iGOV SURVEY

Healthcare Delivery on the Digital Frontline

Block in association with iGov Survey

Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank our partner, Block, for their assistance in compiling the survey questions, scrutinising the responses and analysing the results.

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Introduction

As part of the Spring Budget, the UK government set its sights on improving the efficiency and productivity of the NHS, and underscored the importance of IT infrastructure that not only supports patient care but also job satisfaction for NHS workers and added value for taxpayers nationwide.

"Making changes on the scale we need is not cheap," acknowledged Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt, adding: "The investment needed to modernise NHS IT systems so they are as good as the best in the world costs £3.4bn. But it helps unlock £35bn of savings, ten times that amount."

During his address, the Chancellor outlined a programme of comprehensive investments: £430m in service improvements to empower patients, £1bn to streamline data use and reduce administrative burdens, and £2bn to transform legacy IT systems across the NHS ecosystem. All of which is welcome news. But without the proper foundations in place, transformation can quickly lead to widespread disruption – a reality that many healthcare professionals have experienced first-hand.

And so, for our latest study - Healthcare Delivery on the Digital Frontline - Block has partnered with iGov Survey to establish, in real terms, what digitalisation means for grassroots NHS staff. Specifically, how is innovation impacting roles, responsibilities and the overall patient experience? Does implementation add unnecessary layers of complexity, and which technologies should NHS trusts be focusing on in the months and years ahead?

In answering these key questions, we hope to identify attitudes to transformation, progress to date and the challenges organisations must overcome to modernise their IT systems and deliver on the government's ambitions for a future fit NHS. If our findings are to be believed, there is much to be optimistic about – but significant work remains to ensure patients and healthcare professionals alike feel the full benefit of digitalisation.

Survey Methodology

Healthcare Delivery on the Digital Frontline was conducted by iGov Survey in partnership with Block. The consultation period ran from Thursday 11 January 2024 to Friday 16 February 2024.

A total of 143 individuals from 101 unique organisations participated in the survey, representing a broad cross-section of job functions across the NHS, including but not limited to:

Administration, Business Development, Chief Executive/ Deputy, Clinical, Computer Security, Diversity/Equality, Facilities & Estates, Finance Management, Governance, Health & Safety, Human Resources, Infection Control, Information Management, IT Management, Legal Services, Medical Director, Mental Health, Nursing

Director, Operations, Pharmacy, Primary Care, Procurement/Purchasing, Programme Management, Public Health, Quality Assurance, Senior Management, Technical Services and Training.

All survey participants have received a complimentary copy of the key findings report. There was no inducement to take part in our research project, and Block was not introduced as the survey partner.

About Block

Block was created for one reason: to empower people and inspire change through technology. We're fuelled by optimism and a belief that better digital experiences can create a brighter future for people, organisations, society and our environment.
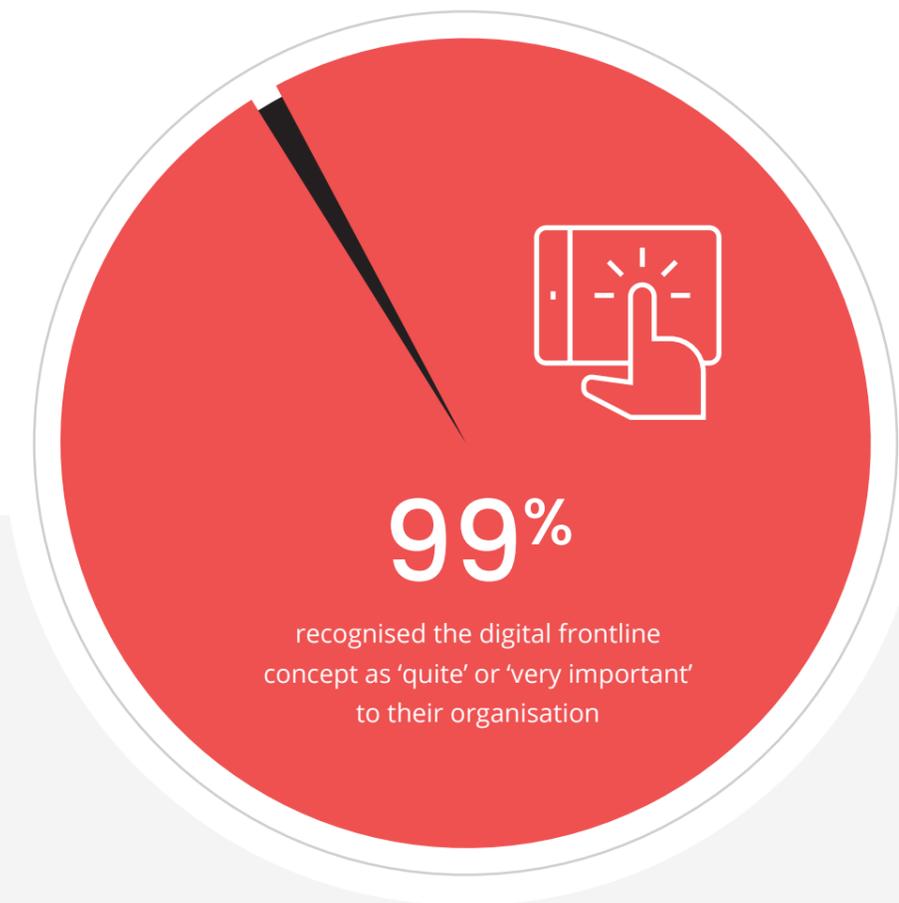**For more, visit: https://www.block.co.uk/**

Key Findings

Attitudes to digitalisation are extremely positive but progress is slow

According to NHS England's Transformation Directorate, digitalising the frontline will "ensure that health and care staff have access to health-related information when and where it is needed, supporting them to deliver care efficiently, effectively and safely". But do healthcare professionals agree with this rather optimistic assessment?

