Workers' Comp

The More Workers' Comp Gets High-Tech, the Better for Providers and Patients

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6 MIN READ

Every day, technology is changing the way we experience the world around us. Our phones can feel like digital extensions of our brains. We converse with smart devices and assent to prompts put up by algorithms about what to watch and what to buy. It's all powered by an ever-widening river of data.

Increasingly, it's becoming easier to hear the rush of all this data in workers' compensation as well. The role of technology in helping those who get hurt on the job has never been greater and it will only continue to grow. Last week, we examined how easy-to-use technology can benefit payers and adjusters. Now, we'll consider how the right tech tools can likewise make life easier for providers and injured workers.

Providers

The need to help providers is clear for the simple reason that the success of a workers' comp case rests in large part on the skills of clinicians. Simply put, helping providers helps patients. Doing what we can to support providers is all the more essential now because a national shortage of physicians raises obvious concerns about access to care for injured workers. A drop in office visits and the strain of working amid the pandemic appears to have pushed some providers into retirement in recent years though the precise number remains unclear. Of course, physicians aren't alone in the healthcare field in enduring stress. Half of U.S. health care workers have reported feeling burnout since the onset of the pandemic. That strain could be exacerbating other shortages that have become more acute in the past two years, notably among physician extenders such as nurses, physician assistants and other clinical workers.

Given this high-stress backdrop, anything technology can do to ease the load on clinicians is a benefit. That's why it's welcome news that we're now seeing software increasingly help providers manage the injured workers in their care. As these systems improve, we'll see greater ability to help track injured workers' recoveries and automate tasks such as follow-up scheduling. Having all pertinent information at the point of treatment, for example, can help providers in their roles. After all, the greater the visibility both the provider and injured workers have into the care plan, the more easily their efforts can be aligned.

Similarly, on the billing side, providers can more easily understand reimbursements by looking up an explanation of review (EOR) and learning how a bill might have been repriced. Online portals that allow for fast and pain-free bill lookup are becoming the norm. Gone are the days when digging into the details of a medical

bill required placing a call to a customer-service department and perhaps waiting on hold for inordinate periods. The availability of online tools makes the business end of providers' work less onerous.

These tools go beyond EORs and include access to treatment guidelines, systems for tracking the latest in medical research and even virtual or self-paced training. Telemedicine has a role to play here as well by giving providers flexibility in where and how they see patients. This could reduce some demands on providers' office staff members.

Providers can benefit in other perhaps surprising ways that are ultimately good for patients. Powerful analytic engines can comb through vast stores of patient data to highlight those providers who have proven adept at treating injured workers. And as these data-mining tools have evolved, they've become better at identifying a provider who might not have treated many workers' comp patients but who has shown prowess when doing so. This makes it easier for a workers' comp network to tap an excellent provider on her shoulder and invite her to participate in its system. When this happens, providers benefit by drawing new patients and injured workers gain by having broader access to the best care.

Injured workers

Injured workers are, of course, also consumers. They are just as accustomed as the rest of us to the many ways technology shapes our lives. In fact, the first interactions many workers will have with any injury-related technology will increasingly come before there is any injury at all. This is because more employers are adopting high-tech safety tools designed to avoid workplace injuries in the first place.

These measures might involve having machines that can detect humans and will shut down when a worker is at risk of getting hurt. In other cases, warehouses are using robots to assist humans with tasks such as lifting and hauling—the types of things that can lead to injuries. In May, Amazon announced plans to halve its rate of recordable workplace incidents by 2025. To that end, the nation's second-largest private employer (behind Walmart) is testing a robot named Ernie that can remove items from a shelf to reduce the strain on workers. Another robot—named Bert, of course—can shuttle items across a warehouse while steering clear of human workers.

Even in areas such as training, 3D visualization tools and augmented reality can help workers better understand complex equipment without having to get close to it before they're ready.

At PepsiCo's Frito-Lay division, workers have begun wearing a device on their belt that alerts users to improper lifting techniques. After workers at several dozen facilities began wearing the units, the company saw a 67 percent year-over-year decrease in lost work time.

The rich store of data from mobile apps and wearables can also point to conditions that lead to injuries, allowing employers to make changes that might reduce or even eliminate certain risk factors.

Indeed, the advance of all this technology in areas such as automation and robotics is one reason workplaces are safer today, according to NCCI. And the better this technology gets, the easier it is for workers to do their jobs while facing a lower risk of injury.

When workers do get hurt at work, despite employers' efforts to prevent injuries, technology has an important role to play as well. The consultancy Deloitte recommends workers' compensation organizations create predictive models to help triage injured workers automatically based on an array of factors. Indeed, Deloitte found two-thirds of workers' comp organizations it surveyed expect that more than 80 percent of clams

eventually won’t require a human touch for the case to be triaged and assigned.

The same A.I. technology that can help guide the initial protocol for treating injured workers can also help sniff out clues that problems might be arising in a recovery. A.I. can also assist by giving patients faster access to test results, especially in fields where specialists might be scarce. Machines that can read results have the potential to let patients know sooner about test results.

Even comparatively simple technology brings enormous benefit to injured workers. Tools that allow patients to chat or text with case managers or even providers can help injured workers stay apprised of their recovery plans and lessen the likelihood some workers will become depressed. Reducing behavioral-health challenges is, naturally, always good for patient outcomes. Once again, technology can help out through use of new care-delivery tools. These include mobile apps for addressing behavioral-health issues and even use of novel tools such as virtual reality. There is other exciting technology at hand such as smart pill bottles designed to help improve adherence to medication regimens and to reduce safety concerns.

It’s evident that there are many ways technology can and will continue to assist workers—from preventing injury to triaging appropriate care when workers do get hurt to aiding communication about an injury.

The role technology plays in workers’ compensation will only grow. That should continue to make the workers’ comp system easier for payers, adjusters, providers and injured workers.



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