

John Muir Health and Optum — a model IT performance services partnership



How John Muir Health advanced patient care through rapid IT integration, modernization and optimization

Historically, health systems have modernized their IT strategies either by leaning on in-house expertise or working with a vendor partner to manage a slice of operations through consulting or professional services. With the former, the organization builds from scratch and only gets as far as that build can go. With the latter, it typically piece-meals a variety of solutions together, hoping for a cohesive strategy.

But as health care organizations continue to move the needle on digital transformation, traditional methods no longer offer a comprehensive path forward. As Deedee Francisco, Vice President of Information Technology at Optum, sees it: The drive for health care innovation requires a new way.

“Digital transformation is so much more than the latest — or shiniest — technology. It’s really about enablement,” she said. “At Optum, we ask: How can we enable an organization to achieve their objectives through digital solutions?”

It’s this question that launched a multi-functional IT services collaboration between Optum and the provider, John Muir Health, in September of 2019. As the first of its kind, the relationship includes Optum managing John Muir Health’s essential non-clinical sector to help the health care organization grow its business and reach new patients. Going into its second year,

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this unique provider-vendor relationship demonstrates firsthand how IT initiatives can be the backbone for success, by improving care access and delivery through reducing the administrative burden providers experience.

“The partnership has enabled impactful COVID-19 responses, analytics decision-making, telehealth stand-up and results-driven remote work,” said Bill Hudson, former chief information officer, John Muir Health.

Establishing a roadmap for digital transformation

A leading not-for-profit health care provider in the San Francisco Bay area, John Muir Health includes two of the largest medical centers in Contra Costa County: John Muir Health, Walnut Creek Medical Center, a 554-bed medical center that serves as the county’s only designated trauma center; and John Muir Health, Concord Medical Center, a 244-bed medical center in Concord, CA. Together, these John Muir Health medical centers are recognized as preeminent centers for neurosciences, orthopedics, cancer care, cardiovascular care and high-risk obstetrics.

Regardless of John Muir Health’s credentials, its executives could see a limit to the health system’s growth as an independent organization. Therefore, John Muir Health established several key goals along the path of digital transformation:

- Increase the efficiency of administrative operations
- Improve IT staff development and retention
- Improve rollout and management of IT support software and applications
- Center innovation around patient care and consumer satisfaction

This was in line with what Optum had to offer. As Francisco, who leads the John Muir Health account in IT, noted: “Our relationship created an opportunity to see the forest and the trees. We immediately saw the opportunity to make big-picture innovations that would support John Muir Health’s day-to-day operations and strategic objectives,” she said.

“Often, vendors come in with solutions that don’t adequately address the challenges their client is facing,” Francisco said. “It was crucial for us to understand the what and why behind John Muir Health’s business strategies before we determined the how.”

IT challenges become accomplishments

After countless collaborative sessions used to determine a path to partnered success and six months into service commencement, John Muir Health and Optum experienced a fork in the road: the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead of limiting their potential, the challenges of the pandemic enabled them to advance IT projects on a faster timeline. “What might have taken two or three years had to happen in weeks and months,” Francisco said. “Everyone — from John Muir Health’s clinicians to our IT teams — were very receptive to change. We had to be.”

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As Francisco recalls, her team immediately shifted priorities to focus on digital solutions that would enable patient care while limiting exposure to the virus. First, her team set out to establish telephone contact centers and online scheduling capabilities so that patients could set up urgent and primary care appointments and engage with their providers remotely. They then worked diligently to grow telehealth capabilities to up 500 visits per day. And they enabled electronic check-in and billing functionalities so that John Muir Health could process patient sign-in forms and payment collection online.

“Our data suggests that digital collection yields a higher revenue than the traditional over-the-counter model,” Francisco said. “So even with limitations to in-person interactions, John Muir Health was able to get in revenue in the door.”

And these innovations have been maintained, even as John Muir Health resumed in-person visits. Francisco reports the organization is still managing approximately 30% of primary and urgent care visits through telehealth.

But perhaps the most poignant moment for Francisco was when her team expanded digital scheduling capabilities for the COVID-19 vaccination. Immediately after California announced vaccine eligibility for patients 60 years old, the John Muir Health and Optum teams spent the weekend building the solution that would send scheduling invitations to all eligible patients in their EHR system.

“That was the power of digital transformation. Within 48 hours, we had 6,000 appointments set up for the next three weeks,” Francisco said. “I remember when we opened the clinic that following Monday morning and I saw every slot filled — it was monumental to see that we had effectively connected with that age group through digital means.

A third way to optimize IT

John Muir Health was the Optum pilot account for this multi-functional engagement model. But since 2019, Optum has taken on more relationships with similar organizations looking to drive digital transformation while staying independent. Francisco says this strategic relationship is a viable option for organizations seeking improved IT strategies because it can modernize and accelerate performance in effective, cost-efficient and scalable ways. Leveraging global best practices from Optum, this model allows organizations to achieve enterprise transformation with a focus on growth, cost reduction, security and next-generation interoperability with IT capacity.

“At Optum, we bring built-in and tested tools, capabilities and technologies to the table. It would be a different story if we had to do everything from scratch, but we don’t,” she said. “This allows providers to focus on what providers do best, providing excellent patient care.”

John Muir Health had impressive metrics to show for its partnership with Optum at the one-year mark in these functional areas:



Cloud optimization

- Launched cloud-based Enterprise Computer-Assisted Coding (ECAC) solution
- Successful backup and restore of Epic from the Cloud



Application development and management

- ChatBOT (Jane) COVID-19 symptom checker implemented
- Launched eCheck-In, Instant Activation, Pediatric Critical Care Transfer/Transport
- 50% reduction in workday testing time
- MyChart total users increased to 277K versus 215K a year ago
- Over 80K telehealth visits achieved in five months
- Over 300 IT supported software and applications



Security standardization

- Completed all security management action plans for 2019 internal audits
- Stronger security measures to protect against COVID-19 related phishing threats

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And the value of this unique relationship goes both ways. “By partnering with John Muir Health, we can better understand the priorities of providers to enable innovation,” Francisco said. “We can leverage the strengths of both organizations to be mutually beneficial and to serve our patient communities better.”



11000 Optum Circle, Eden Prairie, MN 55344

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