Figure 1: The importance of digital frontline to organisations and the NHS

Encouragingly, as part of our survey of healthcare professionals, the overwhelming majority (99%) recognised the digital frontline concept as 'quite important' (18%) or 'very important' (81%) to their organisation. When asked to consider digital capabilities within their trust, however, responses were much more nuanced.
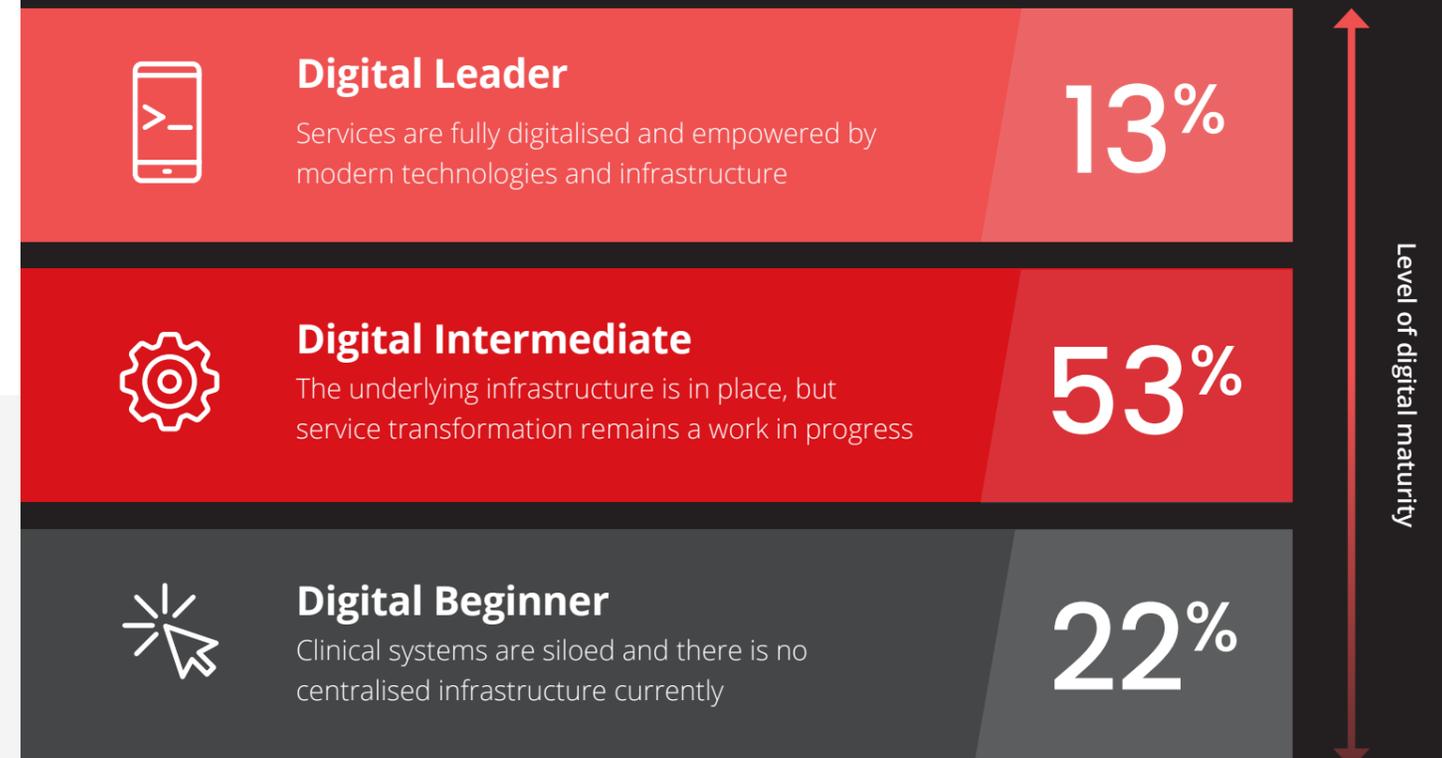
99%

recognised the digital frontline concept as 'quite' or 'very important' to their organisation

In total, 53% described their organisation as a 'digital intermediate', by which we mean that the underlying infrastructure is in place, but service transformation remains a work in progress. In comparison, only 13% felt confident enough to call their trust a 'digital leader', while almost a quarter (22%) answered that their organisation was a 'digital beginner' with siloed clinical systems and no centralised infrastructure.

