



Creating a simpler, more transparent patient pathway through digital innovation

Mater Private Network builds Ireland's first
digital engagement platform for patients and
referring physicians

In partnership with



Just inside the main entrance of Mater Private Hospital, in the heart of downtown Dublin, is a permanent art exhibition. In addition to sculpture and physical artifacts from the hospital's early days, the installation mixes archival images and modern video displays to trace the transformation of a single hospital into what is now the Ireland's largest for-profit private hospital group, Mater Private Network.

Of the exhibition's two prominent themes—evolution and innovation—the latter is highlighted by Mater Private Network's long record of pioneering advanced clinical approaches and technologies. Among the most recent examples is cardiac mapping technology, with the Mater Private

Atrial Fibrillation Institute one of the first electrophysiology centers in the world to use it to improve the efficiency of cardiac arrhythmia-related surgeries. Taken as a whole, these investments in clinical innovation reflect an ethos that Mater Private Network shares with virtually all

healthcare providers around the world: an overriding commitment to putting the interests of patients first.

In the shadows of all this innovation, however, Mater Private Network also struggled—like so many of its peers—with a reliance on manual, paper-intensive administrative processes that had an adverse impact on the patient experience. While there was widespread recognition of the need to address these perennial issues, the progress was largely piecemeal and the inefficiencies remained. Then, in July 2018, the hospital network was acquired by a European private equity firm specializing in technology-based transformation, and a new stage of Mater Private Network's evolution as a healthcare network began.

When Eric Neville joined Mater Private Network as its Group Chief Information Officer about a year later, the rough contours of its digital transformation plan were starting to take shape. Under the strong guidance of its board of directors, Mater Private Network had articulated a vision with two key elements. The first was to establish digital engagement platforms; the second—focused more on back-end processes—was a push to adopt electronic health records.

Expected to increase
top-line revenue growth
by some

2%

by driving more physician referrals

Expected to reduce
inbound contact center
call volume by

25%

through 24x7 digital access and chatbot assistance

Taking the pain out of referrals

In honing its digital engagement strategy, Mater Private Network had concluded that while improving the patient's interaction experience was imperative, the needs of other key stakeholders—specifically, the primary care physicians (PCPs) who referred patients to specialists, or consultants—were also an important part of the equation. Upon Neville's arrival, there was a broad consensus on the need to improve the notoriously opaque, slow and paper-based referral process.

Defining the “how”—and where to begin—was Neville's first big challenge. But the “why” was crystal clear. “As a hospital network, primary care physician referrals are, in many ways, the lifeblood of our business,” he explains. “In order to attract more referrals to our consultants, it's strategically essential that we remove pain from the referral process. Our growth depends on it.”



If the root cause of that pain was the varying methods used by primary care physicians (PCPs) to send referrals (letters/faxes/emails) to Mater Private

Network, its main symptom was a near-complete lack of transparency as to where things stood in the referral process. Under the process at the time,

a PCP's office would send a referral to a consultant requesting an appointment. It was only when the PCP received a formal response—a cycle that could be delayed due to the non-centralized referral management process in Mater Private Network—that the PCP and the patient knew what was next. "All the while, the patient was left waiting, often anxiously, and the PCP is frustrated because he or she has no visibility into the status of their patient," Neville says. "What we really needed was a way to eliminate those chronic blind spots, and to simplify the patient pathway."

While the problem was well understood, Neville and the board still faced the fundamental question of whether to tackle it from the process perspective of PCPs, or the access perspective of patients—both of whom represented a distinct customer base. Demonstrating a spirit of pragmatism and the art of the possible, they recognized the challenges of dislodging PCPs from using their practice management systems, which they use for referrals and just about everything else. "The more viable approach, we decided, was to build our digital engagement strategy around the bigger customer base," says Neville, "the patients themselves."

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Eric Neville, Group Chief Information Officer, Mater Private Network

Co-creation leads to a new patient experience



Neville and his team then set out to define Mater Private Network's broader digital engagement strategy and perhaps its most crucial element: the technology

platform it would run on. For input on the decision, Neville turned to a team from [IBM Consulting® for Microsoft](#) that he had worked with on a similar platform project

in a prior role. "Functionality-wise, there was a lot we were trying to accomplish with the solution," he says. "[By working with IBM] our aim was to get a more balanced view of what we should do, looking at our strategic priorities and then defining the optimal platform in terms of capabilities, budgets and timelines."

The first major decision was the selection of Microsoft Dynamics 365, running on the Microsoft Azure Cloud, as the platform of choice. Its breadth and comprehensiveness, Neville says, were its chief selling points. "Dynamics gave us a single platform providing every capability we needed for end-to-end digital transformation and a single, unified experience." The means of delivering that experience would be a patient-focused portal and a mobile app.

The heart of the engagement—and the prime example of the co-creative approach—was the conceptualization and

design of the user experience. Before the actual delivery phase began, the IBM team brought in user-experience and service-design resources to define a series of customer personas and journeys, or “user stories.” A key part of that effort was a series of highly collaborative workshops involving process and subject matter experts from across the Mater Private Network organization, including IT, marketing and various administrative areas.

To Neville, the co-creation that prevailed in these workshops served a dual role. “[The workshops] provided a forum for capturing different stakeholder views on the ‘ideal’ process they wanted to see set up, while making sure that they were on board with the process,” Neville explains. “The fact that these agile, co-creative practices never really stopped throughout the journey was critical to getting—and keeping—their buy-in.”

