



# HME Business VOICES

## Nick Knowlton

Business Development  
Brightree

In this interview, HME Business sits down with Nick Knowlton, Vice President, Business Development, Brightree, to talk about the barriers to interoperability and how to solve for them. He discusses the importance of adopting a technology platform that can integrate with existing systems and processes, and he provides an outlook on the role interoperability will play in the evolution of health care as a whole.

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Editor's note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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**Q: HME Business:**  
What life and career experiences do you most draw from in your role today?

**Nick Knowlton:** I'm both a biochemist and a computer nerd, so it's not surprising that I ventured into health information technology. It took a good friend nearly four years to convince me to take this path, but looking back, I'm incredibly grateful for the nudge. My motivation stems from wanting to make a significant impact on people's lives, both presently and in the future. Shifting my career direction over a dozen years ago has allowed me to pursue this goal.

My excitement for what I do is shaped in part by my personal life experiences. I was introduced to the Japanese concept of ikigai, which represents the intersection of what you are good at, what you can build a career in, what you are passionate about, and what benefits the world. Striving for a balance among these drivers has always been crucial to me.

**Q: HME Business:**  
How has technology advanced within interoperability now versus 10 years ago?

**Knowlton:** Several major developments have really advanced system interoperability and enabled providers to reap the benefits. Firstly, the past decade has seen a substantial increase in the adoption of cloud-based, modern technologies for interoperability. Ten years ago, the landscape was dominated by point-to-point interfaces that were challenging to program and maintain, and they often utilized coding languages specific to health care interoperability.

Since then, we've witnessed the spread of interoperability solutions that employ modern and accessible technologies. One advantage of this shift is the expansion of the developer pool, since more of them are capable of working in health care interoperability, thanks to programming languages that align more closely with those used by web developers.

Secondly, the rise of cloud-based technologies has facilitated more efficient one-to-many connections, eliminating the need to construct and upkeep interfaces individually. This allows a single interface to serve thousands of provider groups, reducing costs and enhancing the capacity for creating an interoperable health care ecosystem. This transformation is not confined to Home Medical Equipment (HME) but extends across the health care interoperability sector as a whole.

**Q: HME Business:**  
Are providers more experienced with it now or do you find that there's still confusion about what true interoperability means?

**Knowlton:** When thinking about the essence of true interoperability, HIMSS offers a definition that encapsulates several fundamental ideas: "Interoperability goes beyond merely transferring documents; it involves the meaningful utilization of exchanged data by providers." This is especially relevant in the HME sector, where there's immense value in seamlessly transferring patient care details between different providers and care settings. Effectively integrating this data into provider workflows can cut the time spent on patient treatment processes, expedite reimbursement procedures and enhance the coordination between systems. It also fosters smoother collaborations with external partners like e-prescribe vendors, which have become more prevalent in the current environment.

Today's providers grasp the importance of connectivity, unlocking untapped potential and more possibilities for the future. Demonstrating the capabilities of interoperability sparks conversations about system functionality and advancements in collaboration for the betterment of patient care and provider efficiency.

**Q: HME Business:**  
What challenges can interoperability help solve for?

**Knowlton:** Continuity of patient care is a good starting point in this discussion. Providers enter this field to help patients, but continuity of care poses ongoing challenges in achieving that goal. A decade ago, we heard from customers that up to 10% of their orders couldn't be filled due to missing patient information, and it's hard not to wonder about the fate of those untreated patients.

For HMEs, interoperability ensures patients continue receiving the treatments they need and deserve. Without it, numerous treatment opportunities are missed because the originating physician's information, necessary for correcting or completing orders, can't be located. This issue aligns closely with my personal concerns, because providers excel at patient care but struggle without accurate information from referral sources. Interoperability aids in every step, from patient intake and resupply to billing and ongoing care, improving interactions with patients at multiple junctures.

Finally, the ability to proactively collaborate with providers across different care settings is key. Improving how HME providers are perceived in health care partly involves enhancing interactions with referral sources. Using modern, technology-driven methods to communicate allows HME providers to integrate seamlessly into the broader care team, which is fundamental in a value-based reimbursement landscape.

**Q: HME Business:**

What would you say to a provider who is using a system that doesn't integrate or play well with others?

**Knowlton:** I would always advise providers to demand a lot of their vendors when it comes to interoperability, regardless of the care setting. The capabilities are out there, so if a vendor is under-invested in their capabilities to drive true interoperability, providers need to do what's best for their team and their patients, ultimately exploring other systems if they're not getting what they need.

**Q: HME Business:**

How do you see interoperability playing a part in the changing of healthcare solutions in the future?

**Knowlton:** The seismic shifts in health care delivery within the United States has largely been driven by the principles of value-based care. This approach focuses on doing what's best for the patient, maintaining their health at home or in their current residence, and reducing overall care delivery costs — interoperability plays a key role in achieving these goals.

For health systems or groups that are compensated for preventing patient issues before they escalate into severe and costly problems, analyzing data from various systems is helps achieve a more comprehensive understanding of patient health. The rise of population health and value-based care among referral sources makes it even more important to keep patients informed about their conditions to realize the potential of a connected health care ecosystem.

The effectiveness of technologies and analytics, including machine learning and artificial intelligence, is limited by the data they can access. Connecting these systems enables more robust insights and leads to the best possible care for patients and providers alike.

**Q: HME Business: Finish this sentence:**

**In the home medical equipment industry, 2024 will be the year of...**

**“...rapid advancements in connected care solutions.”**