How User Experience Can Improve The Bottom Line In Healthcare

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Recent stunning advances in healthcare technology are placing new demands on managers in the industry. And somewhat paradoxically, the rise of the machines means healthcare executives need to place greater stress on people skills to ensure that patients get the most out of this brave new world.

Of course, IT and engineering skills are in increasing demand across the industry. But as medical technologies are increasingly commodified, companies need to set themselves apart from the competition by thinking in depth about user experience.

Human-centred Approach

The story of Doug Dietz, a GE engineer and industrial designer who created the Adventure Discovery Series of MRI scanners, illustrates the need for a human touch when implementing new technology. Dietz tells the story of how he was excited to see one of his new machines in action – but when he saw how a young patient was frightened by the industrial-looking machine, emanating strange noises, his heart sank.

The Adventure Series responds to that by changing the scanning experience into something fun rather than an ordeal. In scenarios such as a pirate story or an underwater adventure, the entire room is decorated to fit the theme, and children are even offered costumes like pirate hats. In one series, the young patients have to lie down inside a canoe; if they remain still, they'll see fish jumping over them.

"When they come here and they see what we've done, and how we've decorated the rooms, they feel as if they really are on an adventure, and they feel when they're having their scan there's no need to be panicked or afraid," says Kathleen Kapsin, director of the Pediatric Radiology Department at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC. "When they get up out of the scan and they leave, they're walking out that door with a positive feeling."

That kind of human-centred approach also extends to the mobile technology and wearables that have been flooding onto the market in recent years: Companies need to invest not only in engineers who make reliable products, but in designers and user-experience experts who ensure patients will be able to use them easily – without adding to the frustration and stress that may already be caused by their underlying medical condition.

"I always kept in my mind that frightened child, who's going through cancer, or who's really having some problems, going through their scan," GE's Dietz says of his scanners. "It means a lot to me, now, that we have a solution, and that the solution is helping the way it is."

While it may seem obvious, executives need to take a cue from Dietz and keep in mind that most people wouldn't be using their products or services if they didn't already have a serious problem.

Wearables Move Healthcare Towards Prevention

Properly designed user experiences can help get people more engaged in their own care and more motivated to take preventive steps. Wearables are empowering consumers and driving a shift in healthcare provision to prediction and prevention rather than reaction and treatment, meaning executives need to make a similar shift in their thinking about how their companies address issues in their chosen fields.

In addition to the human factor in user experience, technology also raises other side issues, such as privacy and security. Managers need to think broadly about the implications of the technologies they're introducing, and the new threats that accompany them; the nightmare scenario of a hacked pacemaker is something executives need to keep in mind at every step of the design process, and companies need to ensure they're employing the cybersecurity talent they need.

Processing of Medical Records – Considerations and Opportunities

Another area where technology is overturning established certainties in healthcare is in the area of medical records and data sharing. Here, executives will need skills at collaboration and partnering with tech giants such as Apple and Google, which are making inroads into the space and have essential core competences that healthcare companies themselves simply don't possess and can't afford to develop.

Note for Executives – Connect with Users of Your Products

Finally, the story of Dietz and the Adventure Discovery series of scanners provides another important lesson for healthcare executives: the importance of getting out into the real world and connecting with the people who use their products and services. Dietz wanted to see one of his new machines, and ran to the hospital in his excitement; if he hadn't done so, he never would have seen how his products actually made their young patients cry, and never would have been inspired to come up with something better. That should be a cautionary tale for any executive who's tempted to take user experience for granted, and a wake-up call to get out into the real world and interact with customers and patients.