How telehealth software developers can get ahead with better clinical content for providers and patients

Wolters Kluwer

Following a spike in telehealth popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, use has stabilized at levels 38 times higher than before the pandemic.[1] The message is clear: Telehealth is a necessary form of care delivery. As patients increasingly face challenges in obtaining and keeping in-person appointments with providers, telehealth can provide high-quality care at greater convenience and at a lower cost.

Nearly all providers (95%) say they plan to sustain or expand telehealth, but it is yet to be determined exactly how big a role it will play in the larger healthcare continuum.[2] In fact, despite its rapid growth, venture capital investment in telehealth has slowed and many startups that showed promise during the pandemic have already folded. But with that said, more established companies continue to invest in their telehealth solutions.[3] Thus, while the medium has found broad acceptance, the health tech space has work to do to determine how to continue to evolve telehealth platforms and offerings to expand its footprint.

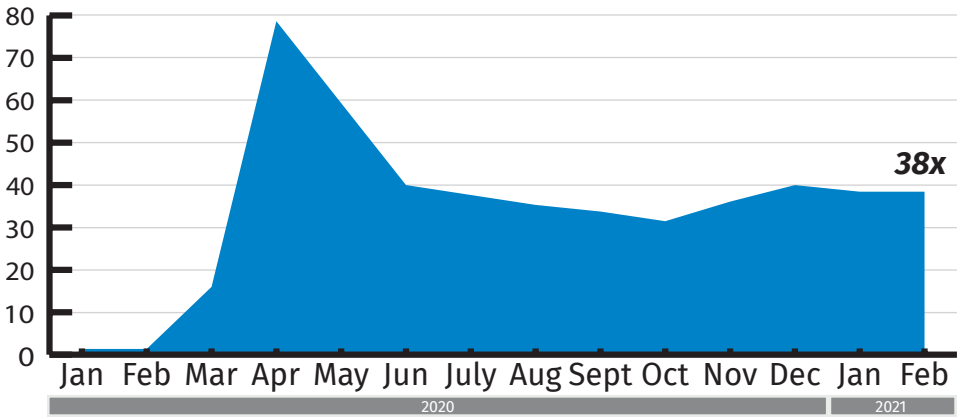
As telehealth software developers work to strengthen their offerings through core features and functionalities, clinical and educational content can become one of many differentiators. A patient- and provider-centric experience fueled by high-quality, evidence-based, tech-enabled content can help software developers elevate their solutions in an increasingly competitive marketplace. However, developers must also be mindful of value-based care and health equity considerations.[3] They must simultaneously focus on how they are successfully supporting clinical outcomes, quality and safety; improved access to care; patient, family and caregiver experience; clinician experience; and financial and operational impact.[4]

Telehealth challenges and barriers

Expanding telehealth's role in an ever-evolving ecosystem means telehealth companies must anticipate and address a variety of challenges as they develop new solutions or expand more mature offerings. These include:

- **Reimbursement uncertainties.** Although many payers loosened restrictions on telehealth during the public health emergency, coverage and payment parity laws still vary by state, making it difficult for healthcare providers to commit to a long-term telehealth strategy.[4,5] If telehealth reimbursement is lacking or is lower than that for in-person visits, adoption and investment will lag.

- **Interoperability.** Nearly two-thirds of physicians say lack of integration with electronic health records is a barrier to long-term adoption of telehealth services.[6] Without a seamless workflow, overtasked providers will shy away from telehealth solutions that don't provide a user-friendly experience.



Telehealth claim volumes, compared to pre-Covid-10 levels (Feb 2020 = 1). Telehealth use has stabilized at levels 38 times higher than before the pandemic.[1]

- **Digital divide.** Limited access to technology, low levels of digital literacy, and inadequate or nonexistent broadband are ongoing challenges that make it difficult for some patient populations to engage with telehealth technology.[7] In fact, physicians say the digital divide is the largest barrier to virtual care for patients.[8] Currently, 42 million Americans have no access to broadband, according to Broadband Now, a data technology company.[9] Without addressing this divide, efforts to expand telehealth will be difficult.

