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The frontier for human experience is closer than we think

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Abstract

When we think of frontiers, we think of boundaries between the known and unknown, the edge we see in the distance, something that is always just over the horizon. Yet when we step into what was once the frontier, the horizon moves on us, with new distances to cross, edges to reach. It is this dynamic of frontiers, wrapped in our individual and shared experiences of the last few years that shape this very special issue. It is also why now more than ever frontiers are an important part of our transformation. Frontiers that push us beyond where we can see, and frontiers of rediscovering so much of what we may need to rebuild. The experience movement is a journey through frontiers, around us, in front of us and inside of us. They connect us and push us, they reveal our power and purpose and we must never let them be the reasons we do not take that next step. The frontiers of experience are closer than we think. They are, because of what each of you do each day for one another. And that care, that hope, may be the greatest outcome of all.

Keywords

Human experience, patient experience, workforce experience, diversity, equity, innovation, simplicity, frontiers.

A Context for Frontiers

When we think of frontiers, we think of boundaries between the known and unknown, the edge we see in the distance, something that is always just over the horizon. Yet when we step into what was once the frontier, the horizon moves on us, with new distances to cross, edges to reach.

Much to that effect a commitment to transforming human experience does not have an ending point, but it too is a journey across many frontiers. Frontiers are not necessarily measured in great distance alone either. Frontiers can stretch beyond where your eyes can see, but they may also be found just beyond the tip of your nose.

Frontiers too are not simply linear. What is reflected in the core ideas of a frontier, the outer most limits of knowledge or achievement, also shift. They live in the context of our own lived experience, in the moments in which we find ourselves.

What we experienced in the last few years alone has taught us many valuable lessons. While frontiers may be in front of, or all around us, they too may be inside us. At the same time when we are pushing to stretch ourselves to places we have yet been – either with clear intention or due to circumstance – sometimes the frontiers we seek are actually wound in the simplicity of the basics we may have forgotten or seemingly moved beyond.

It is this dynamic of frontiers, wrapped in our individual and shared experiences of the last few years that shape this

very special issue. It is also why now more than ever frontiers are an important part of our transformation. Frontiers that push us beyond where we can see, and frontiers of rediscovering so much of what we may need to rebuild, revitalize or even relearn.

We have heard from so many in our community that we are now in a moment where “back to basics” is our driving focus. The realities of the financial constraints healthcare as an industry are facing and the clear workforce strain we are feeling has created the perfect storm I have referenced before.¹ In watching the storm fronts approaching in closing 2022, I shared:

As was known even prior to the pressures placed on us by the pandemic, what lied just beneath the surface of our work in healthcare was clear. A healthcare workforce feeling overworked and overwhelmed. Communities seeing and feeling the impact of inequities and disparities in care. Patients and care partners working diligently to elevate what matters to them. A tearing at the social fabric that has led to incivility and even mortal violence. And healthcare systems laboring to maintain financial viability in the face of global economic uncertainties. We knew the opportunities then, and we cannot escape them now. This is a perfect storm for healthcare, one that weighs on and buffets all who are engaged in and served by the healthcare ecosystem. But amid this turbulent reality, I believe there is hope, a space for optimism and a solid foundation on which we can and must build. It comes in our commitment to the human experience.¹

The commitment to human experience is a space that calls on us to take an integrated view. It also reminds us that some of the simplest of actions can have the most profound impact. It reaffirms that in pushing to the

boundaries of knowledge we also see frontiers in the rebuilding of what we can and must do to move forward.

The State of Human Experience

This reality is confirmed in The Beryl Institute's *State of Human Experience 2023: Affirming the Integrated Nature of Experience in Healthcare Today*.² The study revealed that healthcare organizations are clearly in a moment of reset and reflection as they seek to set clear and simple priorities in a resource constrained environment. As the study says, "It is important to acknowledge that we are in a period of restarting, where the foundational ideas of experience are essential as we build back strength and focus."^{2, p. 9}

At the same time, the study revealed that organizations reporting a formal mandate for experience are at all-time high. This interesting point underlines that there is more of a commitment to addressing experience in healthcare today than ever. The time in which we find ourselves has not diminished our spirit, hope, or intent. But we also acknowledge the realities we face call on us to act differently, to think creatively, to rebuild after years of a critical focus on combatting a global crisis.

