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Managing Digital Identities in Health Care is Vital

By Lori Bowes

Speakers on a Becker's webinar discussed how a congruent digital identity can help health systems run smoothly and efficiently.

In a recent *Becker's Hospital Review* webinar, sponsored by [Imprivata](#), Wes Wright, chief technology officer at Imprivata, hosted a discussion on digital identities and cybersecurity with Cara Babachicos, senior vice president and chief information officer at South Shore Health, and Arthur Harvey, senior vice president and chief information officer at Boston Medical Center.

Imprivata is a digital identity company for “health care and beyond,” with solutions focused on clinician productivity, patient experience, cybersecurity and compliance. Imprivata currently has 3,000 global health care customers and 8 million care providers across 45 countries.

[South Shore Health](#) (SSH) and [Boston Medical Center](#) (BMC) are large-scale health systems located south of Boston. SSH focuses on mobile integrated health and provides a number of urgent care centers, while BMC is one of the largest safety-net hospitals and Level I trauma centers in New England.

Given the vast network of physicians, patients and employees across both health systems, the need for a fully merged, congruent digital identity is a must.

Prior to becoming the chief technology officer at Imprivata, Wright worked at Microsoft, where the adage

“identity is the new perimeter” was used quite frequently. Considering the ever-changing notion of digital identity systems, Wright posited a new way of thinking about digital identities within the sphere of large-scale networks, saying that he now believes “identity is the new control plane.”

“There is no perimeter anymore...it's not like we have a single organization,” Harvey said. “The expectation of our providers, as well as our staff and patients, is that they can do what they need to do from where they happen to be, wherever they happen to do it.”

Babachicos added, “If you look at it from the cybersecurity perspective along the lines of digital identity, if we know who you are, what your preferences are and how those go together, we can have a lot of power in protecting the systems and giving you more of the experience that you're looking for. If your identities are incorrect, then your authentication and all those pieces and parts can be really hard to manage as well, so all of these pieces need to play well together.”

Moving toward a more defined digital identity is integral to seamless health systems. The current state of electronic health systems follows a fragmented system from 20 years ago, Wright said. With a new age of integrated health

systems that have a larger network of needs, the goal is to take all the digital identity frameworks and coalesce them into one single, consistent framework.

To break down this complicated process, Wright shared a flowchart from Imprivata that detailed the different subsections of a digital identity framework that make the entire health system run smoothly.

A key feature of this integration is ensuring that consistency is present across all devices, including personal mobile devices of staff members.

Digital Identity Framework for Health Care

Governance and Administration

Compliance

- Health care and governance standards
- Analytics and audit reports
- EPCS reporting

Risk Mitigation

- Anomaly detection
- Enrollment and attestation review and remediation
- Safety of patient records

Source: *Imprivata*

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“It’s really important how [the digital identity] extends outside of the environment onto mobile devices and a lot of the tools that we’re using, even in what we’re bringing to work in our BYOD [bring your own devices] strategies,” Babachicos said.

Staff members and employees could be more prone to phishing attempts on their devices, which could damage the entire system.

Wright shared a quote from Jay Gazlay, a technical strategist at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), who said, “Our takeaway from this [SolarWinds] attack is that identity is everything now.” Gazlay was referring to the major cybersecurity attack on U.S. information technology firm

SolarWinds in early 2020, which left over 18,000 of its customers vulnerable to hackers, including U.S. agencies like the Pentagon and Department of Homeland Security, [detailed here in an article from Business Insider](#).

Additionally, Wright shared the “core four” elements for securing digital identities and preventing cybersecurity attacks, which include:

- Identity governance
- Single sign-on
- Multifactor authentication
- Privileged access management

“We forced MFA [multifactor authentication] on things that casually weren’t being utilized before,” Babachicos said. “We really need to double down on that because that is one of the top ways

that ransomware comes about.”

Additionally, she shared the importance of protecting your data from potential breaches in the cloud.

“For business continuity purposes, replication is important. If you have all your identities in the cloud, and you ever lost that connectivity to the cloud, you’ve got to have some ways of replicating so there’s still some kind of managing on-premise as well,” Babachicos said.

