A Guidebook for Improved Communication in Healthcare

amtelco

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Communications Designed for Healthcare

Communication in healthcare is complex. Hospitals utilize a combination of purpose-built and adapted technology solutions to meet their diverse needs. The mix constantly evolves as technology advances and the healthcare industry's requirements change.

Some of the most commonly altered programs that are cobbled together to fit an organization's needs include communication and collaboration tools.

While these general business communication solutions can be adapted for hospitals, the importance of having communication tools designed specifically for healthcare cannot be overstated. Communication breakdowns are a major source of medical errors and negative patient outcomes, and using ill-fitting tools exacerbates the problem.

This e-book draws upon Amtelco's decades of experience in the communications industry to provide helpful information about enhancing communication in health settings. Readers will also gain insight from Amtelco's healthcare customers, who share tips from their experiences at their systems.

Amtelco was founded in 1976 as a telecommunications company and expanded into the healthcare industry in 1997 to provide clinical communication solutions designed specifically for the healthcare industry. Amtelco is dedicated to serving the unique communication needs of hospital organizations.

Overcoming Communication Issues in Healthcare Results in Better Patient Care

There is a link between communication breakdowns and adverse events in hospitals. A couple of recent studies explore this critical link. Dissecting Communication Barriers in Healthcare: A Path to Enhancing Communication Resiliency, Reliability, and Patient Safety analyzes the risk management literature and emphasizes communication errors as a significant factor (around 70 percent) in adverse events. It highlights the complexities of communication within healthcare settings.

Impact of the communication and patient hand-off tool SBAR on patient safety: a systematic review examines the effects of a structured communication tool (SBAR) on patient safety. While the study focuses on SBAR's effectiveness, it acknowledges that communication failures are a well-established source of preventable errors.

Following a structured format like SBAR ensures clear and concise communication of critical patient information, reducing the risk of misunderstandings and improving patient safety.

Communication Cataclysm

According to information from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Becker's Hospital Review, The average hospital employs 982 people, including physicians, nurses, and technicians. Hospitals with six to 24 beds employ the fewest staff, while the largest hospitals can employ more than 4,900 people.

With so many different healthcare professionals with unique communication challenges due to their specific roles and environments, it's unsurprising that communication downfalls can occur.

Doctors and nurses often juggle multiple patients with complex needs, leaving limited time for in-depth communication. Maintaining open and respectful communication between these two roles to advocate for patient's needs can be challenging, especially in hierarchical environments.

Clear and concise communication during shift changes is crucial to ensure patient safety, but it can be compromised by time pressure and information overload. On-call situations often involve urgent medical needs, necessitating clear and prompt communication to ensure timely intervention. Medical personnel rely on clear and concise communication from referring staff members and notes left during shift changes to make informed decisions regarding patient care.

What is SBAR?

SBAR is a standardized communication protocol used in healthcare. SBAR stands for:

Situation. Briefly describe the current situation and why contact is being made.

Background. Provide relevant background info about the patient.

Assessment. Share your professional assessment of the patient.

Recommendation. Clearly state your recommendation for the next course of action.

Lab technicians have limited direct patient contact since they primarily interact with patient samples. Still, clear communication is crucial when clarifying test orders or reporting abnormal results to nurses or doctors.

Pharmacists must maintain accuracy during medication reconciliation, which involves verifying a patient's medications across different healthcare providers and requires meticulous communication and information sharing.

Improving Communication Skills

Healthcare workers are extraordinary people, but they can still have poor communication skills. Some healthcare professionals may struggle to clearly articulate complex medical information or actively listen to patients' concerns. Language barriers or cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings during communication. Traditional hierarchies in healthcare settings can sometimes make it difficult for staff to voice concerns about medical decisions made by their superiors.

Interpersonal challenges aren't the only concern. Communication breakdowns in healthcare settings can also stem from systemic issues. Fragmented care means patients often see multiple specialists and transition between different care settings. Disconnected healthcare information systems and outdated communication methods can make it challenging to ensure everyone has a complete and up-to-date picture of the patient's condition and treatment plan.