“By building a single communications infrastructure for all our digital engagement—with patients first and PCPs and consultants beyond that—we’re really creating an ecosystem, all built around a common, secure core of information.”

Eric Neville, Group Chief Information Officer, Mater Private Network

An ecosystem approach to healthcare communications

The first major milestone of Mater Private Network's digital engagement journey was the release of MyMaterPrivate, a mobile app and a portal-based solution targeted to patients, in September 2022. Designed by IBM Consulting for Microsoft and the first of its kind in Ireland, the solution enables patients to find consultants, request and book appointments, pay bills and more, all with the assistance of a built-in AI-powered chatbot. In addition to giving patients real-time information on appointment status and the like, MyMaterPrivate enables them to do it when it best suits their schedule, not during standard office hours.

While Mater Private Network's first step into digital patient engagement represents a major step forward in its strategy, the arguably bigger story is what's coming down the road. And how, Neville explains, the use of a single, unified solution like Microsoft Dynamics 365 is a critical enabler of its strategy. "By building a

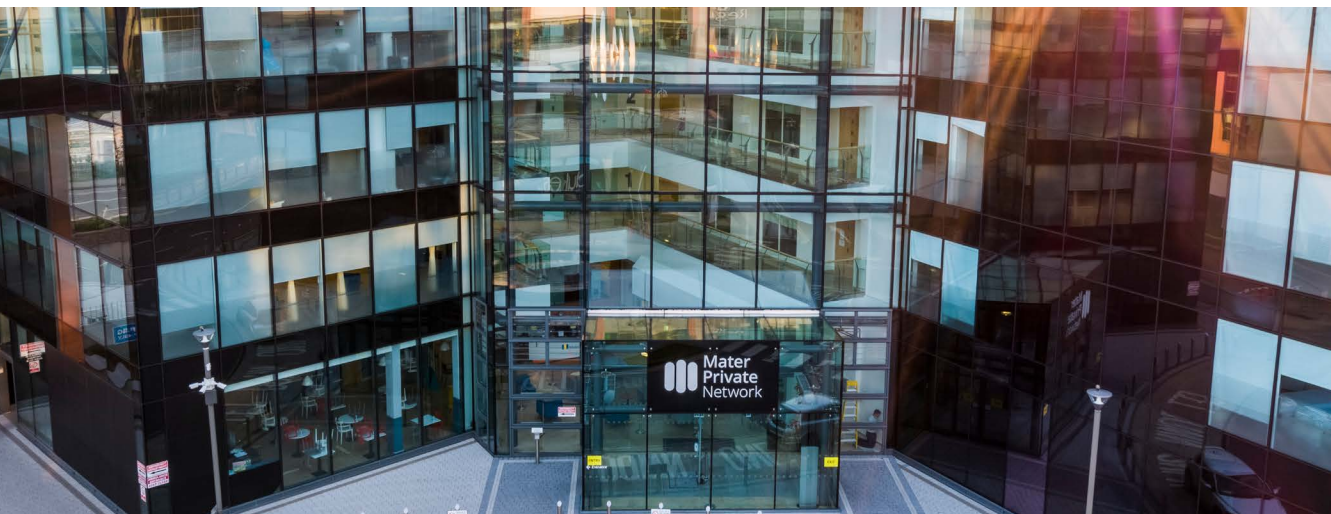


single communications infrastructure for all our digital engagement—with patients first, and PCPs and consultants beyond that—we're really creating an ecosystem, all built around a common, secure core of information," says Neville. "It provides us with an extremely efficient way to offer a series of interconnected capabilities to all our key stakeholder groups."

Take PCPs, for example. Under a capability currently being deployed, PCPs will be able

to log in to the portal to not only make referrals to consultants within the Mater Private Network system, but also see where their patients are in their journey through it. And by taking advantage of the built-in CRM capabilities of the Dynamics platform, Mater Private Network's marketing team will be able to engage digitally with PCPs, ranging from email-based personalised communications to educational webinars and other targeted programs.

A legacy of innovation continues



As with its clinical innovation record, Mater Private Network's digital transformation is all about delivering on a core commitment: providing patients with a more personalized experience and a smoother, simpler pathway to the care they need. But it's also an acknowledgement of the Darwinian need to meet ever-

rising customer expectations around convenience and information availability. As Neville explains, this dynamic applies to both patients and PCPs, and has major implications for referral market share. "At the end of the day, a PCP is more likely to refer to our consultants if we have better communications around appointments

and scheduling, and other things that affect their patients' experience," he says. "Conservatively, we think our new digital capabilities can generate upwards of a 2% increase in our top-line growth."

On top of that, the availability of always-on digital access to appointment information—in combination with the convenience of an AI chatbot to get fast answers—is expected to eventually reduce inbound call volume to the Mater Private Network contact center by 25% or more. In addition to internal efficiency improvements, that translates into a simpler, more satisfying experience for patients.

To Neville, Mater Private Network's transformation journey represents the latest chapter in an ongoing story of evolution and innovation. "We see our digital engagement strategy as a direct outgrowth of our mission of putting patients first," he says, "and an affirmation of our commitment to it going forward."



About Mater Private Network

Based in Dublin, [Mater Private Network](#) (link resides outside of ibm.com) is Ireland's largest private hospital network, with approximately 280 patient beds and more than 2,150 employees—including more than 300 consultants. A national leader in heart and cancer specialties, Mater Private Network has a strong reputation for medical innovation and providing high quality patient care.

Solution components

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