BECKER'S HEALTHCARE RELATIENT



Smart access, stronger systems: How leaders are turning patient access into a growth driver

Healthcare providers are intensely focused on enhancing patient access and the patient experience while simultaneously seeking to improve staff efficiency. From call center enhancements, self-service scheduling tools and agentic AI, providers are actively pursuing a digital-first approach to maximize success around their patient access strategy.

To better understand how providers are leveraging technology, Becker's Healthcare and Relatient surveyed 100 healthcare leaders.

Findings from this survey along with insights from Relatient CEO Jeff Gartland are summarized below.



Survey background

This survey reflects the perspectives of healthcare executives, offering a snapshot of key leadership views on technology adoption across the industry. Among the 100 respondents, **80% held C-level or vice president roles**, with nearly half (49%) serving as CEO or COO. Other respondents included vice presidents or directors of operations (23%), practice managers (20%), and vice presidents or directors of patient access (7%).

Most respondents were from mid-sized or larger organizations: 79% reported more than 75 providers in their organization and 63% reported more than 100 providers.

The majority of respondents **(65%) were from primary care or multi-specialty organizations**. The remaining 35% represented specialty organizations including orthopedics, dermatology, oncology, OB/GYN, cardiology and behavioral health.

Top investment priorities

A central theme of the survey is that providers are prioritizing and investing to enhance their patient experience while also seeking to increase staff efficiency.

Healthcare leaders are prioritizing investments in call center infrastructure, patient communication tools, and scheduling solutions, all aimed at improving the patient experience while easing administrative burdens for staff. These patient access technologies are seen as essential for removing barriers to care and creating a more seamless journey for patients.

By modernizing patient access tools, providers can directly influence outcomes such as lowering call abandonment rates, enabling patients to schedule appointments outside of traditional business hours and ensuring patients are connected to the right resource at the right time. Each of these improvements translates into potential for more appointments booked, fewer missed connections with patients and ultimately greater access to care.

Figure 1: How many providers are in your organization?

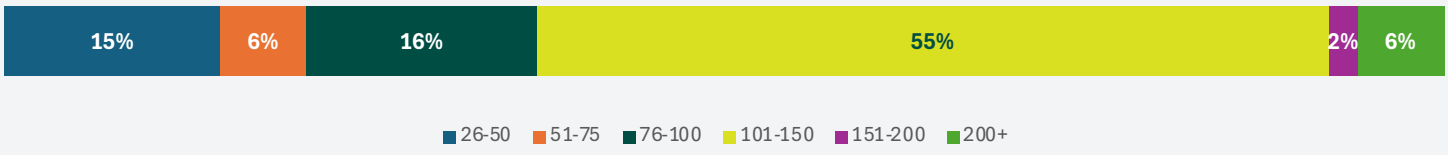
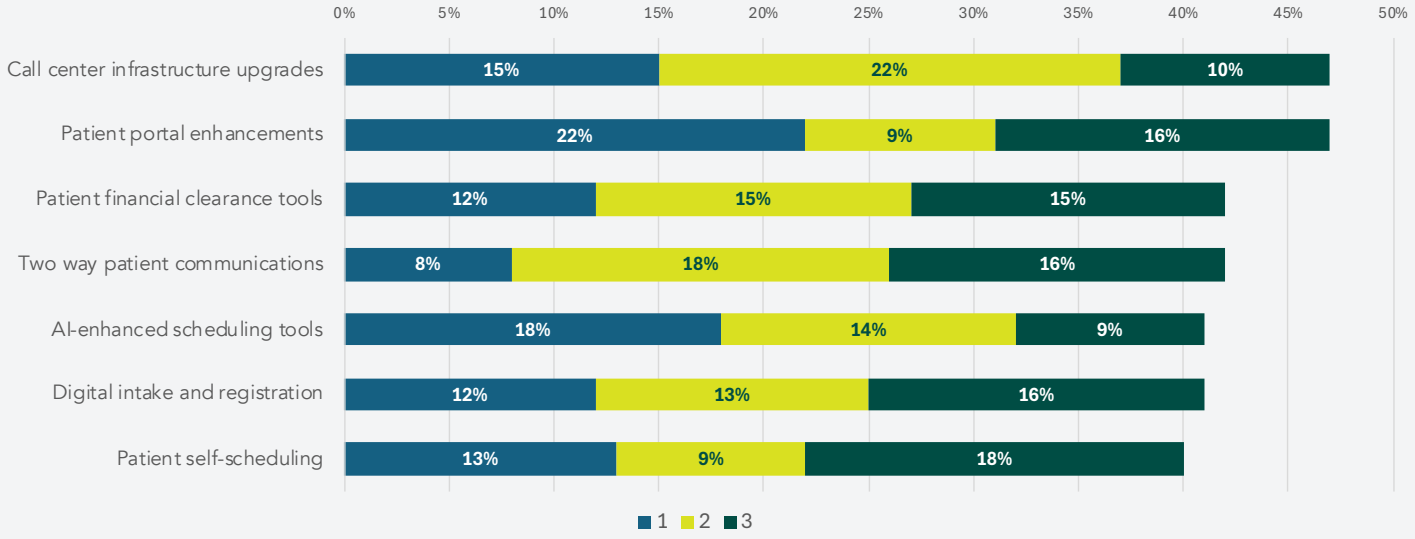


