback provides ongoing support to a patient and can extend a provider’s availability and

insights beyond the occasional office visit. “Today, a patient can see and understand key health metrics minute-by-minute, see trends in their lives over the last week or month, and make adjustments immediately. There’s no need to wait for the intermittent interaction with a healthcare provider, not that they can be replaced, but that outside of those visits, the patient can do so much more for themselves,” the Fitbit Wellness Strategic Partnership Manager said.

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STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP MANAGER,
FITBIT WELLNESS

The more data the user has available, the more valuable all of it becomes. “Users can incorporate biometric screenings they have onsite with their employer, screening results from their physician, and goals set with their health coach,” the Director of Project Management at WebMD Health Services said. Patients can share that information with their providers during visits to give them a more complete and objective view of what’s happening between consultations.

Benefits go both ways. “Our employers and health plan clients want trusted data. They don’t necessarily believe users’ self reports. If we flow the data in real time through their daily goals and plans and make it accessible to their telephonic health coach, that holds users accountable,” the Director of Project Management at WebMD Health Services noted. The more engaged and accountable the user, the better results they can achieve and the more committed they are to continue behaviors that improve their health. In fact, individuals using a device to reduce weight or achieve a healthier body mass index (BMI) are 5 - 10 percent more effective in reaching their goals than those who do not use a device.

The immediate feedback provided by wearables inherently lends itself to an increased ownership

of one's health. These devices can motivate swift and long-term changes in a way that is difficult for healthcare providers, because they are with a patient during every decision and moment of the day. "My son's childcare provider had always struggled with her weight," said Schiller. "She started wearing a tracker and noticed that she took 2000 steps just shopping. She was so excited, she started taking longer walks. Then, in monitoring her sleep, she noticed it was really off, so she bought a new mattress, which has improved her quality of rest. Now, she is into real-time health in a way she had never been able to before and it is making a real difference for her. This kind of new found investment in personal health is happening every day for people around the world - thanks in large part to the insights, accountability and engagement offered by wearables."

Increasing engagement and actionable insights

The challenge for digital health rests in keeping users engaged, so they continue to build on the quality of information available digitally and continue to derive increasing benefit from their devices. The success of these devices hinges on their ease of use and lifestyle relevance. "Removing barriers is critical. The program or platform must be easy to access, easy to use and easy to integrate into your day," said the Fitbit Wellness Strategic Partnership Manager.

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DREW SCHILLER, CEO, VALIDIC

Once users find comfort with a platform or program, then they need the data to drive actionable feedback and messages. "If they are tracking steps and are short of their goal, the device needs to reach out and say, 'it's time to take a walk,'" the Director of Project Management at WebMD Health Services added.

For many users, social connections and peer involvement provide a powerful hook for continued and expanded use of digital health data. "We see social engagement emerging strongly within Fitbit's application. People are communicating through the app and the dashboard, particularly with digital challenges, which are a fun and light-hearted way to get people motivated, moving and communicating," the Fitbit Wellness Strategic Partnership Manager observed. This helps promote continued engagement and sustained behavior change.

Health plans and employers have also used those fitness challenges effectively to drive engagement. "We see more engagement with challenges when users have a device then when they have to key in data from their pedometer, for instance," the Director of Project Management at WebMD Health Services said. "And once they 'get in the door' with challenges, we see more engagement with other solutions," such as those prompting diabetics to more closely or regularly monitor their blood glucose levels or those at risk for obesity to better track their weight and blood pressure.

For providers, employers and health plans that want to benefit from the explosion of digital health data and help users improve their health, the biggest challenge has been finding a way to work with the data, regardless of the device utilized. "A trend we're seeing from the data side is that patients have a fairly good amount of loyalty or lock-in once they choose a platform and device. So, healthcare companies need to have a device- or platform-agnostic strategy to truly reach their full population," Schiller noted.

As many companies have yet to implement a strategy around digital health, this is the time to ensure their approach incorporates any device their population could use or currently uses. One study examining absenteeism and presenteeism among 50,000 workers at 10 companies shows that lost productivity costs are 2.3 times higher than medical and pharmacy costs.²

Looking to the future

Today, there are over 325 million connected wearable devices worldwide.³ These devices are giving users better insights into their health than

what is available via other means, according to the panelists. “The devices will give users information they never had access to before,” the Fitbit Wellness Strategic Partnership Manager said. “The ability to track heart rate is becoming standard on higher end trackers, and we’ll soon see glucose and blood pressure monitoring, as well as other vital sign readings incorporated in simple, stylish devices,” added Schiller. Users can even monitor vitamin levels in some current prototypes, the Director of Project Management at WebMD Health Services noted.

With the rapid expansion in clinical information available through devices, the next step in advancing digital health is to make “identifying and managing health goals as seamless and easy as checking your email or Facebook status,” the Fitbit Wellness Strategic Partnership Manager said. “Knowing where you are, how you’re trending and being notified of exceptions to your status are key components to consistent, long-term health. Devices must deliver not just data, but data that can change lives.”

The ability to change behaviors and improve health outcomes appeals to providers and payers as much as to users. “John Hancock Life Insurance

recently announced a program to give wearable trackers to users and offer real time adjustable life insurance rates based on how active users are in their daily activities,” Schiller said.

Palo Alto Medical Foundation and Sutter Health provided a different type of incentive in a pilot with patients suffering from hypertension and heart disease. The patients received connected blood pressure monitors, connected fitness trackers and connected weight scales to share their data with their physicians because it saves them time and is more convenient, said Schiller. Instead of having to go to the hospital or doctor’s office to find out everything is fine or some aspect needs improved, they are monitored remotely. Someone from the hospital reaches out if the patient stops tracking their vitals or if their blood pressure or weight starts to fluctuate to see if they need to adjust medications, come in for a visit, or need a new program.

As seen in pilots such as this one, the healthcare industry will continue to leverage the interest and the growing adoption of mobile, connected and wearable technology to fully engage patients in ways that will help them improve their health.

Sources

¹Survey: Nearly 25% of Americans Own a Wearable Device. January 4, 2017. <https://blog.wellable.co/nearly-25-of-americans-own-a-wearable-device>

²Findings from the 2015 Surveys of Employers and Health Care Consumers. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/life-sciences-and-health-care/articles/employers-still-bullish-on-wellness-programs.html>

³Number of connected wearable devices worldwide from 2016 to 2021 (in millions). <https://www.statista.com/statistics/487291/global-connected-wearable-devices/>

About Validic

Validic guides wellness organizations, providers, payers and pharma companies through the technical complexities associated with accessing and operationalizing patient-generated health data. Validic's scalable, secure solutions help you improve operational efficiency and patient outcomes by delivering personal health data from hundreds of home health devices seamlessly into your existing workflows.

Validic was named to Gartner’s “Cool Vendors” list and received Frost & Sullivan’s “Best Practices and Best Value in Healthcare Information Interoperability” and “Top 10 Healthcare Disruptor” awards. To find out how wellness is innovating to create more data-driven and integrative care experiences, follow Validic on Twitter at @validic or visit www.validic.com.