What does this tell us? Evidently, healthcare professionals appreciate the importance of digitalisation, and real-world progress is under way. But the pace of change is a potential concern, and a relatively high percentage of organisations are already at risk of falling behind.

Additionally, as part of our research, we wanted to establish whether digitalisation had simplified the individual roles and day-to-day responsibilities of healthcare professionals or introduced more complexity into their working lives.

Digital Leader
Services are fully digitalised and empowered by modern technologies and infrastructure

13%

Digital Intermediate
The underlying infrastructure is in place, but service transformation remains a work in progress

53%

Digital Beginner
Clinical systems are siloed and there is no centralised infrastructure currently

22%

Level of digital maturity

Figure 3: Has digital technology simplified work or made things more complicated?

Two-thirds of participants (66%) told us that digital technology had a positive influence to date, enabling staff to 'work from anywhere' (94%), 'increasing collaboration between colleagues' (79%) and unlocking 'time and/or resource savings' (72%).

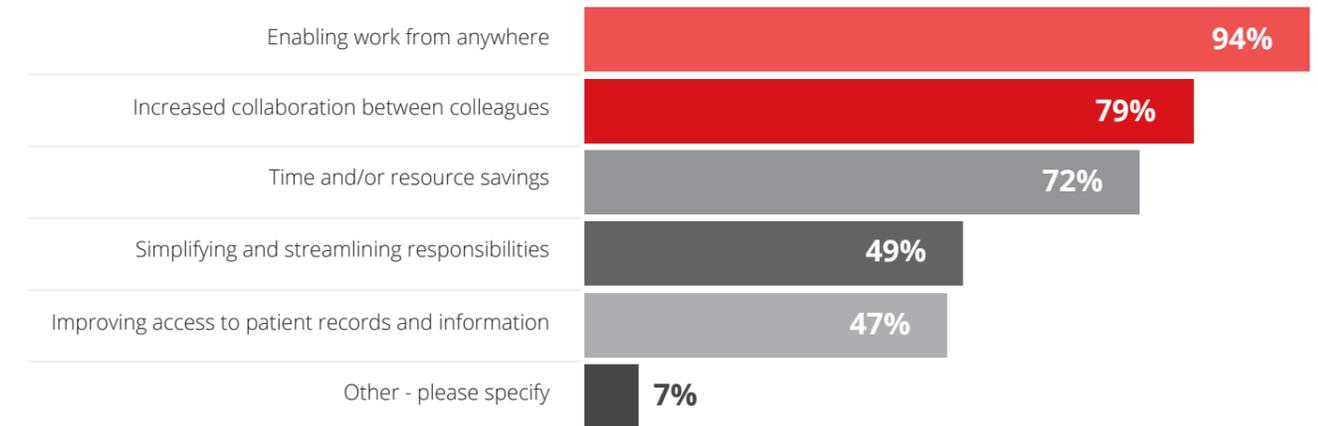"I am able to take care of my own wellbeing more meaningfully," explained one respondent, adding: "Productivity and efficacy in my role remains high and I have been able to reduce the number of sick days within the team because of this approach."

66%

said digital technology has made their roles much easier

13%

were unsure whether digital technology is having a meaningful impact on their roles

21%

said digital technology has made their roles more challenging/complex
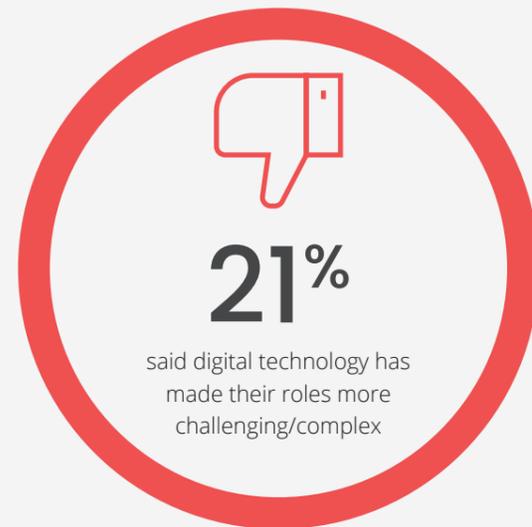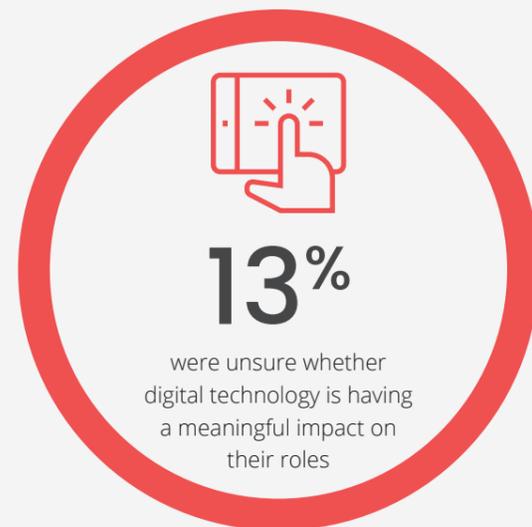
Figure 4: How is digital technology positively impacting healthcare professionals' roles?

