

# PHRs for the Masses?: Consumers Say They Are Interested in PHRs, but Will They Use Them?

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*by Kevin Heubusch*

Providers, payers, and employers are excited about personal health records (PHRs), as are vendors, policy groups, and the federal government. But what about consumers, the half of the equation that will use them?

When asked, the general population typically says they are interested in having online access to their health information. However, there isn't much in their current behavior to suggest they would use PHRs, notes Erika S. Fishman, a senior research analyst at Manhattan Research. For PHRs to reach the mainstream, the average consumer will have to become more comfortable managing personal health information over the Internet.

## Interest and Likelihood

About 1 percent of the population currently uses an online PHR, according to surveys by Manhattan Research, which specializes in consumer healthcare issues. Low use isn't surprising given the newness of the concept and the offerings. When the basic PHR concept is explained, most consumers express interest.

But it's important to appreciate the difference between expressing interest in a thing and being likely to use it, cautions Fishman. "You see very high interest in PHRs," she notes, "but you have to remember that interest and likelihood are very different things." She cites living wills as an example. We all agree they are a good idea, but from year to year many of us don't get around to writing one.

An estimated half of the population currently goes online for any kind of health-related reason, Fishman says. This includes an action as simple as searching WebMD to learn about a medical condition. That suggests PHRs will need some time to catch on with the mainstream. The majority of the population isn't highly Internet savvy, and certainly not to the extent that they manage their health information online, Fishman says. If you use the Internet extensively yourself, it's easy to forget that not everyone does.

"A certain part of the population kind of lives in this bubble, where we're surrounded by YouTube and MySpace and we think, 'Oh this is so big,'" she says. "But if you look on a nationwide scale, it's really not. And that's where we're going to have to look if we're going to move to digitization and push personal health records to some sort of point of saturation."

Some slices of the population are much more likely to maintain PHRs than the overall population, of course. Consumers with chronic conditions are one set; so are those taking care of children or elderly parents.

And when it comes to comfort with the Internet, age is a major factor. "As the younger generation comes up, they will be very comfortable with managing their information online... Kids today will be a totally different generation" when it comes to healthcare and technology, Fishman says.

For PHRs to catch hold, she believes, what the overall consumer market needs most is "general comfort online, and comfort online with health information, specifically." That's reflected in survey results that correlate above-average use of the Internet for health with above-average interest in using a PHR.

For example, people who currently take health surveys online or personalize health information Web sites are more likely to be interested in PHRs than the general public, says Fishman. People who currently e-mail their physicians are even more likely to report interest. This is a small piece of the population already sending personal health information over the Internet.

## What's My Motivation?

Exposure may help. With major employers and payers announcing large-scale rollouts of PHRs, many more people could find themselves with free and easy access. The issue will still come back to use, says Fishman. "There can definitely be a positive effect from this, but if people aren't comfortable with online use for health, it's going to be a very slow process."

That leads to the question of motivation, which, like comfort, is largely lacking for general consumers. Most consumers say they see at least some benefit in accessing their health information online, but for many, the consequences of failing to do so are not compelling. Education and awareness will help. But consider again the example of living wills. Understanding is different from motivation.

It will be interesting to see the effect that employers and payers may have here, Fishman notes. If an employer or payer were to offer reduced premiums for those who maintained a PHR, "that would motivate," she says, "because there are consequences."

Other motivations could come from clear benefits. A PHR that saved you from filling out a registration summary with each doctor visit may be a modest tool for managing personal health information, but it could speak volumes to general consumers about the value of PHRs.

That's the idea behind the "electronic clipboard" under development in the American Health Information Community, the federal advisory board promoting health IT. The goal there is to demonstrate value to the general public in the short-term and promote widespread adoption of more sophisticated PHRs over time.

The planned clipboard would also offer a confidential and secure way for consumers to manage and share their medication history with providers. A simple initial offering like this may be the most useful tool for the coming years, and a good start into the mainstream.

"There are so many great things that we could be doing," agrees Fishman. Delivering useful and usable services will depend in part on keeping consumer readiness in mind.

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**Article citation:**

Heubusch, Kevin. "PHRs for the Masses?: Consumers Say They Are Interested in PHRs, but Will They Use Them?" *Journal of AHIMA* 78, no.4 (April 2007): 34,36.

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