Understaffed and busy healthcare environments can lead to rushed handoffs and limited opportunities for thorough communication. The absence of clear and consistent guidelines about communicating critical information can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

These factors all contribute to a situation in which important information is lost or misinterpreted, leading to delays in diagnosis, medication errors, and other preventable mistakes. Hospital systems can support their staff by providing helpful information and best practices for communicating. Individuals can work on their own to improve their communication skills as well. Several options include:

- **Training and Workshops**: Many hospitals and healthcare organizations offer communication skills training programs. These programs can teach techniques for active listening, clear communication, building rapport, and managing difficult conversations. Workshops can also focus on specific communication challenges, such as delivering bad news or dealing with angry patients.
- **Role-Playing Exercises**: Role-playing exercises allow healthcare professionals to practice communication skills in a safe and controlled environment. This can help them develop confidence and identify areas for improvement. Scenarios can be designed to address specific communication challenges, such as explaining complex medical information or handling cultural differences.
- **Self-Reflection and Feedback**: Healthcare professionals can reflect on their own communication style and identify areas for improvement. They can also solicit feedback from colleagues and patients.
- **Utilizing Communication Tools**: Standardized communication protocols like SBAR can help ensure clear and concise communication of critical information. There are also software apps designed to improve communication and collaboration among healthcare teams.
- **Continuous Learning**: Healthcare is a constantly evolving field, and communication skills must also evolve. Attending conferences, reading articles, and staying up-to-date on best communication practices can all be beneficial.

Better Tech = Better Communication

Studies consistently reveal a staggering percentage of adverse events in hospitals are linked to communication breakdowns. Misunderstandings and unclear information can lead to medication errors, wrong dosages, or even improper procedures. However, robust communication tools help ensure clear communication between doctors, nurses, pharmacists, call center operators, and other staff.

A real world example of this is when supervisors at Providence Swedish noticed an uptick in errors related to nighttime on-call providers failing to return calls or pages about patients. It was discovered that communication breakdowns and delays were happening due to how updated on-call schedules were handled by the on-call system.

"We had situations where a provider may have a last-minute schedule change, an after-hours availability update, or needed to change their preferred method of being contacted," said Brenda Frieboes, On-Call Manager for Providence Swedish. "The previous process for communicating those changes was for the providers to contact the call center and inform an operator. However, the only thing a hospital operator could do at the time was to take a message and put it in their 'notes of the day' system. There wasn't a way for a general announcement to go out. That meant a nurse on the floor wouldn't know about a schedule change unless they happen to contact the call center looking for help because they couldn't reach a provider."

Key Metric

Providence Swedish's manual code call process was reduced from a two minute processing time to under 60 seconds each.

Providence Swedish upgraded to an accurate on-call scheduling solution that made it easy to create, view, and update schedule coverage for roughly 200 schedules with the ability to easily dispatch messages to on-call contacts using their preferred method of communication.

The team also updated their hospital phone operator console to improve the code call process to work enterprise-wide to guide agents through code calls and quickly dispatch to the correct location with a system that also tied into the on-call software. Brenda explained, "Providence Swedish has many different locations, and our hospital operators had to manually process code calls from each location using code sheets. For example, if someone from our Cherry Hill campus called a code stroke, operators had to write down the information, pull a Cherry Hill stroke form specific to their campus versus one from another site, and then call the code. There were about 100 different code sheets for all our campuses. Depending on the code, this manual process could take up to two minutes each. We needed a system that could dispatch codes automatically."

The team chose a healthcare-specific console system and app that helps to:
- Reduce operator errors.
- Improve efficiency for a better patient experience and outcome.
- Contact the correct on-call personnel.
- Provide detailed reporting analytics.

"Now when a code call comes in it rings to an available operator, they select which campus, the code, and input any additional info needed into the fields to make the overhead announcement. It's 'click, click, click' and they're done. We dispatch between 1,000-1,200 codes a month from all eight of our hospitals, and most of our codes are dispatched in under a minute now. Dispatching our codes through Soft Agent versus pulling the code sheet has significantly decreased the number of serious safety events," said Brenda.

Valley Health's <u>Winchester Medical Center</u> uses their hospital contact center software to help patients manage their pain while providing nurses with a more efficient workflow.

Monitoring and recording each patient's pain level on an ongoing basis can be challenging, as it takes a large amount of a nurse's time. Lorraine Leake, Former Corporate Director of Communications at Valley Health, Winchester Medical Center commented, "The ongoing charting takes away time from the patient. Our goal is to do anything we can to help our nurses stay bedside."