Enabling work from anywhere	94%
Increased collaboration between colleagues	79%
Time and/or resource savings	72%
Simplifying and streamlining responsibilities	49%
Improving access to patient records and information	47%
Other - please specify	7%

However, over a third of participants (34%) felt that implementation had little or no meaningful impact (13%) or, in some instances, actually made healthcare delivery more challenging (21%). Issues ranged from complexity - i.e. 'too many platforms or tools' (76%) - to a 'lack of integration with existing platforms' (72%) and the frequency of 'issues or errors' (62%).

A handful of respondents also took to the comments section to emphasise that IT teams often fail to understand the basic needs of users, implementing unintuitive systems that lack accessibility. It is an example of how overly complex processes can obscure or impede innovation.
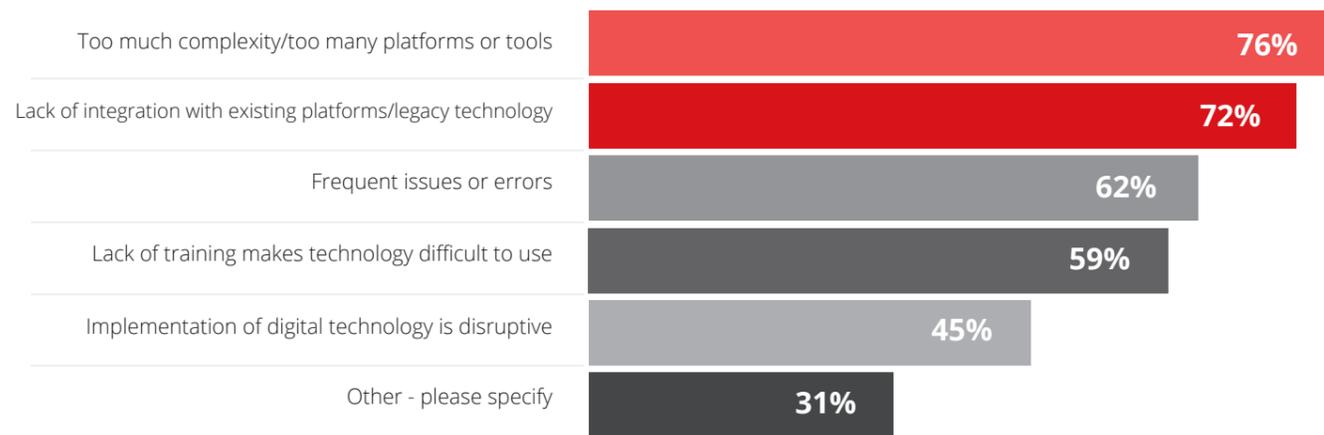
This matrix of systems is likely to be a response to ever-increasing cyber threats. But participants also claim that these risks are outpacing the rate of cyber security investment. There's an "insufficient number of devices for all members of staff to access digital information securely" one respondent revealed, with another highlighting the difficulty of sharing data between organisations securely.

Others identified issues of training and engagement, with one participant highlighting the need for human interaction: "When we ask for support, we are directed back to hyperlinks when what we need is to speak to a human being."

Ultimately, if these findings illustrate anything, it is that innovation is a partnership; something best done with people, rather than to them. All healthcare professionals, irrespective of seniority or digital experience, need to be brought on board - and those that are less tech savvy will require in-person or virtual training to ensure they feel the full benefit of a digitally empowered frontline.

Failure to smooth out issues of implementation and training may complicate the daily roles and responsibilities of healthcare professionals, leading to reduced trust in technology, negative impacts on healthcare delivery and a frustrated digitalisation frontline.

Figure 5: How is digital technology negatively impacting healthcare professionals' roles?

|	
Too much complexity/too many platforms or tools	76%
Lack of integration with existing platforms/legacy technology	72%
Frequent issues or errors	62%
Lack of training makes technology difficult to use	59%
Implementation of digital technology is disruptive	45%
Other - please specify	31%

The benefits of digitalisation are many - but so too are the challenges

An effective transformation relies on having the right strategy in place. But how aware are healthcare professionals of their organisation's digital aspirations? Our findings indicate that just 44% consider themselves 'fully aware', while over a third (38%) say they are 'broadly aware' and a sizable proportion (18%) are completely 'unaware'. Why is this important? Does every NHS employee need to know the ins and outs of their organisation's digital strategy?

18% are completely 'unaware'