Figure 2: What are your organization's top three investment priorities for patient access technology in the next 12 months?



These crucial upgrades aren't just about technology, they are ensuring patients can connect with the provider organization when and how they need to. The result can be improved operational efficiency for staff and a more reliable, patient-centered experience for those seeking care.

According to Gartland, investments in patient access should be a clear priority for providers. He emphasized that the best provider organizations don't view patient experience and staff efficiency as tradeoffs, they pursue both.



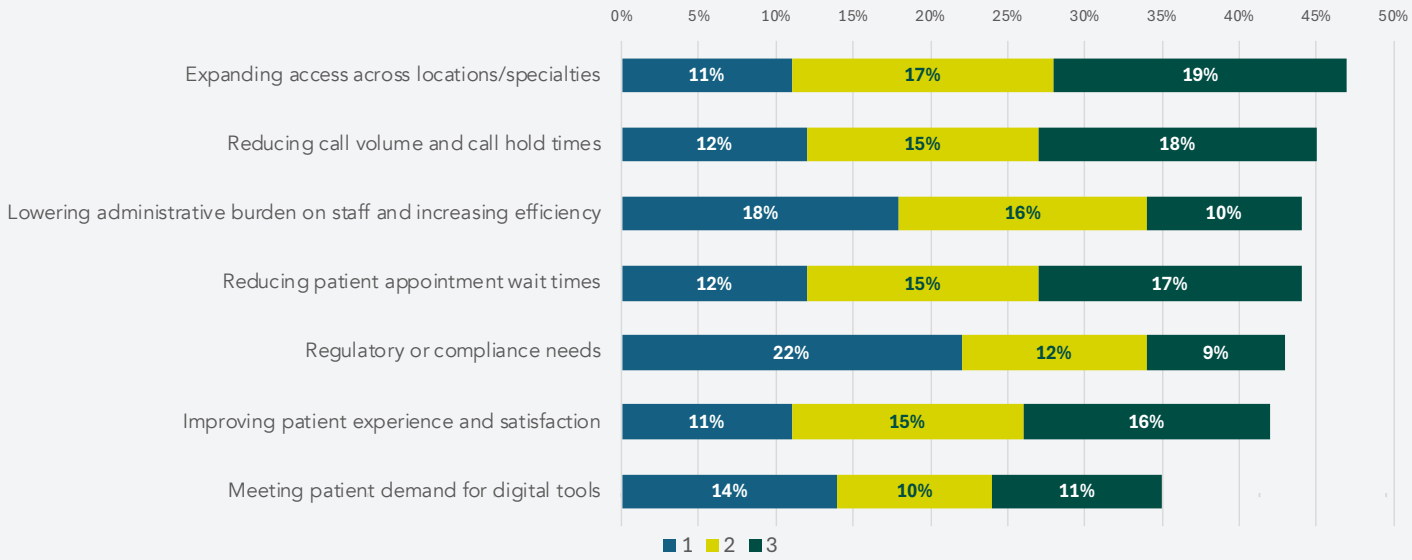
"Patient access isn't a feature anymore; it is fundamental to how providers operate, run their business and support their community," Gartland said. "When you leverage tools and technology along with automation and AI, you actually free up your team from repetitive tasks so they can spend more time on empathy and high-value touches that drive the overall patient experience."

