

Adapting to innovation in the healthcare sector beyond just tech

By [Kevin Aron](#) , issued by [Stone](#)

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Adapting to innovation takes time and effort. It took the telephone 64 years, electricity 45 years, and computers 23 years to achieve 40% consumer adoption. Although healthcare is not unique in slow innovation and adoption, it is a laggard and other sectors have been innovating better, faster and smarter. The pandemic revealed a long-overdue urgency to innovate and embrace new tools and technologies.



We can describe healthcare innovation as a novel idea, product, service or care pathway with clear benefits compared to what the market can offer currently. Successful innovations often possess two essential qualities: usable and desirable. Successful companies ask their customers what they want and innovate based on their findings. Such organisations must develop and provide a culture of innovation for their employees.

Key areas of change in the healthcare sector

Over the last three years, the healthcare sector experienced dramatic shifts that will likely persist. New business models, unexpected collaborations, and accelerated timelines have pushed organisations to rethink their operations. Adapting to these and other shifts will require many healthcare organisations to transform their operations and mindsets.

The pandemic illuminated how healthcare providers can service patients remotely through virtual care, remote patient monitoring, and virtual collaboration for professionals in the pharmaceutical and med-tech industries. This model supports greater flexibility and has enabled organisations to draw from a more diverse talent pool. At the same time, leaders are reevaluating old workplace norms and introducing new measures to increase employee flexibility. Furthermore, several digital health companies have embraced virtual healthcare delivery by streamlining their customer support and introducing virtual assistants and new technologies like augmented reality.

According to [research by McKinsey](#), prioritising innovation during crises can help unlock growth in the recovery, provided leaders approach it with commitment and establish critical capabilities and processes. Incremental innovation will likely not be enough to stay ahead of competitors, and thus healthcare organisations must make "bold bets" and seize opportunities. We saw the benefits of nontraditional partnerships and collaborations in quickly finding creative solutions to urgent problems. The health and auto industries teamed up to build ventilators, while pharmaceutical sector competitors

collaborated to hasten the development of a Covid-19 vaccine. These new avenues could become extensions of the healthcare ecosystem and the way of the future.

Creating a culture for innovation

We don't need to look externally for innovative ideas. Staff at all levels of the organisation can develop brilliant ideas for innovation, such as improving systems for a better patient experience. It is essential to create a culture where innovation can flourish, and all stakeholders feel empowered to contribute to the innovation process and help make change happen. But an innovation culture is not the only component for success.

Several other areas present barriers to innovation in healthcare, and we need to tackle these if we are to make innovation happen:

- **Privacy versus data sharing** – Handling personal patient data is a crucial prerequisite for innovation, but is also one of the most significant barriers. Given the risk of harm, many organisations have isolated themselves from the outside world by installing all-encompassing firewalls to safeguard their systems from attack. This strategy may have hindered some innovations. Improving and simplifying information governance processes and technologies will be critical. Data sharing is crucial for providing integrated care, improving the patient experience, and conducting research; developing a pragmatic approach to information governance will be vital.
- **All-round efficiency** – Digitising healthcare records is the first step toward better healthcare. Benefits can only be reaped after all individual systems and databases, including enterprise systems, third-party apps, and patient-facing platforms, are linked. We can now begin extracting significant insights from the data and transforming these insights into actions that will improve the quality of care, safety, and efficiency.
- **Intellectual property policy** – Delivering fair and sensible intellectual property treatment to healthcare innovators is critical to supporting innovation. Intellectual property battles can suffocate excellent ideas, preventing them from reaching their full potential. We must create an environment where the best place to explore an idea is within the healthcare industry, with proper access to resources.
- **Systemic challenges for adoption** – Resistance to change among healthcare personnel who will be impacted by innovation is a common impediment to its adoption and diffusion. Adopting an innovation typically entails much more than simply adopting a system; we must grasp the relationship between people and technology, mobilise and engage personnel to accept change, and push them to rethink the work.

To revolutionise the sector, we must carefully nurture innovation by addressing regulation, intellectual property, funding, scalability and procurement issues. An authentic culture of innovation will help us improve and provide quality healthcare for all South Africans.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Aron is the principal officer of Medshield Medical Scheme.

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