- **Patient-provider relations.** Although physicians generally support telehealth expansion, some say building rapport in a virtual environment can be challenging.[9] Physicians also say telehealth can reduce the sense of connection between patients and providers and that information sharing and shared decision-making can be difficult in virtual visits. Failing to address this can undermine efforts to promote telehealth permanency.

How health tech companies can address these challenges.

There are many ways in which forward-thinking health tech companies can address these challenges to strengthen telehealth's position in the ecosystem and deliver a consumer-centric experience that drives patient adoption and loyalty.

Prove outcomes to prevent future payment restrictions. Telehealth companies must offer data-driven evidence to demonstrate that telehealth can be equivalent or more clinically effective when compared with in-person care. Clinical effectiveness studies already exist for certain use cases – for example, stroke management, blood pressure control, mental health support, pain management and blood glucose reduction, as well as diagnostic services involving dermatological (skin cancer) and ophthalmic (glaucoma) conditions.[10] However, telehealth companies have an opportunity to add increased value by participating in additional studies across a wider spectrum of clinical health services.

Use equity-centered design to improve health equity and access. Telehealth companies must continually strive to promote equity as a core design feature to help address the root causes of care disparities.[11] While the technology inherently broadens the reach of providers and might address some care access concerns across the country, it raises others around technology comfort and access. Further, content and tools within telehealth must align with equity initiatives in order to be broadly useful within the healthcare industry.

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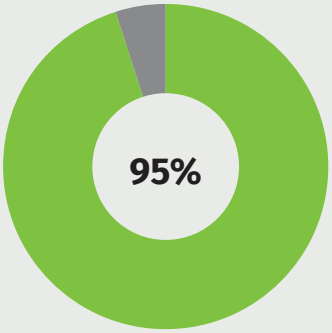

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Focus on consumer centricity. Telehealth companies must keep the user experience at the forefront of software development so consumers continue to view telehealth as a viable and even preferred option in many cases, including when they cannot obtain an in-person appointment as provider shortages continue. Software developers can do this by promoting a responsive design that ensures compatibility across various devices and screens. They can use clear fonts for readability and a well-crafted visual design with calming colors. They can ensure intuitive navigation and include artificial intelligence chatbots to answer questions and provide empathy. They can provide a resource library with evidence-based clinical content to which patients can turn when questions and concerns arise. This educational content can support patient understanding and health literacy.

When software developers create telehealth solutions with consumers in mind—particularly solutions that provide high-quality educational content—it becomes easier for healthcare providers to promote those solutions. Promoting telehealth as a digital front door and key offering of in-demand diverse care options helps providers differentiate themselves in a highly competitive marketplace.[12]

Empower and engage providers. Telehealth software developers must continually strive to improve clinical outcomes and work efficiency, and provider buy-in will be key to this effort.[13] Strong physician engagement with a solution can improve care coordination, increase patient adherence and enhance patient safety. In addition, telehealth companies must embed high-quality digital content to support clinical decision-making, as well as vetted patient education that's easily digestible and written in plain language to support follow-up and reduce the question load on providers. Finally, they must support providers in multiple modalities and specialties as hybrid care models continue to evolve.

Promote interoperability. The most successful telehealth companies will be those that reduce fragmentation in hybrid care models to achieve interoperability across the entire healthcare ecosystem.[14] Interoperability is what will enable telehealth solutions to become integrated into routine care across the care continuum to advance clinical quality and financial sustainability.[15]