Lorraine looked at the various systems already available in their facility to find an easier way for nurses to monitor pain levels. She discovered their contact center system contained real-time patient room and on-call scheduling information. They also used the GetWellNetwork which enables patients to enter their pain level with a remote control.

The highly interoperable call center software and GetWellNetwork systems integrated and merged the data within each system to improve the pain pathway process.

To start the pain pathway process, a nurse scans a medication given to a patient. Fifty minutes later, the patient is asked to rate their current pain level on a scale of 0 (low) to 10 (high) using the GetWellNetwork on their television. The result is sent through the GetWellNetwork to the hospital's contact center's on-call scheduling module, which keeps track of the nurses responsible for that patient's room and messages the appropriate nurse with the result.

Early results showed a 48 percent average response rate from patients. "It is used in every inpatient area except for the critical care area," Lorraine stated.

A time study revealed that checking on a patient takes a nurse 9 minutes. Susan Clark, RN Clinical Manager for the Float Pool at Valley Health said, "For a pain scale rating of 0 to 3, when the nurse doesn't have to do anything since the patient's pain is being controlled, it saved 69,066 minutes (1,151 hours) in a two-month period. For a pain scale rating from 4 to 10, where the nurse would have to do something, it saved 74,988 minutes (1,250 hours) within two months."
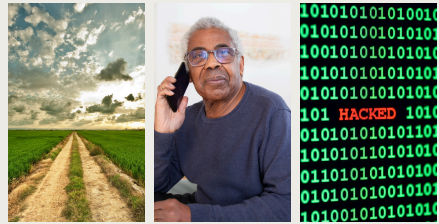
Ethical Considerations of Using AI and Other Technologies in Healthcare Communication

The ethical considerations of using artificial intelligence (AI) and other technologies in healthcare communication are a growing area of concern. While technology offers a range of benefits, there are also potential downsides that need careful attention to ensure ethical use. We'll examine some key areas to consider and give an example of a policy about the use of AI in healthcare communication.

THERE ARE POTENTIAL DOWNSIDES TO TECH

Privacy and Data Security

Keeping patient information secure is a top priority for health organization. The data contained within a patient's electronic protected health information (ePHI) can fetch a premium price on the dark web. Healthcare communication technologies often involve sharing sensitive patient data, so robust security measures are crucial to protect patient privacy and ensure compliance with HIPAA regulations.

Cybersecurity breaches can expose confidential patient information. Healthcare organizations must have strong data security protocols in place, and work with trusted vendors who are also adhere to HIPAA's Business Associates contract, to minimize these risks.

DEVELOP POLICIES TO MITIGATE RISK AND HARNESS TECH BENEFITS

Access and Equity

There is a digital divide when it comes to technology. Not everyone has reliable internet access or feels comfortable using tech. This can disadvantage certain populations and exacerbate existing healthcare disparities.

Socioeconomic factors such as the cost of internet access or devices needed to manage someone's healthcare or participate in telehealth can create barriers for low-income patients.

Algorithmic Bias

Some communication technologies in healthcare utilize or are powered by AI. There's a risk of bias creeping into algorithms used for diagnosis or treatment decisions, potentially disadvantaging certain patient groups.

Patients have a right to understand how communication technologies are used and how their data is protected. Clear communication and informed consent are essential. Over-reliance on technology can also lead to a de-personalized approach to patient care. The human element of communication shouldn't be neglected.

Here are some ways to address these ethical concerns:

- Develop clear policies on data security, patient privacy, and the use of AI in healthcare communication.
- Focus on equitable access by providing alternative communication channels and bridging the digital divide.
- Promote transparency by informing patients about how technology is used in their care and obtaining their informed consent.
- Maintain a human touch by ensuring that technology supplements and enhances human interaction, not replaces it.

Policy on the Use of AI in Healthcare Communication

Below is a general example of a policy on the use of AI in a hospital environment. In the real world, organizations will work with their administrators, IT staff, and applicable vendors to fit their specific needs and regulatory environment. However, it provides a starting point for considering the ethical implications of AI use in healthcare communication and developing policies to mitigate risks while harnessing the potential benefits of this technology.

1. Introduction

This policy outlines the guidelines for using artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in communication with patients and healthcare providers at [Hospital Name]. Our commitment is to leverage AI to improve communication efficiency, but we acknowledge the ethical considerations involved.

