Improve Patient Care with Your Next Phone System
A Guide for the Healthcare Industry

Is your telephone system soon due for a replacement or upgrade? If so, you have an opportunity to streamline processes that improve patient care with the next phone system you procure. If you have not done so already, your business will likely soon transition from paper-based record keeping to an electronic system. Once you have a computer network in place for supporting electronic medical records (EMR), adding phones and voice applications to that network is an important next step.

The integration of computer and phone networks provides doctors and nurses with instant communication as they roam. The integrated network enables interactive healthcare—creating greater collaboration and efficient access and delivery of healthcare information at the point of care. The immediacy afforded by the latest mobile phones with text displays is critical to providing excellent patient care.

Healthcare organizations usually benefit by choosing wireless handsets for many of their personnel. Wireless phones offer the communications mobility that physicians, nurses, orderlies, and others require to do their jobs most effectively.

And, unlike cellular phones, your wireless phone system won’t interfere with medical equipment. You also don’t pay any usage charges, as you must with cellular.

Reduce Expenses

Next-generation communications systems are much less expensive to own and operate over time than traditional phone and key telephone systems. First, they integrate with the computer system you have already deployed to support network-enabled EMR and medical imaging applications. As a result, you have only one communications network to administer.

They also allow you to bypass public telephone network toll charges by using the Internet or other alternative network service to make inter-office calls whether those calls are placed from the hospital or remotely—from a home office, for example. Because both outbound and incoming calls are made via an inter-building network, dial-up phone charges between hospitals, clinics, and physicians’ offices are eliminated.

Finally, the latest technology allows your business phones to function as mobile extensions, which follow personnel around with no administrative changes required.

Staff moves or additions won’t require you to configure phone extensions to different wall jacks. Instead, you simply plug in the phone or issue that employee a wireless handset, and you are done.

It also pays to invest in a communications system that changes and grows at the same pace as your clinic or hospital. Yesterday’s phone systems often require expensive upgrades or replacements just to add a few features or to support additional handsets. By contrast, modern systems can be expanded incrementally, as needed, so you can contain costs and manage your budget better.
**Improve Patient Response Time**

The newest business phones empower healthcare providers to do much more than simply make and receive phone calls. Because they can be reached at their phone extensions anywhere around the facility, physicians and nurses become instantly accessible to one another.

By using wireless handsets—or new “wearable” communicators that allow hands-free communications—case workers, nurses, and others can avoid the often inefficient cycle of paging a physician, waiting for a callback, and being unavailable by the time the return call arrives.

Whether their handsets are wireless or plug into a wall jack, extensions follow users wherever they go as long as they remain on your facility’s phone network. And from their phone handset displays, caregivers and administrators will be able to conduct text messaging and tap into relevant patient data and medical information—all to provide the best care for patients on the spot.

Similarly, calls can be transparently forwarded to cell phones, home offices, or other numbers—further boosting staff accessibility.

Wireless access also allows staff to use their integrated networks to streamline patient-care processes; they can query the computer network to find empty beds, conduct patient registration, or schedule appointments from anywhere within the facility.

**Integrated voice and data communications enable these improved processes.**

**Unified Call Center**

Northwest Health System has a similar story to tell. The medical group has installed Cisco IP Communications to merge its appointment and nurse triage operations into an efficient contact center.

The medical network supports more than 220 independent primary-care physicians and specialists across 18 facilities. Patients call specific locations for appointments or for advice from a triage nurse. Like Bloodsource, Northwest Health eventually found itself with proprietary telephone systems at each of its locations from different vendors. Calls between facilities required outside dialing with associated toll charges.

Receptionists at each facility could not keep up with call volumes, and callers would often get a busy signal and have to call back later. Neither could receptionists transfer calls between facilities; instead, they had to ask callers to hang up and dial another number. The communications bottlenecks threatened to degrade patient care.

Like Bloodsource, Northwest Health wanted to unify its disparate phone systems and build a unified dial plan. It also wanted to integrate its data and voice networks to leverage its medical-record database. But it wanted to do all this without changing all the main phone numbers to each clinic.

Cisco IP Communications capabilities put an end to the busy signals and enabled inter-office call transfers. The phone system also positioned Northwest Health to integrate voice and data services with new applications that increase productivity and enhance patient care.

Incoming calls to each clinic are routed through the central call center, where operators can set appointments for any provider in the system. They can also transfer calls as needed. Patients on hold can press a button to leave a voice-mail message. Cisco call-tracking and reporting features assist with predicting appropriate call center staffing by providing a real-time view of hold times, average call length, and number of calls.

Northwest’s dial plan preserves existing phone numbers while enabling internal four-digit dialing between clinics. Patients still dial the number of their local clinic, so they don’t pay toll charges.

Because of the voice and data network integration, healthcare staff can access a customized directory from their Cisco IP phones to help enable faster communication. The directory includes local staff extensions and a selected set of frequently called outside numbers such as pharmacies and laboratories.

Users can search for numbers by name, location, department, and entity. In addition, a broadcast messaging system that allows people to send messages to defined groups.

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**Improve Time Management**

Phone-based personal productivity applications help save your physicians and administrators time that can be used for other tasks. For example, they can check their online calendars on their phone displays while talking on the phone to best organize their days. They can call a colleague by clicking on a name or functional title in an online phone directory that appears on their phone display. Physicians can phone in refills and return patient calls quickly and easily. And all staff can retrieve voice mail, e-mail, and fax messages from a single unified inbox in whichever of these formats they prefer—saving valuable time.

As important, your new communications system lets patients and others find out about your facility and services using the Internet when it is convenient for them—without requiring human resources to be available. A well-designed system naturally integrates automatic call distribution (ACD), interactive voice response (IVR), live phone conversations, and your Web site to form a self-service center.
Think Cisco

As you consider your options for getting the most out of your next communications system, bear in mind that using IP Communications solutions from Cisco Systems® simplifies your ability to integrate phone calls with computer information. With Cisco, your organization runs on a single telephone and computer network that expands at the same pace you do. Your communications structure gets simpler, not more complex.

And Cisco provides a number of business-productivity and call center applications to increase the productivity of your staff. Cisco phone systems will support many third-party applications as they are developed for the healthcare industry.

To learn more about how to make the most out of your next communications system, contact your Cisco IP Communications partner or representative. To locate a Cisco partner in your area, visit http://www.cisco.com/findapartner.

To learn more about Cisco healthcare solution, visit http://www.cisco.com/go/healthcaresolutions