Smart access hubs

Call center infrastructure upgrades are a **top-three patient access technology investment priority for 47% of respondents and the number-one priority for 15%.** As Gartland noted, healthcare organizations are moving away from traditional call centers toward contact centers, access centers, or "smart access hubs" that not only answer calls but also guide, counsel and support patients throughout their journey.

What makes these hubs "smart" is their ability to move beyond reactive call handling. Capabilities such as rules-based automation, intent-based routing and proactive functions like automated waitlist management and referral tasking allow organizations to anticipate patient needs rather than simply respond to them. For example, instead of waiting for a patient to call back, a smart hub can automatically notify them of an earlier appointment slot, streamlining access while boosting satisfaction.

Figure 3: What are the top three drivers behind your call center technology investments?



This proactive approach is driving an important evolution: where patient access technologies were once viewed primarily as a cost center, they are now increasingly recognized as a strategic growth driver. By expanding access, reducing hold and wait times and meeting patient demand for digital-first tools, **60% of respondents cite the patient experience as the central reason behind these investments**.

While the primary driver for investing in call center infrastructure may be to enhance patient access and the patient experience, these investments also increase staff efficiency by reducing call volume and lowering administrative burden.

The survey also revealed growing adoption of AI-based technologies in call centers. Among the main AI use cases are sentiment or **patient feedback analysis (37%), agentic AI or voice AI agents (36%), and intelligent call routing (32%)**.

In Gartland's experience, organizations that have already adopted agentic AI solutions such as voice AI agents are making significant progress toward achieving both their patient experience and staff efficiency objectives. Among Relatient's clients using voice AI agents, two-thirds of appointment cancellations are handled by the AI agent and 72% of rescheduling requests are now handled autonomously.

What sets Relatient's voice AI apart is that it doesn't operate on generic scripts. Unlike standard voice bots that can only follow rigid workflows, Relatient's agentic AI allows each organization to set its own scheduling rules and guardrails, which the AI then applies intelligently in real time. This ensures the technology adapts to each provider's unique policies and workflows, acting as an extension of their operations rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.

That adaptability enables a higher level of personalization, maintains consistency across interactions and jumpstarts scalability.

"Taking that volume away from staff members and allowing humans to do what they do best and allowing the AI to do what it does best works great," Gartland said. He noted that AI is an immediate "staff liberation move," and in the long run, will drive more intelligent personalization.



The importance of self-service tools

Consumers have rapidly migrated to online self-service tools in areas such as ecommerce and online banking, showing strong consumer preferences for easy-to-use online tools. However, to date, the rate of adoption of self-scheduling in healthcare has been lower than in other industries.

The survey found that currently 56% of organizations report that less than 25% of their appointments are scheduled via self-service tools and only 6% of providers have more than 50% of appointments booked this way.

While adoption today remains limited, this does not reflect a lack of patient demand, instead, it signals the opportunity for providers to implement the right kind of self-service options.

Many existing tools, such as patient portals and static forms, require patients and/or staff members to do additional steps to book the appointment, and often create friction in the scheduling process. By contrast, intelligent self-service tools powered by automated workflows can simplify scheduling, proactively guide patients and reduce barriers to booking an appointment. When these kinds of tools are deployed and patients are made aware of their availability and ease of use, adoption rates could climb significantly.