2. Principles

Transparency: Patients have the right to know if AI is used in their communication with the hospital. We will clearly disclose the use of AI chatbots or other technologies and explain their limitations.

Patient Choice: Patients always have the option to speak with a human healthcare professional if they prefer not to communicate through AI channels.

Data Privacy: All patient data collected through AI communication tools will be protected according to HIPAA regulations. De-identified data may be used for improving AI performance, but only with appropriate safeguards.

Equity and Fairness: We acknowledge the potential for bias in AI algorithms. We will select and implement AI tools that have been tested for fairness and avoid discrimination against any patient group.

3. Use Cases for AI in Healthcare Communication
- Appointment scheduling and reminders: AI chatbots can be used to schedule appointments, send confirmation messages, and provide appointment details.
- Answering basic patient questions: AI can answer frequently asked questions about hospital services, billing, or insurance.
- Symptom checkers and triage tools: AI-powered tools can help patients with initial symptom assessment and guide them to the appropriate resources within the hospital.

4. Responsibilities

IT Department: Responsible for selecting and implementing AI communication tools that meet security and privacy standards.

Healthcare Providers: Responsible for overseeing the use of AI in communication with patients and ensuring clear communication about limitations and availability of human support.

Compliance Department: Responsible for ensuring compliance with HIPAA regulations and other relevant data privacy laws related to AI use.

5. Monitoring and Review

This policy will be reviewed and updated periodically to reflect advances in AI technology and best practices. We will monitor the use of AI communication tools to ensure they function as intended and address any identified issues.

By carefully considering these ethical issues and proactively implementing safeguards, healthcare organizations can leverage technology's potential for improved communication while ensuring patient privacy, equity, and responsible use of these powerful tools.

Are You Ready for AI and LLMs in Your Hospital Call Center?

Artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models (LLMs) are already making waves in call centers, and for good reason. This newest development has the potential to increase productivity without taking away human jobs and turn an initial financial investment in technology into a cost-effective decision.

It's understandable that people are wary of losing their jobs or having their hours reduced because a machine can "do it better." However, that doesn't have to happen in an organization's call center. When viewed as co-workers or teammates, AI and LLMs can make great agents into super agents.

It is well-known that being a call center agent can be a stressful job, and oftentimes experience burnout. LLMs can function as intelligent virtual agents and super-powered assistants to the operators. Integrated LLMs provide real-time information retrieval, suggest responses, and even complete forms during calls to significantly reduce handling times and offer faster resolutions.

AI and LLMs can boost efficiency and productivity by relieving some of the operator's workload. This technology can:

- Automate repetitive tasks by handling data entry, call summaries, and even generating reports, freeing up agents for more complex issues. This makes agents available for complex problem-solving and customer service interactions.
- Provide smarter self-service by powering advanced chatbots that understand natural language and context. This means callers get accurate answers to frequently asked questions without interrupting an agent.
- Improve first contact resolution times by equipping agents with the right information and suggested responses, leading to a higher chance of resolving issues on the first call and boosting customer satisfaction.
- Offer personalized interactions by analyzing customer data and tailoring communication styles for better engagement.
- Provide caller sentiment analysis by analyzing conversation tone to identify frustrated customers and flag them for priority handling or even de-escalate situations.

Below are five tips to get started with developing a plan to implement AI and LLMs in a hospital call center.

Identify Needs and Goals	Research and Choose the Right Solution(s)	Prepare Your Workforce	Start Small and Scale Up	Monitor and Continuously Improve
Define areas where AI and LLMs can offer the most significant benefit. Consider factors like cost reduction, improved caller satisfaction, and agent productivity.	Explore different AI and LLM solutions available, considering factors like functionality, scalability, vendor support, and cost.	Address agent concerns about job security and displacement. Focus on how AI will make them more effective and efficient.	Begin by implementing AI and LLMs in a pilot program to test their effectiveness and identify any potential issues.	Develop a plan for data collection and management. Use reporting and analytic software features to track key metrics to measure success and identify areas for improvement.
Set clear and measurable goals for your AI implementation. This could include targets for increased FCR, reduced call handling times, or improved caller satisfaction scores.	Look for solutions that integrate seamlessly with your existing call center technology.	Provide training on using AI and LLM tools effectively. This will ensure agents feel comfortable and confident working alongside these new technologies.	Once the pilot is successful, you can gradually scale up your implementation across the call center.	Continuously monitor and refine your AI strategy as new technologies and best practices emerge.

