

Field Notes on Digital Inclusion | Part 2 | When Efficiency Isn't Equity

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"They have a new digital check-in system, and I don't think it's equitable."

That's what my husband said after a quick trip to our local pharmacy, and his story was yet another reminder that we still have a long way to go when it comes to digital inclusion. As he described the scene, it reinforced what I already know: we're designing for efficiency, not always for equity.

The pharmacy had introduced a new digital system for prescription pickup. To get in line, customers had to scan a QR code or enter their information on a touchscreen tablet. The instructions were printed on signage so small you had to be nose-to-screen to read it. There was no staff available to help. The line was full of seniors and folks who didn't speak English fluently, each one growing more confused and frustrated by the minute.

Meanwhile, those who understood the system, or had the digital skills and confidence to figure it out, were called ahead.

My husband stayed as long as he could, helping people navigate the check-in until his name was called. The experience confirmed something I often talk about: there's a widespread assumption that everyone has a phone, and with it, the access, comfort, and digital skills to match.

I Went the Next Day and Saw the Same Thing

A growing line of confused and anxious customers. An unattended kiosk. A pharmacy team doing their best but clearly overwhelmed.

Eventually, a kind and patient employee stepped out from behind the counter to assist. But without a uniform or name tag, people were hesitant when he asked them to enter their birthdates on a public tablet. It was a matter of trust, understandable especially in healthcare settings.

Another good Samaritan stepped up to provide Spanish translation, which was sorely needed. But it shouldn't fall on fellow customers to make the system work for everyone.

I Went Three Months Later and Saw the Same Thing

This time, a feisty senior was yelling at the pharmacist about how she did not understand the kiosk and why she could not simply approach the counter. A kind man in line told the pharmacy staff, "I got her, I got her," and proceeded to help her log in. At that exact moment, I received a notice on my phone telling me to approach the counter. But when I did, the staff told me I was not next.

I looked at the digital screen that listed the order of customers. An abbreviation of my name had "counter" beside it, but so did three other names. The technology was clearly malfunctioning.

Technology Alone Isn't Enough

Let me be clear: I understand why this system was implemented. It integrates into backend workflows, tracks service times, supports productivity, and helps prepare prescriptions more efficiently. Those are all valid operational goals.

But when technology touches the public, especially in essential spaces like healthcare, it must be implemented with care, with intention, and with inclusion in mind.

Because here's the truth: not everyone has digital skills. Not everyone trusts digital systems. And many of those same people are already facing systemic barriers to healthcare, mobility, and access.

If we're not mindful, digital systems can become the new gatekeepers.

What Would a More Equitable Rollout Look Like?

If I were on the corporate team responsible for implementing this system, I would have asked different questions upfront:

- How do we inform customers before the rollout so it's not a surprise?
- Can we staple flyers to prescription bags or have cashiers hand them out?
- Are those materials multilingual and reflective of the local community?
- Should we notify local libraries so their staff can help patrons who may have questions?
- Can we run short announcements in community newspapers, radio stations, or newsletters?

- Could digital navigators support in-store transitions for the first 90 days, especially for customers on three-month prescriptions?
- Can the corporate office produce a friendly, visual walkthrough video of the new system?
- Would local media help spread the word to normalize the change?

This isn't about blaming pharmacy staff. They were doing their best. It's not even about the technology itself.

It's about process.

People.

Care.

We need more digital inclusion champions inside corporations, advocates for both customers and frontline employees. People who can bring a human-centered lens to product rollouts and ensure they work for everyone. We also need to ensure that corporations understand what resources are available to help them navigate inclusive implementation.

This Is Why I Do the Work I Do

That pharmacy visit may seem like a small moment, but it represents a much bigger truth.

Digital inclusion is not a side conversation. It is central to equity.

As we continue digitizing services in healthcare, government, and beyond, we must bring everyone along. Not just the tech-savvy. Not just early adopters. But everyone.

Because digital systems should never become new barriers.

When digital transformation meets the real world, equity must be at the center, not the margins.

Let's build systems that don't just work but work for all.

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