38% Broadly aware

44% Fully aware

Figure 6: Awareness of organisations' digital strategy and aspirations
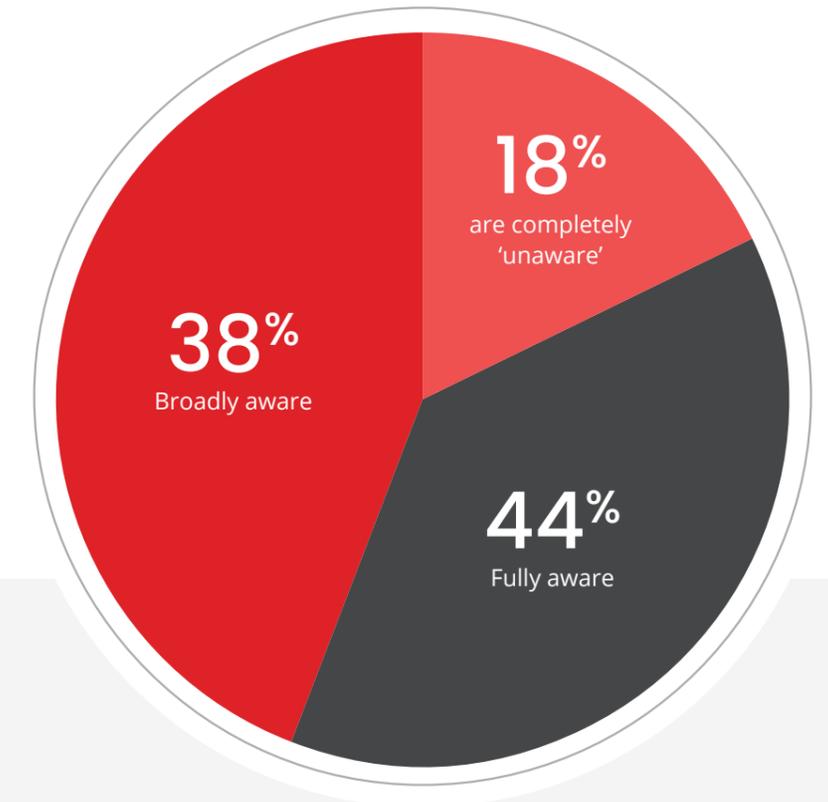
In truth, communication with staff and stakeholders is absolutely critical to maximising buy-in and reducing employee resistance when implementing changes. Frontline NHS staff must be given every opportunity to discover their organisation's digital strategy, via consultations, internal updates or knowledge sharing sessions.
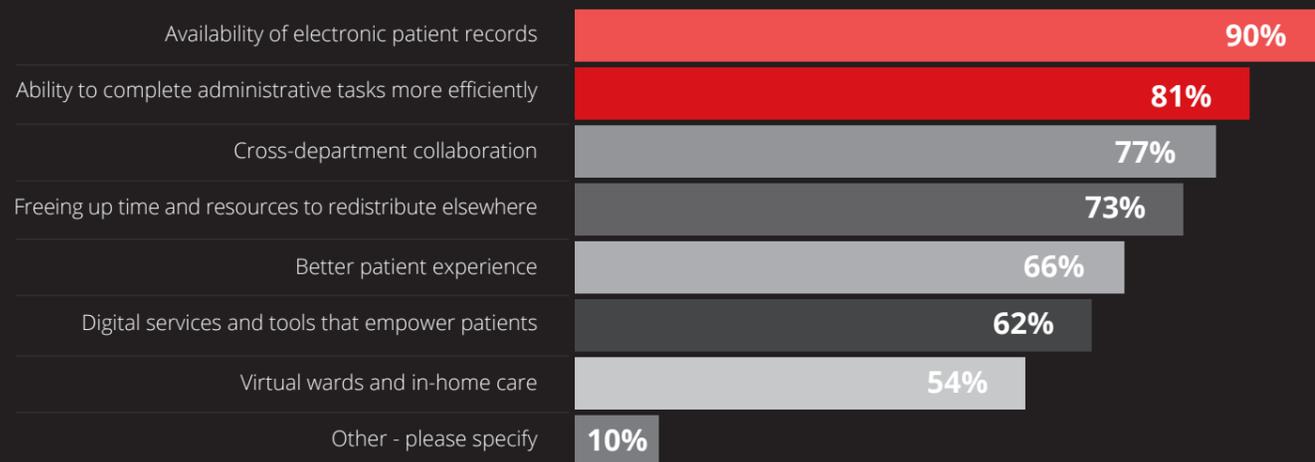
While awareness of digital strategies is relatively low, healthcare professionals appear to recognise the importance of digitalisation. So, what do they see as being the biggest benefits for their organisation?

In total, improvements to operational effectiveness, such as the 'availability of patient records' (90%) and the 'ability to complete administrative tasks more efficiently' (81%), ranked highest. Meanwhile, 'cross-departmental collaboration' (77%) and the ability to 'free up time and resources to redistribute elsewhere' (73%) follow closely behind. Direct benefits to patients, such as a 'better patient experience' (66%) and 'digital services and tools that empower patients' (62%), also placed highly.

As one respondent reflected, digital technology has the potential to: "Create safer patient pathways, reduce risk to patients and patient data, and improve staff satisfaction/job fulfilment, especially for clinical staff who are overburdened with administrative tasks through inefficient systems and processes."

Others highlighted the concept of 'patient empowerment' and 'self-care', as well as engagement with patients and the ability to share knowledge and information seamlessly. Collectively, this feedback demonstrates that digitalisation has the potential to deliver a wealth of benefits for frontline NHS staff, providing it is undertaken responsibly.

