

US health systems must adopt unified vision to succeed, according to a new survey

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In order for the United States to achieve full functionality and innovation of health information technologies, it must put forward a well-articulated, futuristic collective plan at the national level. Disparities

across health systems around digital orientation point to the need of a national digital mission and strategy, which is currently missing. In a new study published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, University of Colorado Denver (CU Denver) Business School researchers, Jiban Khuntia, Ph.D., Xue Ning, Ph.D., and Rulon Stacey, Ph.D., strongly point to the gaps across health systems in digital orientation and the subsequent recommendations for a national strategy.

Many health systems throughout the US are overwhelmed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To accommodate the growing need for virtual care and deliveries, most health systems developed some form of consumer-facing [digital technology](#) which aligned with existing [electronic health records](#). Despite these advancements, researchers are seeing a gap in new systems' ability to integrate with expanding technologies to spur innovation.

"While we are seeing electronic health records become useful in the world of COVID, we're not seeing these new technologies being used to their fullest extent," said Khuntia. "A question to ask in this context is how many telehealth systems are integrated with existing electronic health or medical records? Do mobile health systems align to the population health approaches? Similar gaps remain. Health systems cannot shape future decisions and strategies until they start to leverage more comprehensive functions."

The goal of the study was to explore and measure the differences between four types of orientations in health systems with different characteristics, including size, region, ownership status, teaching status, revenue, number of physicians, hospitals, and other factors. These orientations included: Analytics and Intelligence Oriented Digital Technologies, Customer Oriented Digital Technologies, Growth and Innovation Oriented Digital Technologies, and Futuristic and Experimental Digital Technologies.

According to the study, researchers found smaller-sized, non-teaching, and low-burdened health systems more likely to adopt analytics and customer-oriented digital technologies. Researchers believe this is because of financial restraints, lack of capability and/or technical support. Comparatively, health systems in the Midwest and south, along with low-revenue and non-investor-owned health systems, are more likely to adopt futuristic and growth-oriented digital technologies.

"The differences in utilization of digital technologies around the country was a bit surprising to me" Stacey added. "This suggests a comprehensive approach to [public policy](#) would serve to equalize the level of access to all patients in different parts of the country."

The authors behind the study suggest that a policy strategy and financial incentives are necessary to spur a well-visioned and articulated digital orientation for all health systems across the US. In the absence of such a policy to collectively leverage digital transformations, differences in care across the country continue to be a concern.

"The disparities across these orientations suggest that a holistic, consistent, and well-articulated digital orientation direction across the United States remains elusive" said Khuntia. "It is time to have a solid blueprint at the national level to guide health systems to leverage the potential of digital transformation; but a lack of consistency would exacerbate different outcomes across different health systems and regions in the United States."

The study surveyed a group of 625 [health](#) system CEOs across the United States in early 2021. Secondary data was also collected from the AHRQ Hospital Compendium, leading to the matched usable dataset for 124 [health systems](#) for analysis.

More information: Jiban Khuntia et al, Digital Orientation of Health

Systems in the Post–COVID-19 "New Normal" in the United States: Cross-sectional Survey, *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2021). DOI: [10.2196/30453](https://doi.org/10.2196/30453)

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