The data reveal that the top roadblock to experience success is the stress being felt by the healthcare workforce. And while it may seem like an issue that has been long simmering under the surface, it too is now a frontier for us to traverse. In fact, reducing caregiver stress and burnout was also identified as the top item for investment over the next three years for healthcare organizations. This is the very essence of transforming the human experience at the heart of healthcare. This is part of our current frontier.

This is further supported by the data in the study that reveal an increasing focus on equity and addressing health disparities. This realization that community experience is also essential to our work in healthcare further completes the holistic and integrated view of human experience itself that reinforces the importance of the patient experience at its core, bounded by the workforce experience and wrapped in the context of community experience.³

Today's Frontiers

Last summer when we first announced the call for submissions for this special issue, we stood in optimism for what the future of the healthcare experience might be – the call for innovation and evidence that would push our efforts forward. Even in the face of what challenges us today our authors did not disappoint. At the same time, they brought us reflections on lessons learned on which we can start to rebuild.

The issue opens in reflecting on all the layers of the model of human experience itself. From an environmental scan

of patient-centered care frameworks,⁴ to addressing caregiver burden,⁵ to addressing cultural and linguistic diversity.⁶ The issue touches on some of the foundational issues of measurement of experience from gathering online feedback⁷ to the use of patient reported experience measures (PREM).⁸

The issue also explores the application of telehealth^{9,10} in providing better experiences and expands our focus into non-hospital settings such as long-term care¹¹ and nursing homes.¹² (I invite you to review our call for submissions for our 2024 special issue that will further explore experience in non-hospital settings.)¹³

What our authors brought forth on these pages is a comprehensive and integrated view of how the frontiers for human experience can be framed by the very opportunities we see today, be they on the horizon, or just past the tip of our nose.

Closer Than We Think

The frontier of human experience is closer than we may think. That is where it should be for where we find ourselves today. The data show that experience remains a priority for healthcare organizations. This is key, as it remains of significant importance to healthcare consumers as well.¹⁴

This leaves us with some critical considerations as we move forward both in research and practice, consider our new frontiers and travel the tides of this moment.

We must consider new ways to structure and guide experience efforts with a strategic lens. When we see experience as an integrated, strategic effort we can stay grounded in what matter to patients, supports our workforce and meets the needs of our community. We must find ways to integrate experience as foundational to strategy, not as separate from it and be willing to find ways to do things in efficiently with the resource we have at hand.

We must advocate to and with executive leadership on the value of an experience focus. Experience must be both grassroots and executive led. We must be willing to invite and engage leaders to see the strategic value of experience and recognize the impact it has on outcomes from financial to quality. Executive leaders ultimately control experience results by their willingness to prioritize actions and resources. It is incumbent on all to reinforce why these are worthwhile and sustaining investments.

We must ensure a commitment to experience is driven by more than just survey metrics. While a commitment to experience for many was motivated by the measures to which organizations were being held accountable, the realities of why experience is important

now has bloomed in scope. From addressing community needs of equitable outcomes, to workforce wellbeing and patient safety, to financial viability and more. All of these outcomes are possible with a strategic experience focus and are driven by a commitment to experience-focused actions.

We must commit to a simplicity mindset as we rebuild, revitalize and restart. Reinforcing the strategic nature of experience is not intended to take us away from the basics. Rather it is meant to reinforce how a simplicity mindset can help us achieve greater strategic results. In this moment of resource constraint, workforce burden and more, a simplicity mindset may be most critical. Focusing on key elements of engaging patient voice, creating ownership in team members and more will help us reset the building blocks for greater future success.

We must recognize that the frontiers of experience are closer than we think. That is truly the point of all of this. Frontiers are what we make them. We cannot let the shiny and new or the distant and unreachable be the reasons for why we do NOT focus on experience. The frontiers of experience truly live within us, in our humanity and in our commitment to something bigger than ourselves. Innovations may be simple steps. Reaffirming our humanity may be bolder than we could imagine.

The last few years has left us in a place of mixed emotion, of fear and hope, of constraint and abundance, of limits and opportunity. It is truly up to us to find our own frontiers. The contributions here show us the breadth in which frontiers can take us. Each of you in your work and research explore those boundaries too. That is what calls us to this work and it is what we can do in supporting one another in the days ahead.

The experience movement is a journey through frontiers, around us, in front of us and inside of us. They connect us and push us, they reveal our power and purpose and we must never let them be the reasons we do not take that next step. The frontiers of experience are closer than we think. They are, because of what each of you do each day for one another. And that care, that hope, may be the greatest outcome of all.

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