Bonus Section
5 Essential Characteristics of the Cloud

The cloud is convenient, on-demand, and available for many resources, including networks, servers, storage, applications, and services. There is minimal management effort and plenty of self-service aspects to the cloud. Cloud technologies are all about separating the physical IT resources from the actual underlying infrastructure.

When considering cloud-based e-mail accounts, we no longer think of Microsoft Exchange as an e-mail service, but rather Google and other cloud-based e-mail applications. When we use a hosted storage service, we are not referring to rack upon rack of storage in our data centers. We are referring to services such as Dropbox Inc.'s Dropbox and Microsoft's OneDrive.

Cloud technologies are on-demand, contain self-service features, are highly available, and present users with various interaction interfaces or APIs (application programming interfaces). Cloud technology providers are attractive because they help customers reduce costs, better utilize equipment, provide end-users with an engaging experience, and build a fail-in-place environment.

The NIST (National Institute of Standards and Technology) states the cloud is composed of these five essential characteristics:

1. On-Demand Self Service
When considering on-demand self-service, one thinks of self-services like Dropbox and OneDrive. When additional storage was needed before the advent of the cloud, people had to contact their provider, get a quote, negotiate the contracts, and attend to other time-consuming details. Eventually, you were able to order and have the hardware installed. With the cloud, adding additional storage is now accomplished quickly through a self-service cloud portal.

2. Broad Network Access
Additional storage is not useful if it cannot be accessed by various devices. It's important to have access to these resources at any time and from anywhere, and it is essential to allow access from multiple equipment options, including smart devices and desktop computers.

3. Resource Pooling
One way to consider resource pooling is to think about the massive data centers built or being built around the country, such as AWS (Amazon Web Services), Microsoft, and Google. Inside each of these data centers lives equipment from Cisco, VMware, NetApp, and Red Hat, to name a few. All this technology works together to provide a multi-tenant environment for many customers with different needs.

Resources, both physical and virtual, are pooled within these data centers and assigned dynamically to customers. Customers often don't know precisely where their resources exist, nor do the resources of one customer interact with those of another. While a customer can usually pick a general location for their resources, such as the U.S. Northeast, even within this area, one doesn't know exactly where everything is located.

4. Rapid Elasticity
A good way to visualize rapid elasticity is to imagine a small start-up business that needs a website. The website is up, customers begin to arrive, and the company starts to grow. As its popularity increases, the business grows more rapidly. Additional computing power is needed to meet these growing needs. A slump occurs, fewer resources are required, then growth returns, and so on. This ever-changing atmosphere helps to illustrate the elastic needs of many organizations. Cloud technologies satisfy these dynamic raw resource needs by easily adjusting both physically and financially to ever-changing needs.

5. Measured Service
Elasticity goes hand-in-hand with the final characteristic, measured service. Cloud providers can automatically control and optimize resources based on the type of service or resource. For example, when it comes to OneDrive, Microsoft will meter storage usage, provide reports, and maintain a consistent and optimized solution, which provides transparency for both the user and the provider.

Unify and Simplify Communications in Your Organization

Did you know that the average hospital has relationships with more than 1,300 different vendors? Tools and technologies from various vendors are often disconnected and difficult to manage – even communication solutions meant to streamline workflows. Healthcare leadership may not realize that the software and apps used by their call center can help unify and simplify communications throughout the entire organization.

Call center operators are the information hub for patients, medical personnel, and other stakeholders. Agents access data from multiple sources via highly interoperable omnichannel hospital contact center software and apps – which work together as a single solution.

Unify On-Call Schedules and Communication

Hospital on-call schedules are complex. Miscommunications and delays can be disastrous for patients and health systems. An article from StatPearls entitled, _Medical Malpractice_ notes, "Weekends, holidays, and nights are a particularly treacherous time for physicians because of a lack of communication: Many lawsuits are filed because the physician covering the weekends, holidays, or overnight failed to communicate."