For more health care tips from industry professionals, [visit Becker’s Hospital Review webinar series webpage](#).

Lori Bowes is ACA International’s communications specialist.

Hiring Concerns Top of Mind for Third-Party Debt Collectors

Survey reveals challenges around attracting employees in a tough labor market, as well as a continued appetite for new technology.

Employee and technology investments are on the rise in the accounts receivable management industry, according to a [report by TransUnion and Aite-Novarica Group](#), which reflects an overall feeling of optimism about the future despite concerns about hiring and retention.

Based on a survey of 151 third-party debt collection professionals and interviews with 12 industry thought leaders conducted in Q2 and Q3 2021, the report found that while “many collection firms and industry thought leaders noted reduced or stable account volume this year, over half (56%) believe their company will work more accounts in 2022.”

Relatively few companies said they planned to make significant changes to their overall business strategy, with just 19% electing to move into adjacent services such as business process outsourcing and only 13% changing the types of debt collected.

“In the survey, we saw that there was a lot more anticipated investment in business development and marketing,” said Jason Klotch, vice president of

third-party collections in TransUnion’s diversified markets business. “To me, that focus, combined with an expectation for more accounts, does suggest optimism.”

Remote is Here to Stay

The majority of respondents indicated that they shifted one or more roles to remote work during the pandemic, with most indicating they will be implementing a permanent hybrid model of remote and in-office work going forward. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of companies are either considering or already offering remote work arrangements for new hires, including collection agent positions.

“The top two reasons companies say they are considering keeping a remote or hybrid work environment are to attract better talent and increase retention,” Klotch said. “But we’re seeing some concerns about sustaining hybrid work environments, particularly when it comes to employee engagement, productivity and regulatory restrictions.”

Larger companies and those with a national collection footprint seemed more willing to shift to remote work

since the start of the pandemic. Eighty-seven percent of larger companies had collection agents shift to remote work, compared to just 43% for smaller companies, according to the survey.

Technology Spending Trends Up

Approximately seven in 10 collections professionals (69%) said technology spending will modestly or significantly increase in the next two years. Klotch noted most companies are focused on payment portals and self-service capabilities. This trend is due in part to the adoption of Reg F, though tech investment plans differ based on company size and the amount of resources available to deploy.

“While certain tools have been adopted somewhat uniformly across the industry, others are far more likely to be in use at larger companies,” according to the survey. “While midsize and large companies have similar adoption rates for online portals, letter vendors and call recording—and much higher rates of adoption than smaller companies—the largest companies stand out for their use of a wide range of tools, such as IVR,

NEWS & NOTES

Congress Passes Bill to Prevent Medicare Cuts

Congress has [passed a bill](#) preventing automatic cuts to Medicare from taking effect Jan. 1. If approved by the president, the bill would halt a 6% pay cut to Medicare reimbursement for physicians in early 2022. It focuses on averting mandatory spending sequesters that are meant to limit federal spending.

The bill also aims to reduce the mandatory Medicare sequester to 1% for the first three months of 2022 and provide a 3% increase in pay for providers in the [Medicare Physician Fee Schedule](#).

Read an in-depth look at the bill in *RevCycle Intelligence* here: <https://bit.ly/321FUPt>

11 Health Systems Pause Nonemergency Surgeries in December

With the rise in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations across the U.S., hospitals and health systems are returning to postponing nonemergency procedures to free up hospital space.

This decision came after the daily average of COVID-19 hospitalizations nationwide reached almost 62,000 in early December, with the U.S. averaging around 121,000 new infections per day—a 27% increase over the last two weeks. Read the full story from *Becker's Hospital Review* here: <https://bit.ly/31VCQV2>

We Want to Hear From You

Pulse is published for ACA International health care collection agencies to provide current industry information for health care providers. ACA welcomes article ideas and submissions for consideration in *Pulse* to the Communications Department at comm@acainternational.org.

For more health care collections news, visit ACA's Health Care Collections page at <https://www.acainternational.org/news/publications/>

Serious Financial Problems on the Rise in U.S. Despite Pandemic Relief Funds

An [NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health poll](#) shows 38% of U.S. households report facing serious financial problems in the past few months, as the delta variant outbreak continued to reveal major economic issues for households over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, [according to a news release](#).

