Investments in recent years are paying off

Questions to Wolfgang Heimsch, President Customer Service at Siemens Healthineers

Mr. Heimsch, how many PPEs, i.e. pieces of personal protective equipment, do you have at home?

I'm happy if those who do their so important work in hospitals and medical centers have the protective equipment. As advised, I am currently working from home.

We learned a great deal from past crises, such as the SARS epidemic in 2002 and the Tsunami in Japan 2011, and have made appropriate preparations, for example, by ensuring we have protective equipment for our own employees.

To what extent is Customer Services prepared for such extraordinary events in other areas?

We're a very large service organization worldwide and, thanks to three remote service centers, we have created the necessary infrastructure to be able to serve our customers around the clock. They can access necessary documents on our training platform PEPconnect. This is complemented by our worldwide logistics organization. Here, too, we have taken precautions by timely replenishing supplies in our global warehouses. Nevertheless, this remains a challenge due to greatly reduced flight schedules.

Our remote service performance is also very important, and we have boosted our performance enormously in recent years. I believe that we are among the top players in this area technologically. More than 15 years ago, we started building a smart remote service network that is now the backbone of today's processes. In this way, we help our customers to maintain business continuity.

Despite all our digital solutions, we still visit our customers on-site when, for example, an X-ray tube has to be replaced in a computer tomograph. I really want to thank my staff around the world for showing the courage to work in medical facilities at this time of crisis!

How does the COVID-19 crisis change the work of your service organization? What are the main challenges?

We're trying really hard to do everything without having any direct contact if at all possible, in other words, remotely. This is necessary because many medical facilities can no longer provide us with unlimited access. The challenge for us now is to maintain a robust IT-infrastructure even under heavy load.

At the same time, we see that the investments we have made in recent years are paying off. In our remote service centers via a remote connection, we can now clarify better than ever how to correct a fault on site on our first visit. Follow-up visits to the customer have thus become much rarer.

In this case, are we experiencing the crisis as an accelerator of digitalization in service?

Yes. Networking and remote service now help us a lot. Another example: With the help of our technology, we can now also support customers remotely in scanning with their computer tomographs and magnetic resonance devices if they have a problem with them in their daily routine.

We see our strategic approach confirmed. However, we also see that we need to pursue our remote service portfolio and activities with even greater intensity and expand them even more quickly.

What else can you do to keep customers operating?

We have many ways to help our customers in their daily work: In countries with appropriate legislation, Siemens Healthineers clinical application specialists can now choose to support local hospitals on-site, for example in conducting examinations using CTs.

We're also offering free COVID-19-specific online training, which is made available to our customers on our PEPconnect platform. Among other things, it provides instructions for disinfecting equipment or special rules of conduct for clinical staff. Medical staff can also learn how to support each other remotely with dedicated remote maintenance software.

Finally, we're also offering innovative on-site assistance services, such as remote scanning support for specific imaging devices or smart collaboration solutions.

Customer Services is a very large organization. Do you have an example of what a daily challenge looks like for your employees and their customers?

Yes, here is a story that describes our challenges in this time very vividly! Last month, the People's Hospital of Luhuo County in China's Sichuan Province reported a malfunction on a computed tomograph. The device is used to scan COVID-19 patients. Our employees in the remote service center were able to remotely identify the X-ray tube as the cause of the fault. So, in Sichuan province, one of our customer service technicians, together with a regional service manager, immediately set off with a new X-ray tube in their bags. But they weren't allowed to travel beyond the first checkpoint because they didn't have the official seal from the regional office for the prevention of epidemics. They then called the customer and received the required stamp directly on their mobile phone. The two colleagues then had to pass ten more checkpoints on a logistics service provider’s bus and even cross the Zheduo Snow Mountain at an altitude of 4,000 meters until they finally arrived at their destination after 13 hours. Despite all the regulatory and geographical challenges, the X-ray tube was repaired in just three days. An excellent performance in such tough times!

That really is an exciting story. Let's now consider at the time after the COVID-19 crisis: What has the service already learnt from this crisis?

At the latest now it is clear: Remote Service is the right approach even in medical technology. It'll be much more difficult in future for anyone – whoever they are – to argue against remote connection of our systems. For every future investment we'll ask yourselves the question: Will this investment help us to provide better remote service?

Data usage will play a much bigger role in service than ever before, because this is where data from different systems and application comes together. For example, we can use AI-supported methods to detect and eliminate possible interference in our imaging or laboratory diagnostics systems before it even occurs. And we have also been testing innovative technologies, such as augmented and virtual reality or chatbots and online spare parts tracking. So, you can see there are still many opportunities for digitalizing service operations!