

Defining core components of healthcare cloud platforms

Transcript

NARRATOR: Welcome to the Industries Podcast Series, where Grant Thornton shares information through an industry-specific lens about the most important business issues of the day.

DON AMORUSO: Hello, I'm Don Amoruso, a senior associate in Grant Thornton's Philadelphia office. In our Transformation line. I'm talking with Niloy Laha, a managing director in our Advisory practice out of the Tampa office who specializes in management consulting in cloud and on-prem transformational initiatives.

We're here to talk about the best use of cloud platforming in the healthcare sector and to specifically focus on core components, a foundation of data and streamlined transactions that must be understood clearly. If one is to gain the ability to put a cloud platform to its best use.

Niloy, how are you doing today?

NILOY LAHA: Great, Don, excited to talk to you.

DON AMORUSO: Likewise, likewise. Now jumping on in, I think where we should start is to define what we mean by "quality" organizational data and how to know if your healthcare organization has it.

NILOY LAHA: Great question, Don. Great place to start. But before we go into the attributes of the quality of data and how we really see how that manifests in the organization, it might help to really understand some of the realities facing healthcare organizations today and understand how they've evolved.

So, as I've worked with many clients in this industry, I see normally they have evolved over a number of years and with that has come very different systems. They have enterprise systems, they have ERP systems, EHR systems, EMR systems and several operational systems which have come at different points of time. And as you understand, if the systems come at different points of time, they come with their own definitions of data, which results in essentially a lot of inconsistency, duplication and redundancy of data. There are multiple definitions of the same element—fundamental data elements like "customers," "chart of accounts," "equipment," etc.

This lack of common language, of course, manifests itself and prevents these organizations to start on a proper digital transformation.

The good news is transitioning to the cloud provides a unique and timely opportunity for healthcare organizations to address this fundamental issue. Having said that as a background, if you look at what “quality of data” really means, in real terms, it means a consistent, accurate definition of these data elements which I just described earlier—employees, customers, equipment, facilities, patients. If they use the same attributes and define these elements in the same consistent manner, everything downstream becomes much, much more easier (and I will get to those later as we go through this discussion).

What happens is, as more and more organizations embark on this digital transformation journey, this moving-to-the-cloud journey, the first step most companies do is come up with a consistent definition of data across the organization. That's the first sign of quality of data. What this leads to is really simplifying transactions and improving the quality of healthcare and optimized outcomes by providing much better decision-making ability because everyone speaks the same language, right? If you think about it, it also leads to more collaboration, leading to better patient care because doctors can talk about each other using the same language. Not that someone speaks of something as, “X from one system and Y from the other system”—which is some of the traditional problem which happens today.

“Quality” also means the traditional definition of the accuracy and sanctity of data. – Once more, cloud transition provides a unique opportunity for these organizations to look at their legacy data, cleanse it the best they can, and establish a strong data governance which is fundamental to any digital transformation effort.

The reason I say this is, as we move to cloud, we move away from the traditional “on-prem” systems which are there today and move to a different paradigm, and that means attacking the fundamental piece of that transition, which is the data. This is why it provides a great opportunity to look at things which traditionally will not be looked at because it still works. But it doesn't work most effectively.

The other thing that we see in doing these transformations is more and more companies, healthcare companies, actually do not go towards best-of-breed solutions, but the inclination is to move towards a single platform. That definitely facilitates using the same language and ties everything together. A strong, trusted foundation is needed for digital transformation and that's what this fundamental quality of data ensures.

Also, if you look at the recent history, there have been a lot of trends of merger and acquisitions—a lot of healthcare companies acquiring each other, or hospitals being acquired.

You can already imagine having the same language and the consistency of data absolutely helps that acquisition to be going in a much smoother manner than otherwise.

So, if I summarize—this increased data quality is absolutely essential for healthcare companies to embark on the digital transformation by streamlining and automating transactions and provides better analytics to ultimately make a difference by better patient care.

Did that answer your question, Don?

DON AMORUSO: Yes, it did, Niloy. And as you said, rich consistent data is the foundation needed to efficiently streamline transactions as a healthcare provider. We see it in figuring out the same definition of data across different organizations. And what you're saying really is speaking the truth to how we need to have good data quality in order for us to be able to have good solutions on the front end.

Having said that, what are ways to judge how well your transactions are streamlined?

NILOY LAHA: Oh, another great question. You know I think of it as, let's say, concentric circles and the center of the circle is data—which we talked about. The second layer is transactions, which also have to be streamlined. I'll talk about that in a second again.

And then, just beyond the transactions, is the analytics and information provided in terms of dashboards and information and decision-making ability. And finally, there's the user interface, which also has to be really cool. Cloud actually provides all of this in a nice comprehensive package.

But, absolutely fundamental to making processes more efficient is making transactions standardized. So when we talk about, you know, streamlined today, again let's get back to what happens today. As I talked about, there are multiple different systems in the ecosystem today in healthcare organizations, which means a lot of transactions are duplicated, a lot of transactions are manual because these systems don't talk to each other because of interoperability issues. Sometimes you have to enter data in two places because you cannot link the systems. That obviously leads to a lot of fatigue, a lot of issues with the sanctity of data, human errors, all those things which come with that.

