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mHealth is the next wave'

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Singapore: With no doubt, one of the most important industry trends to watch in 2014 is mHealth. The global mobile healthcare (mHealth) market will grow at an astounding compounded annual rate of 41.5 percent in the next five years to reach USD10.2 billion by 2018, up from USD1.3 billion in 2012, according to a recent report from market research firm Transparency Market Research.

Devices such as tablets are helping drive this growth in rollout of mHealth applications, as devices with a larger form factor are more user friendly especially with older users (due to eye sight issues, presbyopia amongst other things).

The US FDA is planning to release its final guidance on products that require its oversight; many mHealth products are expected to fall under its jurisdiction soon.
mHealth providers who are able to articulate their solutions successfully are the ones that adopt a holistic approach and consider practical usage of mHealth scenarios. Only those who are able to integrate these solutions in the clinical pathways and workflow will continue to experience success.

Health insurance companies too are increasingly open to subsidizing such solutions as, in certain instances, it helps them

lower their costs of health plans they offer.

Why then are healthcare software companies baulking?
Almost all established electronic health record (EHR) vendors, especially the larger ones, have grown through multiple acquisitions recently. Whilst that approach has helped them complete their portfolio of offerings, it certainly has given their CTOs a major headache - that of harmonizing the technology platforms and design differences. Currently their organizational and executive bandwidth is focused on digesting these acquisitions. Consequently vendors are not able to invest in creating mHealth solutions as much as they should.

Of course, profitability continues to be a key concern as mHealth has not brought home the bacon in licensure terms for them, at least as much as they would hope for. One contributing factor could be that many smartphone and tablet apps are sold for small dollars. Established software players apparently also feel secure in their knowledge that hospitals will not go away from them due to their standing and ability. I dare say that the big software providers lack the vision and courage to change-innovative mHealth applications are today coming from smaller, nimbler and more agile software companies.

A matter of choice?
If you were a hospital CIO, would you not pose this simple question to a healthcare software provider: Why should my ideas for deployment of mobile applications be dependent on your ability to create software quickly?
Wouldn't it be great if you could simply demand and be served with a mobile application of your choice?

Leveraging the power of HTML5
Almost all modern browsers include support for HTML5, not to mention tablets and mobile phones (many of which are not capable of running Flash at all). Indeed Adobe themselves no longer support Flash on mobile platforms. Apple was one of the pioneering proponents of HTML5 which allows all iOS devices to access applications on the web without the need for any further plug-ins.
Consider this. What if my entire EHR platform was HTML5 enabled? Suddenly as a hospital I have the freedom of choice to pick any application and integrate it within my clinical pathways and workflow. I'm no longer at the mercy of the software vendor for deploying a mHealth application. Both CEOs and CIOs that I have spoken to tell us that hospitals would prefer this "anytime,anywhere" concept towards mHealth solutions.

The key concerns from CIOs are centered on performance, security and other real life issues rather than the availability of the solution. Software designers do face an uphill task when trying to design software that caters to both mobile and desktop usability. However, an agile software partner who can quickly roll out mobile apps on chosen mobile form factor becomes the winner.

mFirst architecture
As an industry, mHealth software providers need to take cognizance of these growing cries of users for "democracy" and create all solutions with a mobile-first ("mFirst") approach. Software vendors are not the most qualified people to tell physicians and care givers how and which mHealth solution they should use. Let us not put Hospitals at the mercy of inefficient structures that we have built for ourselves in software development.

Let us give them the entire EHR software on a mobile-enabled platform and let the Hospitals decide for themselves. HTML5 front is an important first step in that direction, mFirst approach is the Holy Grail.