IT'S TIME FOR EUROPE TO LEAD HEALTH TECH

JOHNSON & JOHNSON EMEA CXO SAYS THE APPETITE FOR HEALTH TECH IS STRONG BUT WARNS OF BARRIERS TO INNOVATION

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"There are a lot of opportunities to re-imagine the full value chain of the health process," said Francesco Buonarroti, CIO of Johnson & Johnson in EMEA. A passionate advocate for the role of technology in healthcare, he shared his views as the European Union spearheads its European Health Data Space, an ambitious plan that will see CXOs become vital to care across the continent.

The full spectrum of healthcare came together during 2020 and 2021 in the fight against COVID-19. Buonarroti noted there were unprecedented levels of "collaboration between academic, public and private organizations to solve the problems. I have never seen that before. We now see a convergence of biology and technology, and that is an opportunity."

As a result, Buonarroti has become a leading member of DigitalEurope, a trade association formed in July 2021, to promote digital personalized care that improves disease monitoring and prevention. DigitalEurope believes these technology-led approaches can reduce the cost of health care delivery across Europe.

Digital and care come together

The renewed interest in bringing the power of technology to health services has triggered the creation of the European Health Data Space, which the European Union Commission describes as a main priority. It aims to improve access to and the exchange of health data across the 27-nation union. Electronic health records, genomics data, patient registries, and other data will be explored to standardize, digitize and improve sharing for research.

"We need an ambitious European policy, and we see a best practice that has momentum in France and Germany," Buonarroti said. The European Health Data Space states that the use of data in primary care, health research and health policy making will be considered and optimized by its strategy. Underpinning the policy is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) enacted in 2018.

"We welcome opportunity to create a framework so data is accessible and reusable," said Buonarroti. "We have 27 different health systems standardization is coming. The process of research to beat the biggest disease is international, not national."

The response to COVID-19 vaccines and research validates Buonarroti's point, with the leading vaccines for the Coronavirus coming from research teams from German, Anglo-Swedish, and U.S. firms.

The European Health Data Space will also look at the technology infrastructure that supports creating, analyzing, sharing, and storing health data. Interoperability is a significant issue for CXOs in healthcare, especially as the number of medical devices expands and specialist medical areas require distinct applications, for example, oncology platforms.

European CXOs will only be able to extract insight from the region's data if health records systems, medical devices and applications are all able to connect seamlessly to one another. This will result in a semantic layer to be developed between applications, devices, APIs, and the enterprise cloud computing that supports it.

CXOs role

Buonarroti says CXOs have vital role to ensure the European Health Data Space succeeds and drives innovation and research in pharmaceuticals and care.

"I think we have to highlight the opportunity and make clear the opportunities for health and technology working together," he emphasized. "People will be more willing to share their data if you can offer them something."

Although Buonarroti welcomes the European Health Data Space, he cautions the European Union to avoid creating barriers to innovation. "I represent the biggest health firm in the world and I see the resources that we put together to deal with legal frameworks," he said. "How can a start-up deal with that?"

To live up to its promise of standardization in R&D, Buonarroti emphasized that the European Health Data Space needs "clear and consistent implementation of the rules. GDPR is a good thing, but we have 27 implementations of it."

"We have the brains, technology and people to lead the sector," he noted. But without this clarity and consistency, "interoperability will not occur, there will be no benefits to the national health services of the members, and innovation will not occur."

Buonarroti reminded CXOs who want to drive improvements in healthcare and data to stay focused on policy and technology while keeping the welfare of patients in mind, saying "We have to be human-centric."

Asked about the next wave of technology that has the potential to impact healthcare, Buonarroti responded by saying "We have to be able to explain AI to patients and clinicians." AI is considered one of the most impactful technologies in healthcare today and its success depends on ensuring data quality and interoperability.

Buonarroti joined Johnson & Johnson in 2008 as an IT manager, and his CXO career has enabled him to lead technology in critical lines of business, including finance, logistics and commercial. In March 2018, he became CIO for operations in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Before Johnson & Johnson, Buonarroti spent nine years with ERP software giant SAP, where he was a project leader.
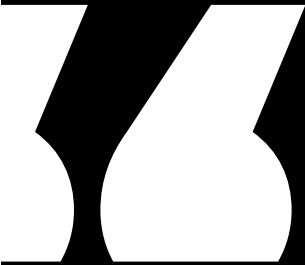
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