



Four things healthcare IT can learn from the 1990s

By Greg Carey | September 23, 2016

We've just closed out a summer of nostalgia, from the '80s relics in "Stranger Things" to the '90s throwback kitsch of "Pokemon Go." Healthcare IT could benefit from a little nostalgia, too – for those bygone days when we capitalized the internet and embraced the "World Wide Web."

It was a time when principles of transparency, access, and digestible information were born, and took solid hold in such industries as travel and finance. Can healthcare catch up? Here are some lessons from the rise of the information superhighway – and a possible roadmap to the future.

1. The federal government provides the spark; the private sector carries the torch.

The U.S. government funded and managed most of the research and development that led to early versions of the internet. And yes, Al Gore played a part: His High-Performance Computing and Communications Act of 1991 used \$600 million to further the progress of online technology. The Advanced Technology Act of 1992 opened up

valuable links between supercomputers and private enterprise.

Then, the winds shifted from government-funded projects to private investment and development – and the pace of technology quickened. Soon, multiple platforms emerged to navigate the web. It didn't take long for slow, clunky computers with dial-up access to evolve into pocket-sized supercomputers.

Can healthcare follow suit? The HITECH Act in 2009 incentivized development and adoption of electronic health records. Today, after that initial spark, the infrastructure is in place and the time is right for government to allow consumers – patients and physicians – to fully realize the benefits of health IT through private sector leadership.

2. Failure is okay.

It's a misconception that failure is bad for a market. Many companies that were prominent during the rise of the internet are either no longer relevant or no longer exist. And that fear of failure has energized developers and innovators to improve their products and innovate at short intervals.

For example, major airlines spent incredible resources improving their websites in the past decade, only to lose traffic to third-party booking engines such as Expedia and Kayak. Now, pricing transparency through sites like Google Flights and frequent flyer incentives have led consumers back to direct airline bookings.

The HITECH Act propped up floundering health IT companies through pay-for-performance incentives and certification programs. But the technology that was outdated back in 2009 is still around, and physicians can feel trapped in the current system. Allowing them more choice – and vendors more flexibility to respond to their clients' demands – will create better solutions in every corner of the market.

3. The first solution is not necessarily the best.

In fact, companies that enter the market later with a competitive, innovation solution often become industry leaders. MySpace was a social network before Facebook, and Google was far from the first search engine. Today's health IT solutions aren't the end-all, and disruptive companies should be encouraged to enter the market alongside larger competitors.

4. Data fuels all.

These days, we're constantly producing useful data that informs products and services, from the routes we get from Google Maps to the relevant ads we see based on pages we click.

We've collected more data in the past 10 years than we did in the previous 40,000 combined. But in health IT, much of that information, stored in closed systems, might as well not exist. It ought to be accessed and analyzed to inform decision making at every level of the continuum of care, from research institutes to patient choices. Let's not get stuck in the past; it's time for healthcare to enter the future.

Greg Carey is technology standards & policy manager at athenahealth.



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