As noted in chapter one, supervisors at Providence Swedish noticed an uptick in errors related to nighttime on-call communication inefficiencies. They discovered the issues stemmed from an outdated, disconnected system, "We had our on-call schedules in several different scheduling platforms from three vendors," says Brenda Frieboes, On-Call Manager for Providence Swedish. "There wasn't a way for a general announcement to go out when a provider had a schedule change."

After updating to a comprehensive contact center platform with an integrated on-call scheduling solution, staff at Providence Swedish can now instantly contact the correct on-call personnel via their desired contact methods. Updates are sent in real-time via automated notifications, and a complete audit trail is kept of all schedule updates for custom reporting.

Medical professionals are dedicated to patients, but being on-call can be exhausting – and dangerous to staff and patients if not managed correctly. Organizations are focusing more on their staff's mental health and well-being. Schedule flexibility plays a significant role in combating burnout, recruitment, and retention.

Robust on-call scheduling software helps to ensure on-call assignments are mindfully assigned and provides useful management features such as:

- Advanced notification of unfilled schedules.
- Accessibility for staff to enter and update their own schedules.
- Adding on-call schedules to personal and mobile calendars.
- Automated, real-time updates.
- Integration of on-call schedule information with a secure messaging app.

Simplify Critical Communications with Secure Messaging

Studies have revealed that clinicians can receive more than 100 alerts per day. Unfortunately, well-intentioned tech can add chaos, increase bureaucratic tasks, and complicate communication. Integrated secure messaging apps can help organizations consolidate alerts and harness data to improve the flow of communication, better care for patients, and reduce alarm fatigue.

When using an integrated secure messaging app, data from EMR HL7 messages, ADT messages, smart beds, nurse calls, appointment desks, diagnostic communications, and housekeeping can be instantly sent to appropriate staff via technology already used by the organization.

HIPAA-compliant secure messaging apps offer a lot of flexibility by enabling staff to easily share texts, photos, videos, or voice recordings via mobile phones, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, and desktop computers. Timestamps indicate when messages were delivered, read, and completed. Administrators have access to full reporting for every message sent to ensure follow-through and accountability for all messages.

Jackson-Madison County General Hospital is a stroke-certified facility, and they use a secure messaging app for their Neuro alerts. Beth Wells, Executive Director of Patient Access and Information at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital commented, "Any time we have a Neuro alert, notifications go out to every member of the stroke team, CT staff, and Radiologists."

The system also takes full advantage of the app's reporting features. "We run reports fairly frequently," said Beth, "especially if somebody has a concern or expresses a need. For instance, someone collecting data for our stroke program might need information about the Neuro alerts we've had in a particular month. We can run a report with that data, so it's very helpful."

Automate Notifications and Organizational Processes

Automated processes help reduce mistakes and time-consuming administrative tasks. Automatic notifications are instantly sent to staff for everything from emergencies to hospital bed turnover, and even everyday reminders.

Integration engines that are built into the contact center software facilitate the exchange and sharing of information. More efficient workflows can be established when seamless communication improves processes, "We automate our nuclear medicine program and procedures using our call center software," states Alicia Wise, former IS Project Coordinator for AnMed Health. "When a patient is scheduled for a test, the information needed by our isotopes vendor is sent automatically. This automation speeds up the process for the patient, generates revenue for our organization, and saves any costs that would have been incurred if the process was put on hold or standby because of communication delays."

Telephone outages, power outages, and natural disasters can happen suddenly and unexpectedly. Organizations that involve their contact center in their disaster response and business continuity plan know communication failure is not an option. Automated contingency communication plans ensure seamless operations during a disruption.

"In the event any of our clinics has a power outage, their calls automatically roll to us at the contact center. So, we provide our organization with an invaluable strategic service. We have a lot of plans in place, and we're always prepared," states Rossi Fraenkel, Business Team Lead for Allina Health.

A healthcare system's core business is patient care. When communications are unified, simplified, and automated, it helps medical personnel focus more on their patients.

Why Do Healthcare Communication Breakdowns Persist Despite Useful Technology?

In recent years, significant technological advances have also been made regarding the technology used in healthcare communication. Collaboration software platforms facilitate team discussions, task management, and real-time updates on patient care plans. Secure messaging apps facilitate quick and easy communication between healthcare providers, eliminating the reliance on pagers and phone calls with the potential for missed messages. Telehealth enables virtual consultations for remote communication with specialists, improving access to care and reducing delays.