Figure 7: Benefits of digitalisation for healthcare delivery within organisations

Availability of electronic patient records	90%
Ability to complete administrative tasks more efficiently	81%
Cross-department collaboration	77%
Freeing up time and resources to redistribute elsewhere	73%
Better patient experience	66%
Digital services and tools that empower patients	62%
Virtual wards and in-home care	54%
Other - please specify	10%

Figure 8: Challenges preventing organisations from taking their digital aspirations forward

Cost and bugdet constraints	70%
Ingrained culture and behaviours	55%
Digital skills shortages	54%
Legacy infrastructure	53%
Time constraints	43%
Privacy and data security concerns	25%
Other - please specify	10%

With so many benefits, what is preventing organisations from taking their digital aspirations forward? Predictably, 'cost and budget constraints' remain the biggest barrier (70%), followed by 'ingrained culture and behaviours' (55%), 'digital skills shortages' (54%) and 'legacy infrastructure' (53%).

"It all comes down to money and government," one respondent declared, adding, "The government keeps placing unrealistic expectations on us without consideration of the financial or administrative burden to enable these transformations."

Where cost and budget is concerned, NHS trusts must ensure return on investment for every penny spent. A robust business case should highlight not only the benefits of digital technology but also the risks of underinvestment and the potential for organisations to recoup expenditure. However, with resources already overstretched, specialist third-party support may be needed to reduce the burden on in-house teams and build the strongest business case possible.

From a cultural standpoint, these findings also support our earlier analysis: that effective training initiatives are needed to upskill and secure buy-in from frontline NHS staff. In the comments section, training was emphasised time and again, with one respondent stating: "Training has been basic and doesn't resemble how the system is actually used in day-to-day practice. Other systems have not been invested in, leaving services reliant on highly staff intensive paper-based systems."

Clearly, where transformation is concerned, there is an overriding need to ensure the right building blocks are in place, from the installation of key infrastructure to the training regimes required to support healthcare professionals. But rather than taking a piecemeal approach, systems and strategy must converge to ensure a smoother transition – one that empowers people and processes, instead of frustrating them.
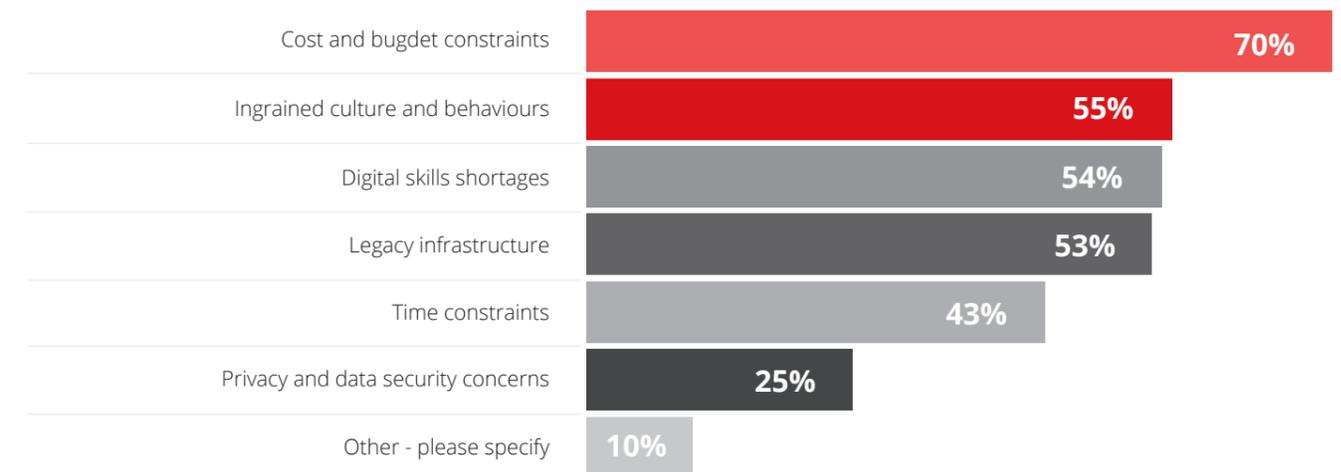
Turning our attention to privacy and data security in the digital age, what are the challenges associated with managing increasingly complex IT ecosystems? From 'information sharing across organisations' to 'understanding what is legal and permitted, versus what is inferred or interpreted', it is clear that there is a significant amount of confusion about what patient information can be shared and with whom.

"Different hospitals have different processes and pathways," confided one respondent, adding: "Digital integration potentially creates apparent management conflicts between one organisation or clinician and another, which could result in medico-legal challenges and difficulties."

Ultimately, NHS staff may need greater levels of guidance to ensure sensitive patient data is shared responsibly and in a way that does not impact patient care or the reputation of their trust. But with internal teams already overstretched, third-party support will have a pivotal role to play in driving education and data awareness.

Without the right foundations in place, transformation will remain a burden for frontline staff

With digitalisation a work in progress, we asked healthcare professionals to consider the top priorities for NHS trusts from a transformation perspective. In total, 83% felt that 'enabling integrated care' and 'ensuring patient records are available in the right place at the right time' should be a high priority. Given that the availability of patient records was previously identified as the single biggest benefit of digital technology, it is perhaps unsurprising that this option would poll so highly.

Other high priorities included 'levelling up healthcare providers with the same core infrastructure' (63%) and 'stabilising infrastructure to reduce disruption caused

by access issues and downtime' (62%) - both of which address the logistical challenges frontline NHS staff now face, and emphasise the need for a resilient digital foundation.