Despite a reported 67% of U.S. households receiving government financial assistance in the past few months, these financial problems continue to occur.

The survey was conducted August to September 2021, surveying 3,616 U.S. adults. Participants in the survey were asked to report on serious problems for both themselves and others living in their households.

The poll found there is a sharp income divide in serious financial problems faced by households, as 59% of participants with annual incomes below \$50,000 reported serious

financial problems in the past few months. In contrast, only 18% of households with annual incomes of \$50,000 or more reported similar problems.

Additionally, the survey found that 19% of U.S. households reported losing all of their savings during the COVID-19 pandemic with no savings to fall back on.

Other major areas of financial problems were reported, including 22% who reported serious problems with paying credit cards, loans, or other debts, 17% who reported serious problems affording medical care, and 16% who reported serious problems paying utilities, like gas or electricity, [according to the report](#).

In addition, 14% of households reported serious problems affording food, 14% reported serious problems paying their mortgage or rent and 11% reported serious problems making car payments.

[Read the full report here.](#)

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which are far less frequently adopted by their counterparts.”

Among tech investments, one area of growing interest is allowing mobile payments facilitated by Venmo, Zelle or similar service providers or via a QR code; about a third of companies surveyed provide this functionality.

Other findings:

- Liquidation rates vary dramatically by debt type, with commercial debt generally having the weakest liquidation rates and health care and consumer loans experiencing the strongest. All respondents whose companies collect commercial debts reported liquidation rates below 20%. This is a contrast to 2020, when about half of respondents reported commercial debt liquidation rates of 20% or greater.
- By the end of 2021, the number

of collections employees was expected to increase to 137,928 compared to 134,347 in 2020, though it remains below 2018 levels (139,273). After a few years of declines, we're now seeing a level of staffing on par with recent highs, according to the survey.

- Third-party debt collection companies continue to deal with litigation challenges. While 62% of respondents believed litigation was at least somewhat challenging in 2020, this has increased to 82% today.

[Read the survey here.](#)

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is a monthly bulletin that contains information important to health care credit and collection personnel. Readers are invited to send comments and contributions to:

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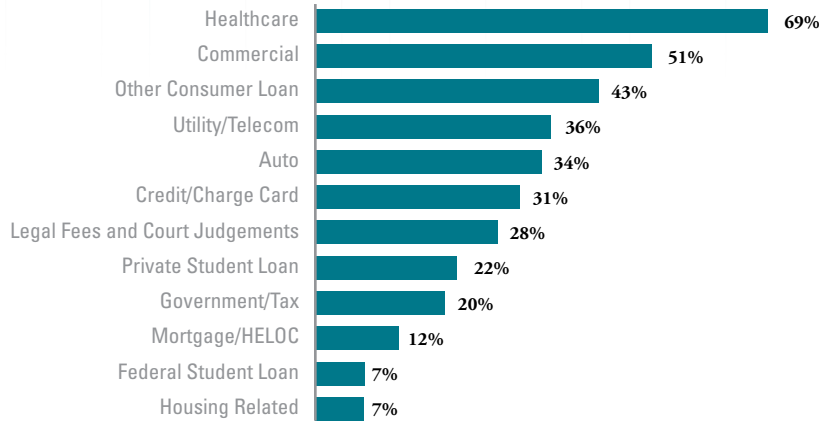
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Common Types of Debts Collected

In a survey of third-party debt collection professionals and interviews with industry leaders conducted by TransUnion in the second and third quarters of 2021, participants were asked what types of debt they collected over the last year. The survey found most respondents reported collecting health care and commercial debts. It also found larger companies were more likely to collect health care, utility and government debts, while smaller companies were more likely to collect on legal and court debts.

WHAT TYPES OF DEBT DID YOUR COMPANY COLLECT OVER THE LAST 12 MONTHS?



Source: Aite-Novarica Group/TransUnion Third-Party Debt Collection Survey, November 2021
[Read the complete survey here.](#)