

The hybrid work model gains traction in the global healthcare industry

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On 23 March 2021, IRC Global Executive Search Partners convened a virtual roundtable featuring business leaders from across the EU and APAC regions to discuss how technology and the response to new threats was shaping the future of work in the global healthcare industry.

Executive Summary

- Greater precautions will remain in place for healthcare workers and patients as working conditions return to some semblance of normality post-Covid-19
- The rapid embrace of communications tools facilitating remote work and telemedicine led to operational efficiencies organizations will seek to preserve
- A demonstrated commitment to employee health and wellbeing has become a hallmark of leading organizations that attract and retain top talent
- Preparedness at the individual and organizational level is essential to contend with unexpected shocks to business-as-usual and ensure business continuity

The healthcare industry found itself in the spotlight as never before in early 2020 as the threat of a global pandemic led governments across the world to take unprecedented measures to limit human contact. As an essential industry, responsible for safeguarding against the very threat that gripped the world in fear, healthcare providers were forced to perform a new kind of triage, allocating resources in the most effective manner to ensure the availability of critical products and services without putting patients, caregivers and other stakeholders at risk. For many industry leaders, this meant adjusting the modus operandi and leveraging technological tools that had been largely ignored previously, including communications platforms allowing organizations to operate with minimal face-to-face contact and doctors to interact with their patients remotely.

The aggressive roll out of the most hasty and far-reaching vaccination program in history will afford a return to some degree of much-desired normalcy, according to Dr. Fazah

Akhtar Bt Hanapiah, Associate Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine from Universiti Teknologi MARA and President of Daehan Rehabilitation Hospital in Putrajaya, Malaysia, but medical staff will need to err on the side of caution, as immunisation does not confer 100% immunity or full protection.

“I foresee that in the very near future, we will be trying to get back to our normality, but with a lot of precaution, and we still have to continue with the measures that we are practicing now to minimize the risks of infection and to protect the patients that are already in the hospital,” she said.

Many of the changes implemented in the pharmaceutical industry will also remain in place, according to Rahil Mahmood, CEO of Novugen Pharma Malaysia and Oncogen Pharma Malaysia. The digitalization of the United Arab Emirates-based company is here to stay, Mahmood said, as the company has become more efficient as it adapted its internal operations and protocols. “Internally, we've had to change a lot of our policies, catering to the healthcare and safety of our employees,” he said, while noting the executive team has put great effort into business continuity planning to mitigate risk.

Health Care is not a zero-sum game, despite the jostling for resources between government health ministries and the pharmaceutical industry that has historically accompanied the provision of healthcare services, according to Pascal Apostolides, Managing Director, AbbVie Pharmaceuticals, Greece. The cost savings that digital technologies can provide in the healthcare and pharmaceutical industry should be leveraged, Apostolides said.

“Take, for instance, how we conduct clinical trials. This is an opportunity, not only for Greece, but for many countries in the world, to take advantage of the new technology, the digital hubs and do digital clinical trials at a fraction of cost by basically exploring the wealth of data that exists in all those databases,” he said. By leveraging technology, many countries that have historically suffered a “brain drain” can capitalize on new opportunities the post-Covid era offers and retain talent, he said.

Towards a Hybrid Model

The hybrid work model is likely to become more ubiquitous as normalcy returns in the healthcare industry, according to Artur Ludwiczynski, Cluster Director, Northern Europe, at medical products and device manufacturer Terumo Europe, a subsidiary of Japan-based Terumo Corporation. “Covid has also forced us to adopt a lot of technologies that we had at our fingertips for many years, but we never used them,” Ludwiczynski said. “We will adopt technologies and mix it with the traditional form of face-to-face work and

face-to-face meetings, whether with customers or internally in our organizations,” he added.

Despite the vaccination push, the disruption of other activities outside the work environment will delay a return to normalcy, he said. “Just within the teams I manage, our Polish team, for example, is fully vaccinated. Everybody has now received the second dose, and today I am still alone in the office because there’s still life that needs to be organized, children are online or in online school, kindergartens are not working as they used to, so there’s a lot of things that we need to adapt to,” he said.



Similarly, in the provision of care, flexibility will be critical as not every patient will be able to realize the full benefits of telemedicine, for example, and traditional contact and paper will continue to play a role, Ludwiczynski said. “We’re entering a future where we have new possibilities, new ways of communicating, new technologies at our disposal, but in principle, the values, the ways of working, the ways of communicating, they won’t change that much. The basic principles that we valued before Covid will remain.”

Telemedicine Gains Traction

The embrace of telemedicine, an area that had struggled to attract substantial resources and gain traction for many years, has been nearly universal since early 2020, a positive

outcome of restrictions on movement, according to Maciej Machowski, Managing Director, DACH and Northwest at Batist Medical, a disposable and advanced healthcare supplies manufacturer based in the Czech Republic. Telemedicine has made inroads in treating chronic disease, allowing for a great improvement in the release of prescription drugs and other direct-to-patient (DTP) services, Machowski said. More efficient delivery of products and services with greater automation and more efficient logistics will help both patients and healthcare professionals by freeing up resources, he said.