Gartland emphasized that rather than a problem of demand, the challenge is one of design and visibility. Patients want self-service options, but they need those tools to be seamless, intuitive, and accessible. For providers, this represents not just an operational opportunity, but a strategic one: those who lead in adopting intelligent, automated scheduling will be seen as more patient-friendly and technologically advanced.

In an increasingly competitive healthcare environment, positioning as a leader in patient access can translate into stronger patient loyalty, higher utilization and long-term growth.

Figure 4: Approximately what percentage of your total appointments are currently scheduled by patients through self-service tools (e.g., online, mobile app, patient portal)?

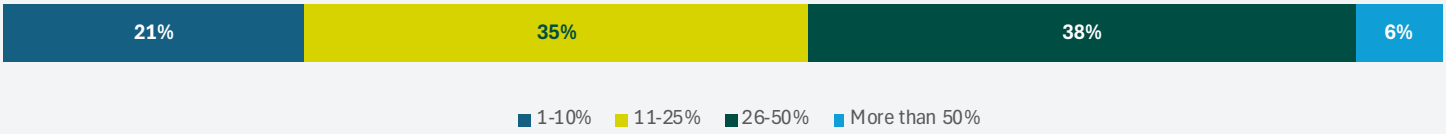
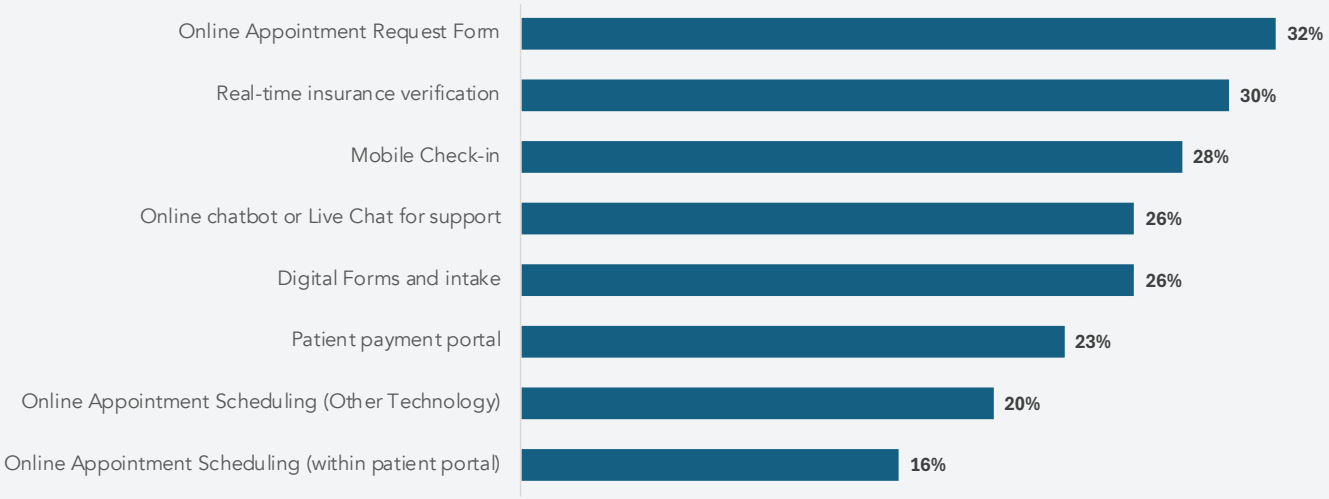
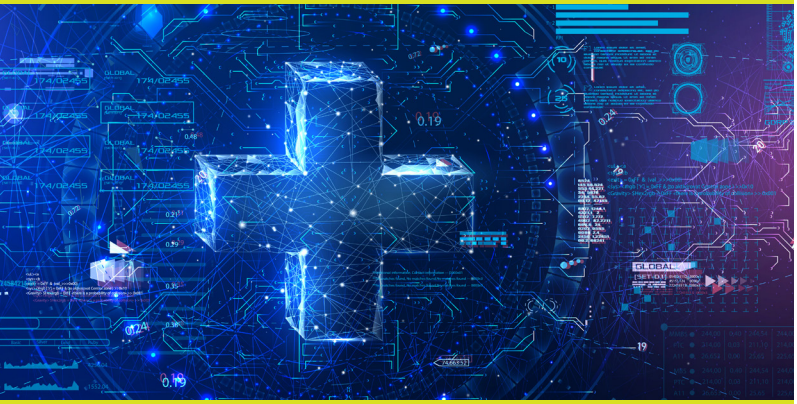


