

Simple API: Will it solve healthcare's interoperability problems?

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By Casey Bryson

You can't throw a rock in healthcare today without hitting someone claiming to solve "the problem of interoperability." Those claims come from interface engines, private or public collaboratives like the Sequoia Project and Commonwell, government entities like the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC), and application programming interface (API) vendors. They all share a focus on information exchange to and from electronic health records (EHRs) and hold the common goal of making system integration easier, but will they?

Integrating digital health applications with EHRs will continue to get even easier through the [adoption of APIs such as FHIR](#). Many health systems have already integrated a handful of digital health solutions to implement new care models, improve patient engagement, and provide an improved patient and/or provider experience.

In the near future, as integration becomes easier and migration to the healthcare cloud continues its acceleration, the average health system's portfolio of digital health offerings is likely to become expansive. Connecting more digital applications through a simple API will create a complicated and tangled mess of innovation. Health systems should focus on proper information governance principles now.

A strong digital strategy is important groundwork to prepare for the future of digital health. If we do not adopt technologies with a focus on governance now, health information management professionals may soon face the challenge of untangling a complex web of system interoperability. For digital health success we must first reduce the complexity of managing the number of digital solutions implemented. The best way to do that is through standardization.

Health systems that standardize IT governance—including infrastructure, compliance, integration, and ongoing vendor management—will spend more time on value-add activities. By aligning digital health strategies with the principles of information governance, health systems can:

- Reduce patient identity errors
- Standardize retention policies on a single cloud vendor
- Build strong audit trails of activity outside of the EHR
- Build a centralized database to aid in eDiscovery
- Understand the purpose and workflow for all digital systems
- Store data maps centrally
- Control and analyze the flow of data to/from on-premise systems

It is important for vendors and health systems to plan and implement digital health growth strategies that adhere to information governance principles. Without such a digital strategy chaos is inevitable; this is something a standalone API will not solve. Much of that future disarray can be mitigated today by managing information at an enterprise level that supports the health system's regulatory, legal, risk, environmental, and operational requirements.

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