

# COVID-19 Drives Digital Health Transformation, Health IT Innovation

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COVID-19 has advanced the digital health transformation, bringing executives to drive health IT innovation with urgency for business resilience.

Executives are driving health IT innovation after COVID-19 revealed the importance of digital capabilities for business resiliency; 93 percent of healthcare executives said that their organization is “innovating with an urgency and call to action this year” according to Accenture’s 2021 Digital Health Tech Vision [report](#).

Kaveh Safavi, MD, JD, global health lead of Accenture Health, noted that digital capabilities are becoming increasingly vital for effective business strategies.

“We are clearly in this world now where you cannot tell the difference between a business strategy and a technology strategy,” Safavi told *EHRIntelligence* in an interview. “Our research says nine out of 10 executives basically say that they’re inseparable. That is very different than it was a decade ago, where IT was a thing in service of your business strategy.”

“The fact that they’re inseparable means increasingly that what choices you make from a technology perspective will actually determine your business strategy and your business capabilities, as opposed to making the business strategies and just going and finding the technologies to get it done,” he continued.

For instance, Safavi noted that every company Accenture works with has migrated much of their technology data center to public cloud.

“Public cloud is considered a relatively elastic way to run a business,” he explained. “You can scale up and scale down much more quickly because you obviously don’t have all the physical store and compute capabilities. The cloud is primarily around giving businesses agility to respond either to crisis or opportunity.”

COVID-19 has accelerated the industry-wide shift to the cloud, Safavi noted.

“Care organizations realized that cloud wasn’t something you do because it’s a good idea, it was something you do as an essential part of having resiliency,” he explained.

Safavi said that many [health IT](#) executives are also integrating artificial intelligence (AI) solutions into their organizations.

“AI allows technologies to perform non-routine tasks,” he explained. “One of our challenges in healthcare is that much of what we do is somewhat non-routine and traditional automation only has a certain upper limit.”

“Our care model is now fundamentally based on an interaction between a person who needs something and a professional person who has expertise, and there’s a shortage because demand is growing faster than supply,” he said. “We’ll never train enough people to close that gap, so we need technology to scale.”

Additionally, Safavi noted that AI can help significantly cut healthcare costs. In fact, the cost of labor is the single most dominant segment of cost growth inside of healthcare expenditures, he pointed out.

“If you can’t figure out how to substitute technology for labor and create productivity, which is something other industries have done to reduce their cost to serve, then you really aren’t going to solve the problem,” Safavi stated.

Safavi noted that as the [digital health transformation](#) progresses, technology will increasingly become a co-worker.

“We’re not talking about technology replacing humans, we’re talking about technologies taking tasks, but the people still have to do their tasks,” he clarified.

“As this technology becomes ubiquitously pervasive, it’s as normal as the water cooler, and the skills that we need to interact with them are no different than the kinds of social skills we develop to deal with other people in our work,” Safavi said. “We’re seeing the same kind of metaphor play itself out with technology.”

When companies integrate new technology, digital literacy is key to technology adoption, Safavi explained. Employees will have to develop different skills and adjust to new organizational cultures.

“For example, increasingly we’re seeing the expansion of what’s called no-code or low-code technologies,” Safavi said. “What that means is that the normal business user has the ability to go in and change something and get more out of the technology rather than putting a request into IT. That’s designed to democratize technology.”

Companies predating the current crop of technologies will have to figure out how to move their data from the existing model to a new model, Safavi explained. However, if you’re a startup, you do not have to deal with data migration from legacy technologies.

“We see a lot of discussions about who’s going to be in a better competitive position,” Safavi said. “The incumbents feel somewhat vulnerable or threatened that they know that their technology footprint is not modern, but the cost structure for them to go from the old to the new creates a whole set of problems that new competitors don’t have any barriers to start with.”

Safavi concluded that while [COVID-19](#) accelerated the digital health transformation, health IT executives still have work to do.

"It would behoove all of us to recognize that the impact of COVID enforcing the adoption of technologies doesn't necessarily mean that the problems that technology needs to address have been solved," Safavi said. "This is a very complex issue."