

Evolution and Innovation

The Digital Future of Healthcare

Atos



Eric Decker is the CIO of Independent Health, a not-for-profit health plan located in Buffalo, New York. Eric sat down with us to talk about the company's current priorities, as well as his own role in helping to ensure that the organization is fit for the future.

Independent Health has a unique perspective on the industry. In addition to its role as a payer for nearly 350,000 members, many of whom are Medicaid and Medicare beneficiaries, the company also has its pharmacy benefit management company and specialty pharmacy, and operates as a provider for some of its chronically ill members via the newly launched Care For You program.

Founded in 1980, the company has also seen more than a little change across the industry during the past four decades. As the company's CIO, trying to stay ahead of those shifts is something that Eric Decker is intimately familiar with.

"At the highest level, my role is about linking the business' priorities to our technical capabilities, and there's a dual aspect to that," he says. "On the one hand, I need to ensure that we're able to execute tactically on the products we offer today, but on the other I also need to be thinking about the next one to three years and what we need to do to be ready for the mid-term."

That kind of forward planning, of course, has been much harder during the past couple of years. But as disruptive as Covid has been, Independent Health has been well-equipped to weather the storm. The company is extremely digitally advanced, being the second payer in the US to include a mobile app as part

of its plan, and the first to offer a dedicated Alexa Skill to its members.

All of this, says Eric, is in service to the company's ultimate goal: creating better member experiences. "We've been seen as an innovator in digital health, which is very rewarding. But there's lots that we still want to do," he explains.

One of the biggest items on that list surrounds the subject of care navigation. "We launched our first CRM in 2003, so one of our current priorities is to reimagine how best we interact with our members," Eric continues. "To that end, we've started to build what we're calling a 'member action plan', a checklist that ensures that the next step a customer takes is the optimum one on their care journey."

That checklist covers a broad range of actions, from reminding patients to download Independent Health's mobile app, through to more significant activities such as getting a flu shot. "At its core, the member action plan is about creating tailored recommendations that give someone everything they need to easily and effectively navigate through their care journey," notes Eric.

This is an evergreen program, he acknowledges, one that requires synthesized campaigns and the creation or acquisition of incentive and feedback analytics platforms. Underpinning those platforms, of course, needs to be a strong foundation of data.

"As it is for many healthcare organizations, data is a challenge for us," says Decker, "and that challenge is primarily governance-related. There are a huge number of restrictions placed on clinical data and the extent to which we can use it to guide care, so it's naturally something that we tend to be quite cautious about."

To ensure that it is operating within those guidelines, Independent Health is partnering with the region's hospitals to gather data on admissions, discharges, and transfers – giving caseworkers the opportunity to reach out to patients at appropriate times.

"Eventually, we'd like to be able to integrate more clinical data into our ecosystem," explains Eric. "At the moment, most of the data in there is either administrative or claim-related, but we'd like to build that out with clinical data that helps us create a more personalized experience."

Delivering a personalized experience can also mean developing products that appeal to specific parts of the market, something that Independent Health is already well versed in. "Our sales and product development teams recognized that younger members wanted to be able to interact with a physician over web chat," says Eric of the company's thRed product, a text-based application which launched in 2019.

Patient touch points like these are all part of the care experience, of course, and Decker is naturally keen to ensure that Independent Health keeps pace with changing needs.

"We launched our MyIH mobile app a decade ago now, and it's fair to say that it saw relatively little

activity during the first four or five years of its existence," he notes. "That has changed a lot, particularly recently. 38% of our members are now digitally connected, and we have an active population of around 13% in an average month."

As well as giving members greater control over their health tools and benefits, MyIH is also helping to reduce the amount of paper correspondence that Independent Health receives. "That's a path we want to continue down," says Eric. "Both from a carbon reduction standpoint, and in terms of the associated costs for our members." He cites the introduction of digitally signed documentation and paperless notifications as key enablers in that pursuit.

If Independent Health's new products and services seem focused primarily on making life simpler for members, that's very much a conscious choice according to Decker. "Overall, the current healthcare system is incredibly complex, even down to the individual benefits," he says. "We get questions about costs, where services can be obtained, what a member's next steps should be. Today, all of these are things that they need to call in about."

The future, he says, looks much more frictionless - if a little way off yet. "To me, it's about self-service, automation, and just making it easy for members to find what they need."

"It's a complex endeavour, one that could take years to develop," he concludes. "But it's one that we're hugely excited for."