Elsewhere, advice on the availability of 'digital funding opportunities' (43%) was also deemed a high priority, while the development of digital services that 'give patients more control over their care' was designated a medium priority. This suggests that healthcare professionals recognise the need to put the fundamentals in place before extending digital services to outpatients.

Figure 9: **Top priorities for the NHS in advancing digital transformation in healthcare**

When healthcare professionals do encounter a technical issue, how easy is it for them to alert IT support and how often are their issues resolved first time? Encouragingly, while there's certainly room for improvement, almost two-thirds (62%) felt that they could easily reach IT support without issue.

However, only 50% said their issues were able to be resolved 'mostly' (40%) or 'almost always first time' (10%), and - as part of a separate question - a quarter (26%) followed up to say they often have to raise the same issue more than once. This speaks to the myriad challenges IT teams now face – managing a multitude of differing systems and diverse user needs with fewer resources at hand.

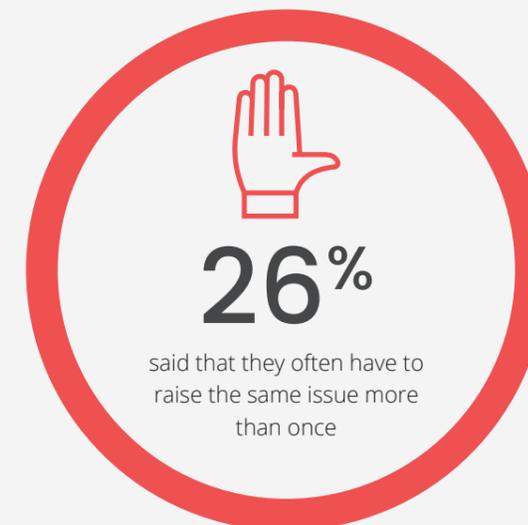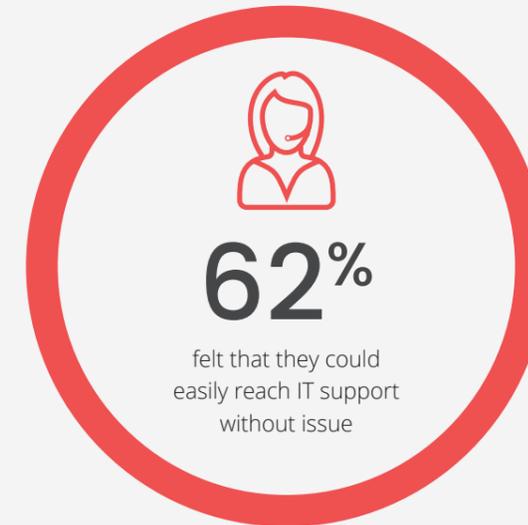| 83%	63%	62%
Enabling integrated care and ensuring patient records are available in the right place at the right time	Levelling up healthcare providers with the same core infrastructure	Stabilising infrastructure to reduce disruption caused by access issues and downtime

43%	29%	
Offering advice on digital funding opportunities available to organisations	Developing digital services to give patients more control over their care	Showing those who selected 'top priority' only.

62%

felt that they could easily reach IT support without issue

50%

said their issues were able to be resolved 'mostly' or 'almost always first time'

26%

said that they often have to raise the same issue more than once

Figure 10: **When healthcare professionals encounter a technical issue**

With IT teams at maximum capacity, collaboration with third parties is critical

Finally, having established the views of healthcare professionals, we wanted a clearer picture of the IT service team perspective. Specifically, we sought their views on digitalisation, IT complexity and workload management.

Figure 11: IT service teams' perspective on digitalisation, IT complexity and workload management

For example, 83% of IT professionals agree that digitalisation is placing 'new challenges or demands' on their expertise. It's unsurprising, then, that 83% feel IT incidents are becoming 'increasingly complex as more systems are introduced' - and, as a consequence, 83% also say that their 'workload has increased' due to digitalisation.

Conversely, only 48% agree that it is 'relatively easy for IT teams to troubleshoot issues', with 39% in disagreement. Why is this? Given that 56% feel that their organisation has not increased IT staffing and resourcing in response to digitalisation, IT teams are almost certainly working at maximum capacity to keep pace with the rate of digitalisation and the associated challenges.

As if to underscore this point, when asked about the logistics of upgrading and maintaining digital infrastructure, 91% cited a 'lack of time and/or resources' as the biggest issue. Only 'cost and budget constraints' polled higher (96%). Additional pinch points included 'training requirements' (74%), 'legacy infrastructure' (65%) and securing 'management buy-in' (57%) - all of which illustrate the challenging environment IT teams now find themselves in.