So, if you come up with a proper data structure we talked about, then the transactions automatically become much more standardized and streamlined and reduces all these manual efforts if you go to a single platform. And cloud actually sort of guides you towards a single platform.

If you have good, consistent processes, good consistent transactions which are handled the same way in a standardized manner, it also opens the door for using more technology which you hear today—artificial intelligence, machine learning—to automate even more transactions.

So your transactions do not need a lot of manual intervention, they're automated according to business rules and the users are more focused on analyzing those transactions, only handling them on an exception basis.

Obviously greater accuracy, less fixing after the fact, better quality of information from the transactions. It's speedy because it's also not customized due to/for various groups. It is done the same way. One of the things which cloud does—cloud packages do—just by their inherent nature is they force you to go towards more standardized processes because the cost of customizing a cloud package is pretty prohibitive. So it almost forces you to go towards a more standardized processes which are all those leading practices, processes and transactions, which other companies follow.

A lot of these companies which are going into this cloud journey are adopting the standard processes which the package provides instead of trying to customize them, which is, again, a fundamental reason why transactions become more efficient—through following processes which are not customized.

The other point I made earlier was around the acquisitions. Again, think of it. If these processes are standardized, it's a much easier acquisition. The M&A playbook becomes much more simpler.

And then I think, overall, as I said, think of the third layer. Once these are standardized, once these are defined in the best possible manner, are automated, these transactions form the basis of better analytics. I know I went through a lot of things there. Did that Answer your question, Don?

DON AMORUSO: Niloy, it does. Thank you very much. And it makes sense. I mean, front-loading the work to ensure that the vigor and accuracy of data has meaningful ROI, and the processing efficiency of transactions doesn't happen in a vacuum. So it's a team effort all the way at the beginning.

NILOY LAHA: Correct.

DON AMORUSO: But getting this done right leads to the tangible benefits in the use of cloud computing for providers' ERP system. Let's talk about what those benefits are.

NILOY LAHA: Absolutely, absolutely. I think the first benefit is pretty clear, which is why companies try moving towards the cloud. It is more affordable and cost-effective. You don't have to invest in your data centers. You don't have to invest in a whole big support team. The vendor takes care of that. Obviously, this is across all industries, but that's a big benefit, for certain.

The other piece which we see is specifically this is in healthcare is speed and flexibility for all the reasons we described above—we covered data and transactions above—is the same reason that leads to speed and flexibility. What that means is, if you think of EMR, you can think of mobile apps, you can think of patient portals, right, big data analytics, all those things which today are being used, which you can go and log yourself in when you're going for a doctor's visit much more easily ... that is all driven by consistent data and cloud technology.

We talked about collaboration, right? A cloud technology definitely provides a better collaboration capabilities. The best example are doctors talking to each other collaboratively over the cloud, and virtually, and coming up with the best patient care which is possible through this collaboration.

If you're looking at the patient side, if you're looking at people like us who go in and get the treatments, it's easier for us because we have easier access to clinical and even billing data. So, we move more and more towards self-service, which is also helping the healthcare organizations to focus on the more important things like taking care of patients rather than more back-end stuff, like billing and collections and all that, because it becomes more of a self-service oriented business.

The solution is also easily scalable, which is another big important thing, especially with the M&A trend which is happening in the industry. So you can scale this according to need. In the past, in a non-cloud world, you have to go and get hardware, you have to go and get more facilities to house your hardware, you have to get three more people to take care of the systems. All that is gone now, right. And it's relatively much cheaper.

There's a lot of debate about data being stored in the cloud. In a sense, it is significantly—studies have shown—this is significantly much more secure than storing it on your on-prem servers. More importantly, what is very, very important in the cloud, is it gives you significantly more disaster recovery capability. So today, if your server drops, it's there, the backup data is there in the cloud, easily retrievable, and it's the vendor's job. It's not that, “Oh my goodness, my server has crashed. Now I have to go and get it all taken from my disaster recovery center situated 60 miles away.”

And I think the final point I'm going to make is because the cloud system is so flexible, it actually equips these organizations to handle situations like what we—or disruptions in situations like what we saw two years ago. We never want that to happen again. But, I think this opened eyes and some of these healthcare organizations have consciously made a decision to go to a more flexible and easily scalable route than what they were two years ago during the pandemic.

I don't know how much that helped, but I think those are some of the things which we see as common benefits, Don.

DON AMORUSO: Niloy, I have to say, with what you're saying right here, it really shows a highlighted path of value add from the data point to the patient. And the more that these companies can streamline and organize their data so that they can best serve themselves, their employees, and most importantly their patients, the more we can see moving forward in quality in healthcare. Thank you for those insights detailing how getting your data and transaction processes correct will make a healthcare cloud platform do the work necessary to best serve its employees, and most importantly, its patients.

NILOY LAHA: Thank you, Don. Absolute pleasure speaking to you.

NARRATOR: Thanks for listening. Find out how Grant Thornton goes beyond expectations at GT.com