Figure 5: Which patient self-service features are currently live at your organization?



In assessing the survey results, Gartland sees a significant opportunity for providers to become more familiar with and adopt consumer-friendly, intelligent self-service tools that exist. He noted that one issue for providers to consider is that the various self-service features offered may be fragmented, causing patients to bounce between various portals or applications, and detracting from the overall experience. In contrast, leading organizations should focus on creating a seamless, cohesive experience.

Gartland shared that in the past year, Relatient has seen 53% growth in self-service scheduling across the company's clients, which offers tangible evidence that when providers implement user-friendly tools, consumers will use them.



Exploring new tech platforms or add-on solutions

With **64% of respondents planning to switch EHR or PM systems or actively evaluating alternatives**, the findings point to the industry's awareness of having to keep pace with providers' evolving needs, creating new demand for tools that are more flexible, interoperable and user-friendly.

The survey found that about one-third of respondents' organizations (34%) plan to switch practice management or EHR systems in the next 12–18 months, nearly one-third (30%) are evaluating new systems and the remaining third (36%) aren't planning to change systems but are exploring modular add-on solutions.

This mix underscores that organizations want to retain the stability and familiarity of a core foundational system, but they also recognize the need to layer on best-in-class tools that solve specific problems.

Meeting this need requires technology that is not only interoperable, but also intelligent. Rules-based engines play a key role here, allowing add-on tools to integrate seamlessly with core systems without creating fragmentation. By applying consistent business rules across platforms, providers can ensure that the patient experience feels unified, whether a patient is scheduling through a call center, a digital portal, or an AI-powered

voice agent. The goal is to mirror the same intuitive and reliable experience across every channel, eliminating friction for both patients and staff.

The increased awareness around outdated systems, combined with a growing demand for seamless interoperability, represents a pivotal industry moment. Providers who adopt rules-driven, interoperable solutions will be better positioned to address patient access challenges, maintain operational efficiency and gain a competitive edge in meeting rising expectations.

Modernizing patient access is a journey

Beyond operational efficiency, patient access itself is emerging as a true strategic differentiator. Provider organizations that make it easier for patients to connect, through seamless scheduling, responsive communication, and proactive support are more likely to attract and retain patient volume in a competitive marketplace.

"With some of the AI and automation that is coming out, there's a lot of performance lift you can do by removing two or three pain points along that process," Gartland said. "It's the beginning of a digital journey."

Excelling at this strategy requires thoroughly understanding the patient experience, identifying friction points, and intentionally addressing them. To do this effectively, providers should consider a platform with modular capabilities that can be added and scaled over time.

Just as importantly, reducing friction in access alleviates administrative burden, which helps improve staff satisfaction and retention. Patient access investments not only enhance the patient experience, but also strengthen organizational competitiveness and long-term growth.

"The winners aren't the ones with the most or the best technology; they will be the ones that know how to use it really well," Gartland said. "They will let machines do the work that they do well, while ensuring that humans are there to bring that human interaction."

This perspective underscores a broader truth emerging across healthcare: automation and AI deliver the most value when they are deeply embedded into existing workflows, not layered on as disconnected tools.

Organizations that get this right will not only maximize the impact of their technology investments but also transform patient access into a true differentiator.