83% of IT professionals agree that digitalisation is placing 'new challenges or demands' on their expertise

83% feel IT incidents are becoming 'increasingly complex as more systems are introduced'

83% also say that their 'workload has increased' due to digitalisation

Showing those who selected 'strongly agree' and 'agree' only.
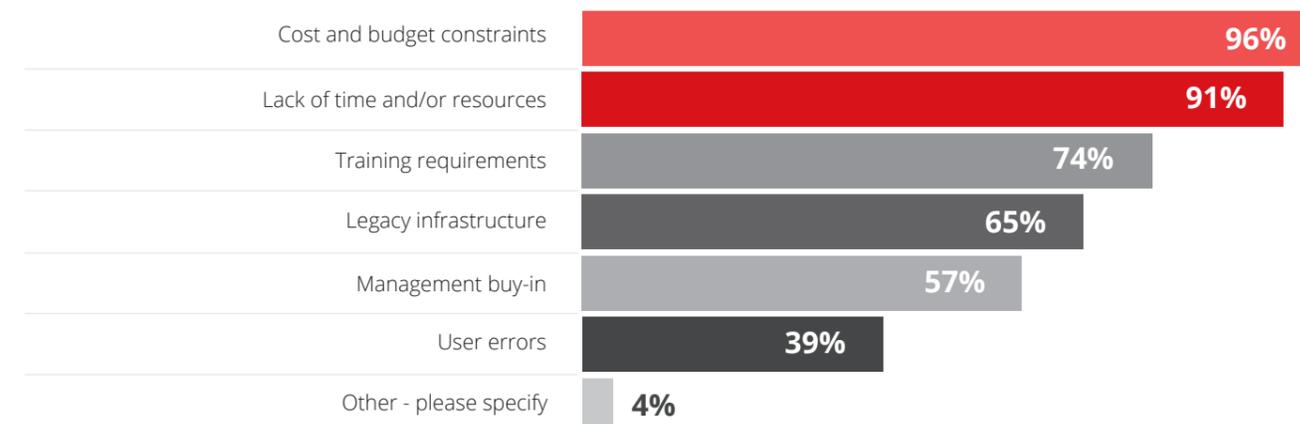
39% disagree that it is 'relatively easy for IT teams to troubleshoot issues'

56% disagree that their organisation has increased IT staffing and resourcing in response to digitalisation

Showing those who selected 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' only.

Figure 12: What challenges are associated with upgrading and maintaining digital infrastructure?

Challenge	%
Cost and budget constraints	96%
Lack of time and/or resources	91%
Training requirements	74%
Legacy infrastructure	65%
Management buy-in	57%
User errors	39%
Other - please specify	4%

But what does this mean for the future? If staff are overstretched, and resources thin on the ground, can IT teams be expected to support their organisation with the same efficiency and effectiveness as before? Put simply, they cannot. It's why we are urging NHS trusts to engage with industry partners and leverage their knowledge and experience to build risk-based business cases that drive lasting investment and modernised IT infrastructure. Only through collaboration can the NHS realistically and cost-effectively alleviate the pressure points impacting IT teams and digital transformation as a whole.

Conclusion

At face value, our findings offer a mixed picture on the digitalisation of the NHS frontline. But, in reality, there's much for senior decision makers and IT teams to feel optimistic about.

For instance, our findings indicate that frontline NHS staff remain positive on transformation, with the overwhelming majority in agreement that digitalisation should be an investment priority in the months and years ahead. Similarly, there's broader recognition for the benefits of digitalisation, whether it's time, efficiency and resource savings or improved collaboration between internal departments and external partners.

However, this shift in attitudes is tempered somewhat by an apparent lack of forward momentum.

Only a handful of frontline NHS staff describe their organisation as a digital leader while the majority appear to be mid-transition or still in the early stage of implementation - significantly behind the digital curve. From budget constraints and behavioural change to skills shortages and legacy infrastructure, the barriers NHS organisations now face are frustrating digitalisation - introducing added complexity to an already complex process.

In response, Block has two simple recommendations to ensure our NHS partners are able to take their transformations forward, intuitively and in a way that supports NHS staff on the digital frontline.

Firstly, without the underlying IT infrastructure in place, digitalisation will always be a difficult process, fraught with compromise. After all, an effective transformation requires a solid foundation. If the fundamental building blocks are poorly implemented, however, the risks to patient care, patient outcomes and the employee experience are very real.

This is why we are urging senior decision makers and IT teams to take stock of their infrastructure in the here and now. As we've established, the majority of NHS organisations are mid-transition, meaning there is still time to ensure IT infrastructure is efficient, intuitive and robust. Once implementation is complete, however, alterations of this kind become significantly more disruptive and costly, meaning the NHS must act now to save later.

Secondly, Block is acutely aware of the challenges IT teams are currently contending with. This latest study validates our own conversations with IT professionals, many of whom are delivering increasingly complex support services with fewer resources, dwindling headcounts and onerous training requirements.

Put simply, collaboration is critical, and if the NHS intends to deliver on the government's ambitions for a digitally enabled frontline, organisations must consider engaging with third-party support. The right industry partner can empower IT teams, provide advice and training, and relieve in-house burdens, but only if all parties are open to collaboration. In challenging conditions, partnerships like these are all the more important and Block will continue to provide our NHS partners with future fit digital support and expert IT services.

Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether the digital frontline concept will take hold to the extent NHS decision-makers hope for. Clearly, buy-in is half the battle, and healthcare professionals appear to be open to digitalisation - but only if it is implemented in a way that minimises disruption and ensures little or no impact on patient care and, just as importantly, patient outcomes.