Working with an evidence-based content partner

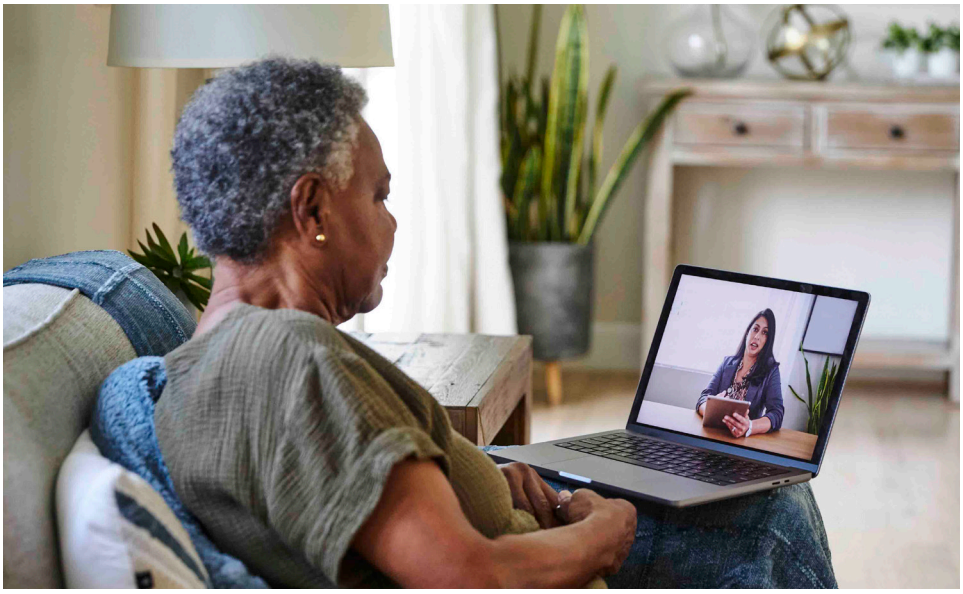
One way for telehealth companies to achieve these goals is by providing trusted, aligned content within their software solutions. This includes evidence-based patient education and access to a robust library of vetted clinical topics to eliminate misinformation—a problem that worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.[16]

That's when conspiracy theories and fake news spread as people sought comfort during times of anxiety and uncertainty. This ungated content has subsequently fed into generative artificial intelligence algorithms that continue to perpetuate the cycle of misinformation. "This can lend itself to a lot of potential harm when information is misconstrued, cut down or flat-out wrong, noted Matthew Sullivan, lead product manager for Wolters Kluwer. "To ensure a smooth consumer experience, patients need accurate, clinically relevant content."

Software developers should seek a content partner that can show return on investment, proven outcomes and the ability to scale quickly.

"Often, if you have to scale your technology, customer service, and physician and patient base, there are other elements of a strong and structured telemedicine business that might lag behind, like engaging with patients and informing physicians of changes in treatment practices. Having a content partner is key in these cases because it allows you to focus your efforts and your business on growth," Sullivan said.

When entering a new content partnership, Sullivan advises software developers to establish a clear vision for the solution and what it will accomplish. Then commit



to continually enhancing the customer experience through flexible workflows and clinical content. Companies that can answer these questions will be able to help usher in the next era in care. Traditionally, patients prescribed a medication might receive a sheet of paper with information about the drug. However, that doesn't always inspire patient adherence to the treatment regimen. By providing in-depth, empathetic information via video, in the portals or channels patients prefer, telehealth developers can help patients gain a deeper understanding of their condition and the need for a particular treatment.

The future of telehealth

As telehealth developers look ahead, they must prepare for a future in which:

- Patients and physicians will expect and demand telehealth solutions that provide high-quality educational resources and are easy to use.
- Telehealth technology will become increasingly integrated with EHRs for a more seamless user experience.
- The industry will become even more focused on chronic disease management, including the use of more wearable technology and sensors, increasing the need for integration and patient education.
- Government funding and regulation for telehealth will continue to evolve, bringing a continual need to demonstrate value.
- Capital investors will increasingly pursue innovators in virtual care and digital health solutions — particularly those that take a novel approach to education and engagement.

Data has already shown that telehealth is a viable solution to help providers tackle a growing workload, meet increasing patient expectations and improve access to care. The question today is how software developers will evolve to meet patient and provider needs while creating meaningful change in the larger healthcare ecosystem.

To do this, they must leverage digital content that brings value to patients and providers, promote a user-friendly experience, and offer solutions that enable high-quality care at a lower cost. Those that do will secure their place in the healthcare ecosystem and be better equipped to give patients a more timely, accurate and overall better experience.

Questions every telehealth company must consider

1. Who is our target consumer, and what do they need now?
2. What will they need in the future?
3. How can we specifically address telehealth services for chronic disease management, ongoing medical management, care coordination, mental/behavioral health and specialty care in a way that differentiates us from competitors?
4. How can we define and demonstrate our value more effectively? What data can we provide to show how our telehealth solution improves health equity, care quality and patient outcomes while reducing costs?
5. How can we help overcome the digital divide?
6. How can we empower physicians to provide value-based care?
7. What is our strategy to promote interoperability?

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