However, technology alone isn't a magic bullet. Communication breakdowns persist despite technology. Many factors that contribute to communication breakdowns, including:

- **Data Overload**. EHRs can contain vast amounts of information, making it challenging for healthcare professionals to identify the most critical details.
- **Integration Challenges**. Integrating new technologies with existing workflows can be complex and time-consuming, and staff may need additional training.

- **Focus on Efficiency Over Interaction**. Technology can streamline communication but also lead to a depersonalized approach.
- **Not All Communication is Digital**. Building rapport, addressing patient concerns, and managing difficult conversations require strong interpersonal communication skills.

The ideal scenario is to leverage technology's strengths for efficiency and information sharing while emphasizing the importance of strong interpersonal communication skills to ensure clear understanding and avoid misinterpretations.

A hospital's call center is often overlooked but plays a vital role in combating communication breakdowns. Robust contact center software uses a single source of truth (SSOT) architecture, so information collected by agents at any time of the day updates the primary data source. This method safeguards against communication breakdowns because everyone can access the most updated information.

Integrating call centers with the overall hospital communication system ensures reliable critical communications are handled correctly. By functioning as a well-oiled communication hub and a bridge between patients and healthcare providers, a hospital call center can play a significant role in defending against communication breakdowns.

Reducing Tech Overwhelm in Healthcare

Healthcare jobs are consistently listed as some of the most stressful jobs across all industries in the United States. Unfortunately, oftentimes the sheer number of communication channels and platforms can be overwhelming for healthcare employees and contribute to stress. Staff may juggle emails, pagers, secure messaging apps, phone calls, and hospital communication systems, all requiring them to switch contexts and log in to different platforms.

A study in 2022 found that a third of healthcare workers felt overwhelmed by technology, highlighting the negative impact it can have. According to the study, "Clinician burnout can negatively affect the quality of care and can result in a range of negative consequences, including dysfunctional relationships with colleagues, self-medication or substance abuse, depression, and even suicide."

Information Overload

The platforms used in healthcare generate a constant stream of information, making it difficult to prioritize critical messages and identify the most relevant details needed for patient care.

However, communication technology does have the potential to improve healthcare delivery. Communication technologies with robust integration engines connect with existing hospital systems and software to potentially improve care coordination and reduce the burden on staff.

"Our minds are at ease because we can take 15 minutes for a team huddle and return any non-emergency calls that go to our voicemail. If we have an emergent call, the sirens will sound so we know to answer it immediately," said the Business Analyst for a patient transfer center.

America's Most Stressful Jobs

In 2023, the Occupational Information Network, part of the U.S. Labor Department, ranked the most stressful jobs in the nation. These five healthcare positions were named among the 10 most stressful jobs across all industries.

Urologists
Anesthesiology Assistants
Acute Care Nurses
Obstetricians and Gynecologists
Nurse Anesthetists

Finding the Balance

The challenge lies in finding a balance between the benefits of technology and the potential downsides that lead to staff feeling overwhelmed. Some strategies include:

- **Prioritizing Functionality**. Implementing tech that integrates well with existing systems.
- **Standardization**. Encouraging the use of a limited number of well-chosen communication platforms.
- **Vendor Support**. Reaching out to your tech vendors to assess your systems and work together to identify and resolve technical issues.
- **Targeted Training**. Providing targeted training on new technologies to ensure staff understand how to use them effectively.
- **User Feedback**. Actively soliciting feedback from staff.

What Healthcare Leaders Should Know About Contact Centers

It is important for healthcare leaders to know that their contact centers can help improve patient and employee satisfaction, reduce costs, and even provide critical communication tools within the hospital setting.

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A Quality Contact Center Helps Retain Patients

Oftentimes, speaking with an agent is the first contact a patient has with an organization and their impression needs to be positive. Patients have options and can always find another provider if their experience is lacking in some way.

The patient's experience with call center agents plays a critical role in their overall satisfaction with care access and the health services they receive. When patients are asked to provide information about their health care experience via the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey, they may be influenced by their interactions with hospital contact center operators.

Address Physician Pain Points

One of the biggest pain points for physicians and clinicians is trying to provide excellent patient care while dealing with staff shortages. Hospital call center agents are increasingly supporting medical staff by relieving some of their administrative burdens.