“A lot of operations and a lot of ambulatory care is now done as homecare because of Covid, and I'm hoping it will stay that way, because it can improve the lives of patients, and of course also reduce hospital overheads,” he said.

Daehan Rehabilitation Hospital President Dr. Fazah Akhtar Bt Hanapiah found it difficult to secure the necessary resources to provide access for the disabled, especially to remote areas across Malaysia using telemedicine technologies until the global health threat frustrated all other avenues, she said, and finally, these methods were embraced by hospital administrators and funds were duly allocated. “Something that I've been trying for the last seven or eight years suddenly became possible in three months,” she noted. The embrace of telemedicine, including tele-rehabilitation, will greatly improve healthcare access for remote populations, she said, but health providers will need to work hard to strike the right balance between inpatient and outpatient care once the threat of Covid-19 subsides.

Fazah likens the organizational response to external shocks to the brain's response to trauma. “When we adapt to a new situation, it's just like the brain trying to adapt to a new impact or insult that it has endured,” Fazah said. “If a patient suffers a stroke, part of that brain is no longer functioning as it used to, so other parts of the brain now have to either undertake or relearn what that part of the brain is no longer able to do; we call that neuroplasticity,” she explained. “An organization has to be very plastic, we have to be able to adapt, we have to learn new skills,” she said, and healthcare providers have to be able to take on new roles, cover for each other and eliminate processes that have become obsolete. Such momentous changes also require a shift in the mindset of both caregivers and patients, she noted.



As communications channels went digital, so too commerce was pushed online in the healthcare space, noted Novugen Pharma Malaysia and Oncogen Pharma Malaysia CEO Rahil Mahmood. “We had to think of innovative ways to address customers’ needs, so one way we adapted was to use e-commerce.” The company has embraced the DTP channel, as well as the direct-to-hospital channel of sales and delivery, Mahmood said, competing with e-commerce giants like Amazon that have moved quickly into the healthcare space. Sales efforts are buttressed by continuing medical education webinars rather than the conferences of old, where pharmaceutical companies are sharing updates on new products and the progress of clinical trials, Mahmood said.

“People who have adapted to the changes and digitalized their operations quickly have emerged the winners, but we always have to be prepared in terms of our supply chain as a drug manufacturer in terms of business continuity planning,” Mahmood said.

Symbiosis Critical to Care

The global health crisis of the past 12 months has reinforced the fact that corporate social responsibility (CSR) is of utmost importance to customers and employees alike, and companies that put an emphasis on taking care of their team members and external stakeholders have been able to attract and retain top talent and generate strong returns.

“There are some issues more important than fast growth or intensive, rapid growth of market share,” noted Ludwiczynski, who said he’s been fortunate to have worked with companies that placed a greater emphasis on finding solutions for healthcare stakeholders and patients than on profit or loss.

“The first word that comes to my mind is sustainability, and right product in the right time. I think this is a key for good, symbiotic development of healthcare companies and stakeholders, this learning that profits should not drive the evolution of medical companies, but rather the sustainable usage of energy, the sustainable usage of medical devices, using the right medical devices in the right time, and not focusing on quantity versus quality. These are the things I try to coach and to sell internally within our organization.” Addressing the need to reduce overhead among a healthcare products company’s partners is a better pitch than trying to sell more products, or trying to sell anyone specific product over another, he added. “If you think in this way, the profits will come anyway,” he said.

Just as the relationship between healthcare products companies, healthcare providers and patients needs to be symbiotic, so too does the employer-employee relationship need to be driven by addressing mutual needs, said AbbVie Pharmaceuticals, Greece Managing Director Pascal Apostolides. Top talent needs to know what’s in it for them in order to achieve a win-win relationship in which they will be called and respond to a higher purpose, Apostolides said.

While new disciplines like artificial intelligence, wearable medical technologies and robotics will undoubtedly play an increasing role in the healthcare sector, time-tested qualities like adaptability to change will remain critical, and organizations need to foster internal motivation and the drive to be successful within their ranks, Ludwiczynski said. This motivation depends on creating the conditions for happiness and a healthy-work-life balance, he noted.

Achieving balance means letting technology help in delivering the best healthcare, but not being controlled by the technology or the excessive information that comes in with the growing use of wearable medical devices, for example, Fazah said.

“The technology bit is the easiest part. It’s the human factor that will be, as always, the most challenging processes, for the teams, for the doctors to adjust,” Ludwiczynski added.

“In the grand scheme of things, we have many tools that we can offer to our talent, and through technology, apply them so that the healthcare system can absorb innovations quickly and serve a higher purpose in finding win-win solutions for all,” Apostolides said.

While technology has brought great advances to the medical field, and will continue to do so, there's no replacing the human element between patients and caregivers, and stakeholders across the healthcare industry are yearning for a return to physical contact. "Nothing in life can replace a human smile, the human touch, a hug from a colleague or a loved one, and nothing will ever be able to replace that," concluded Mahmood.



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