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Big Pharma Bets Big on Digital Health Solutions

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Big pharma and Digital health, once on opposite ends of the spectrum, are now coming together. In 2022, there have been several acquisitions and deals by big pharma companies in the digital health space. The pharmaceutical industry is increasingly relying on digital solutions to make further inroads into healthcare delivery, with broad-spectrum implications. Let's explore the major strides taken by pharma giants are making in this sphere and the impact of these collaborations.



Pharmaceutical giants have recognised vast opportunities digital health firms bring to the table and are actively engaging in the space. There has been a flurry of activities be it collaborations, deals, investments, acquisitions etc. between big pharma and digital health firms in recent times.

Big pharma firms have been eyeing apps, remote monitoring, virtual trials, digital therapeutics, data management in this sector, particularly the solutions that can improve treatment experiences.

COVID-19 has been a propellent of big pharma's growing engagement in the sector. Big pharma companies see massive value in digital health across the development lifecycle for diagnostics and therapeutics.

"For the pharmaceutical industry, there are many challenges where digital health solutions can directly help patients which also aligns with their interests. These types of solutions span the patient journey; from tools that help ensure patients are diagnosed correctly (i.e.,AI/ML algorithms) to dosage titration tools, to solutions that improve medication adherence, to financial assistance tools or remote monitoring solutions to ensure patients stay healthy just to name a few. In addition, there are also applications of digital health that can accelerate drug discovery and improve the outcomes of clinical trials. These are all of significant interest to pharma leaders,'' said Pete Masloski, Managing Principal with ZS Associates, USA.

According to a survey from consulting firm Accenture, the reasons why pharma and biotech executives are working with digital health companies are to access new technology (90 per cent), reduce operational costs (83 per cent) and meeting new patient demands (83 per cent). To accomplish these goals, pharma-digital health partnerships are typically centered on improving diagnosis time and medication adherence rates, integrating real-world evidence into clinical trials, and enhancing drug discovery.

“As to where big pharma is focusing resources, it truly continues to evolve as technology evolves. Some of the primary investments we've witnessed over the last year or two have been in data science i.e., the aggregation of real-world and comprehensive patient data within cloud-based ecosystems and subsequent platforms. Companies that can parse and analyse this data to drive insight discovery and in the technology that allows pharma to design and execute studies more efficiently across their portfolios,” said Caty Reid, Senior Director, Corporate Market, PathAI, US.

Impact of collaborations

According to ZS’s digital health team’s research, the potential impact of digital health for pharma represents a $100 billion opportunity. These partnerships seem to be the win-win situation for all- be it pharma firms, digital health providers or patients and clinicians.

But, could these collaborations end up changing the dynamics of the pharmaceutical/ digital health sector(s)?

“Yes, indeed", feels Pete. "In fact, they already have changed in some specific ways. Nearly all big pharma has created internal teams or functions that are focused on digital health. These groups are exploring partnerships with digital health innovators and launching their own solutions that are meant to address some of the challenges I mentioned. A more potentially transformative change is that by investing more to help solve some of healthcare’s more challenging problems, pharma is ultimately moving closer to what their true end goal should be, which is to improve the lives of patients. There are many examples of companies and partnerships between digital health companies and pharma, but the problems are difficult and changing healthcare takes time. This movement will be a decades-long journey of digital transformation but we all will ultimately benefit,” he added.

Sharing similar views Romain Marmot, Chief Business Officer at Voluntis, part of Aptar Pharma Digital Health, US, said, “According to a recent study, more than 80 per cent of big pharma companies have started developing or have already launched a digital solution connected to a drug delivery system. In other words, this trend is not a revolution, but an evolution of our industry that has started many years ago and is clearly reaching maturity today.’’

Big pharma companies can leverage digital health across their organisation and operations, from early drug discovery to in-market differentiation. In a few years from now, all new drugs will be launched in connection with a digital companion that will allow us to deliver individualised treatment experiences that patients need. Therefore, these collaborations are essential for both industries in the future.

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