Shelley White, Director of Patient Access Services for State University of New York (SUNY) Upstate Medical University explained, "Our ER registration is sometimes short-staffed, but we are able to help by watching our track board, which is tied into the EMR system with Epic. When a patient is admitted, we can register the patient over the phone. This process would normally be done by ER staff, but we can do it remotely and ease some of their workloads."

Virtual Consolidation Results in Real Life Cost Savings

Systems with multiple locations can run on a single virtual server located anywhere in the country. This enables hospital contact centers to be agile during weather events and crisis situations.

Virtual servers provide cost savings to an organization because less physical equipment needs to be maintained.

Michael Wolf, Principal Applications System Analyst and Technical and Support Lead for MD Anderson Cancer Center commented, "Now that the operators can work remotely, the IT department has experienced benefits such as decreased overhead to maintain the equipment or perform quarterly tests and reduced support time."

Points to help convince healthcare leadership and IT staff about the importance of integrating the call center with the overall hospital communication system:

Highlight Benefits for Patients and Staff	Focus on the Value Proposition for Leadership	Address IT Concerns	Present Data and Evidence	Offer a Collaborative Approach
Improved Patient Experience: Faster response times, accurate information dissemination, and easier navigation of the system.	**Reduced Costs**: Improved efficiency, reduced errors, and potentially less readmissions due to better communication can lead to cost savings for the hospital.	**Security and Compliance**: Emphasize that the integration will adhere to HIPAA regulations and patient data security protocols.	Share relevant **case studies** or industry reports demonstrating the benefits of integrated communication systems in healthcare settings.	Work with IT to identify the most suitable integration solution that meets the needs of both the call center and the hospital as a whole.
Enhanced Patient Safety: Streamlined communication between call center staff and healthcare professionals ensures critical info reaches the right people quickly for timely interventions and improved patient outcomes.	**Improved Patient Satisfaction**: Positive patient experiences translate into better HCAHPS scores, which can impact Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements.	**Scalability**: Choose a solution that can scale to meet the growing needs of the hospital.	Conduct internal surveys with staff and patients to gather data on current communication challenges and potential areas for improvement.	Be open to feedback and concerns from IT and healthcare leadership, and address them with data and potential solutions.
Reduced Frustration and Errors: Integration reduces the need for multiple phone calls and info sharing leading to less frustration for patients and staff, and minimizing the risk of errors.	**Enhanced Reputation**: A well-functioning communication system strengthens the hospital's reputation for providing high-quality patient care.	**Minimal Disruption**: Work with IT to ensure a smooth integration process with minimal disruption to existing workflows.	Ask other organizations how centralized communication enables better call routing, resource allocation, and improved workflow for both call center staff and healthcare providers.	Consider proposing a pilot project integrating the call center with a specific department to demonstrate the benefits and ease any concerns before full-scale implementation.

Resources

Hospital staff and medical call center agents understand the benefits of integrated communication technologies. Communication platforms that are specifically designed for healthcare ultimately improve patient care and increase staff efficiency. However, recent studies have shown that many hospitals in the United States are using outdated communication technology.

Here are some resources that provide valuable insight into healthcare communication:

- **Ponemon Institute Studies**. The Ponemon Institute consistently highlights the prevalence of outdated communication methods in healthcare.
- **Industry Reports**. Industry reports from healthcare IT organizations. For instance, a report by HIMSS Analytics found that interoperability and data exchange remain major hurdles in U.S. healthcare, indicating the persistence of fragmented communication systems.
- **News Articles**. Recent news articles often discuss the negative impact of outdated or disconnected communication on patient care. Setting Google Alerts for healthcare communication topics will deliver the news directly to your inbox based on your delivery preferences.

One of the most helpful sources of information are vendor case studies. Case studies provide examples of how your peers overcame challenges they experienced in their organizations, allowing you to learn from their successes.

Amtelco case studies include insight from the systems listed below. Click on the boxes to link directly to the case study.

Valley Health Winchester Medical Center	**Cleveland Clinic Mercy Hospital**	**State University of New York (SUNY) Upstate Medical University**
Piedmont Healthcare	**MD Anderson Cancer Center**	**Ephraim McDowell Health**
Providence Swedish	**Jackson-Madison County General Hospital**	**St. Luke's Hospital**

Thank you for viewing this guide, and please contact us if you have any questions.