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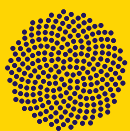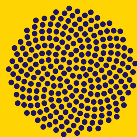# Where Digital Health Thrives
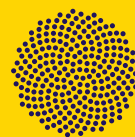
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Unlocking the potential of data

Ray Pinto, Digital Transformation Policy Director for DIGITALEUROPE, speaks about how digital technologies can make Europe's health care systems more resilient in a crisis and in delivering important life-saving treatments

"Digitalisation can greatly improve and accelerate the development of safe and effective medicines," says Ray Pinto. "For instance, Artificial Intelligence (AI) can accelerate drug discovery by analysing data from a variety of sources and identifying lead drug candidates. In some cases, it can shorten the process from three years to 21 days, or cut the time for analysing microscopic images from 11 hours to 31 minutes. It can also boost clinical lab automation in drug testing, enabling high accuracy and fast turnaround time for diagnostic testing."

DIGITALEUROPE is the European organisation that represents the digital technology industry. Together with their 40 national trade associations across Europe, the organisation works to provide expertise and input on the role of data and how emerging technologies can be adopted faster and more securely.

Ray says, "In health, this means the role our members, which is a collaboration of tech, pharma and medtech companies, can play in developing important technologies. Such technologies can bring about disease prevention, personalised medicines and faster, more accurate diagnoses."

EU a leader in healthcare technology

Ray says the EU has huge potential to be a global leader in developing and innovating health technologies, and Ireland can play an important part in this. "Ireland is home to leading start-ups to multinationals in the digital health, medtech, tech and pharma sectors. These companies are exporting billions worth of products annually and employing thousands of people. Multiply this by all Member States and there is potential for the EU, but all stakeholders must continue to make this a priority issue."

According to Ray, digital technologies are proving useful to deliver on goals for efficiencies of health services, reducing costs, duplication and waste. They can also play an important role to stimulate growth.

"The health sector is an economic heavyweight. Securing its innovation and competitiveness is a cross-industry and societal concern. In Germany, the health industry contributed a full 12% to gross value added in 2018 and was an employer for over seven million people, driving innovation on new prevention, diagnosis and therapy options. This benefits society as a whole, in the form of better patient care and highly qualified jobs."

Ray continues, "The power of data is in the numbers; real improvements require international cooperation."

Two main issues are hampering the development of data-exchanges in health systems in Europe. "First, health systems are fragmented. Improvements through better health data structuring and management are dependent on the implementation of Electronic Health Records (EHRs).

"Secondly – and related to the first issue – for improvements to take effect, patients, professionals, and officials should have confidence in the systems throughout the EU."

Ray says that fortunately, as a silver lining to the Covid-19 crisis, significant progress has been made in the uptake of digital for health services and research for the development of medicines and therapies.

"This is because the traditional relationship between patients and health professionals has undergone a massive rethink. Physical visits to Physicians ' are rapidly declining by 57%, with a shift towards digital. But the next steps are pressing and key in ensuring that this shift creates sustainable improvements. In a crisis such as COVID this removes a huge burden on health services and allows for a faster treatment of patients. Also for patients suffering from cancer or who are immune-deficient digital allows for the continuity of care."

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Priorities

A common European Health Data Space (EHDS), which aims to create a single market for data, is essential to truly unlock the potential of health data in the EU, according to Ray.

"It will ensure that Europe remains relevant for clinical research and will pivot our society towards value-based healthcare models and systems. DIGITALEUROPE's members have already provided some constructive ideas for this initiative to galvanise the benefits of the digital transformation in health." Ray adds, "We also need to accelerate the adoption of adequate healthcare reimbursement processes, as the traditional model does not answer the needs of the new reality."

Skills gaps is also a significant issue. "We need Member States to prioritise STEM education at all levels, and the EU needs to promote targeted investments to build digital acumen among existing specialists in drug development.

"It is key to have training programmes for regulators to fully understand AI, as Real World Evidence (RWE) will become more and more important in supporting regulatory decision-making."

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