

The Success of Digital Healthcare lies in the People Directorate

Over the last two weeks, I have attended Sprint Cardiff with GDS (Government Digital Service) and the Digital Health and Care Congress at the Kings Fund. It's clear to see that there are some really exciting developments in the digital space that could have a massive impact on the care that citizens receive.

I am now more convinced than ever, that it's culture that really matters, not technology. We need to invest in our people and prepare for a future where work is very different.

A showcase of technology

At the Kings Fund's Digital Health and Care Congress we saw, phone apps to enable stroke risk assessment to be completed by first responders and direct patients to the best facilities. The Trauma App to assist decision making and information flow in Emergency Departments. Online counselling to support young people with mental health issues. All of these are fantastic uses of technology. There were satellites, tiny shiny boxes to fit into people and many many things in the cloud.

NHSX is gathering momentum and it's been great talking with new colleagues as we start working together. NHS Digital continue to produce some exceptional work too. I'm particularly impressed with the recent work of the NHS.UK team. There's currently more tech than you can shake an AppleStick™ at... and it won't stop growing.

We need culture change, not just technology

So then, why am I so bold as to say that the success of digital healthcare lies not with NHSX or NHSD or a hundred tech startups, but with the People Directorate?

Well the breakfast session on day 1 at the Kings Fund started to focus a lot on technology and drifted into the usual, "let's do some AI" type conversation. But after I challenged what the point of technology was if we didn't do the 80% culture change required for digital transformation too, the conversation for the rest of the conference headed in a better direction:

- **Neil Tester, Deputy Director at Healthwatch England** put up a great slide that just said "It's still about people" and talked about the need for a shared language around our work.

- **James Freed, Chief Information Officer at Health Education England** said “To be digitally ready, you both need to be digitally willing and digitally able. And work in an organisation that will let you. Culture is really important.”
- **Faye Edwards of AHSN Network** encouraged us to “build relationships”.
- **Fran Draper from Connecting Care** said “It’s not just about the technology, it’s about making something that’s useful and easy for people to use.”

Culture is a hot topic

Every time I put a question about culture on Sli.do, it shot to the top of the voting. Lots of attendees were clearly keen to talk about this vital part of our work.

In his keynote, Secretary of State Matt Hancock said that the problem with the NHS was not technical but organisational and that the solution was in building relationships. He also reminded us of Eric Topol’s important challenge to create “technology that gives back the gift of time”.

I’m a firm believer that our work in “digital” is 80% culture and 20% technology. I’ve even gone as far to ponder whether my role as a digital delivery lead is more of an OD role than a digital one.

So if GDS, NHSX and NHS Digital are doing the 20% technology. Where are we doing the 80% culture? Well, Tara Donnelly, Chief Digital Officer at NHS England, quite rightly said in a panel that we all need to be part of the culture and to some extent I agree. But I think we need to do more. We can’t just hope that everyone does the right thing and we end up with a culture that embraces and exploits the amazing technology on offer.

A focus on developing our people and enabling improvement

In their announcement of the appointment of Prerana Issar as Chief People Officer, NHS England said “The new position is part of the NHS Executive Group and will play a leading role in ensuring that NHS in England has enough people, with the right skills and experience to deliver the improvements for patients set out in the Long Term Plan.”

We need to ensure that projects like Building a Digital Ready Workforce are taken seriously and seen as a priority. We need to enable all our staff to be confident and comfortable in a new digital future. To have the right skills and experience to deliver

improvements for patients through digital innovation and transformation where appropriate.

Talent Management will also be key in all of this. If we are to achieve Hancock's call for all NHS Boards to have a Chief Information Officer, we're going to need to develop and attract some exceptional talent. We'll also start to see new job titles we've never known or had before.

It won't be enough to just digitise our current ways of working. We need to think differently, approach problems differently, work with citizens differently. We need to have bold conversations about the inherent risk in doing nothing and challenge the way we approach governance when apps release updates daily.

If data and technology are going to improve the health and wellbeing of patients and the quality and efficiency of services we need to invest in our people.