Optimizing Healthcare with Unified Communications
Technical Document

As the healthcare industry grows and evolves, one thing remains certain: effective communication is critical. More than in any other industry, miscommunications have the potential to impact lives and threaten well-being. Communications initiatives must remain unwavering in the face of ever-increasing budget restraints and pressure to improve productivity, guarantee privacy and provide better care.

Overcoming these obstacles requires staff to have access to information and collaboration regardless of their physical location. That accessibility must extend beyond a simple phone call to include email, text and the full range of collaboration tools. All of this is driving hospitals and healthcare practices to deploy Unified Communications (UC) solutions to provide an environment where users can be most productive, efficient and connected.

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Despite its effectiveness at giving staff the tools for efficient collaboration, UC comes with certain challenges. Now healthcare providers have the option of choosing a cloud-based UC solution—also known as Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS)—that allows them to reap all of the benefits of UC with few of the drawbacks. This technical document will explore how UC and UCaaS can help today's healthcare providers surmount the "Triple Aim" challenges of improving the patient experience, contributing to better population health and reducing costs.

UC — A Breakthrough for Healthcare

UC is best described as the integration of real-time communications services (voice, instant messaging, presence information, mobility, conferencing, desktop/data sharing, call control and speech recognition) with non-real-time communications services (unified messaging such as integrated voicemail, email and fax) via a secure platform that is accessible from any device, network or location while providing a consistent user experience.

This modern way of communicating is a major advancement from the communication methods traditionally relied upon by the healthcare industry. These methods were generally limited to phone, pagers, fax and some email—most of which are unable to offer the instantaneous connections and exchange of information relied on by an increasing number of healthcare operations today.

UCaaS — Overcoming the Obstacles

While healthcare organizations of all sizes have seen the productivity, efficiency, collaboration and cost-saving benefits of UC, it is not without its challenges. Early adopters of UC typically deployed on-premises solutions, requiring a significant capital investment and strain on IT resources. Therefore, there are several obstacles that must be addressed in order to ensure advantageous use.

Fortunately, healthcare providers can easily overcome these challenges by choosing a UCaaS solution. UCaaS integrates voice, multimedia, unified messaging, presence management, mobility and other services into a single unified platform in a third-party data center that's accessible through the cloud.

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Demand for UCaaS is increasing as organizations seek to improve business agility and gain faster, more economical access to advanced capabilities and a larger pool of technology skills. According to Gartner, a leading research and advisory company, the transition from premises-based UC to UCaaS is accelerating. Gartner's recent study predicts that small-to-midsized businesses will adopt cloud-based UC faster than their large-enterprise counterparts through 2021, a trend that is driven by capital budget constraints, increasingly compelling cloud options and limited internal IT resources.[1]
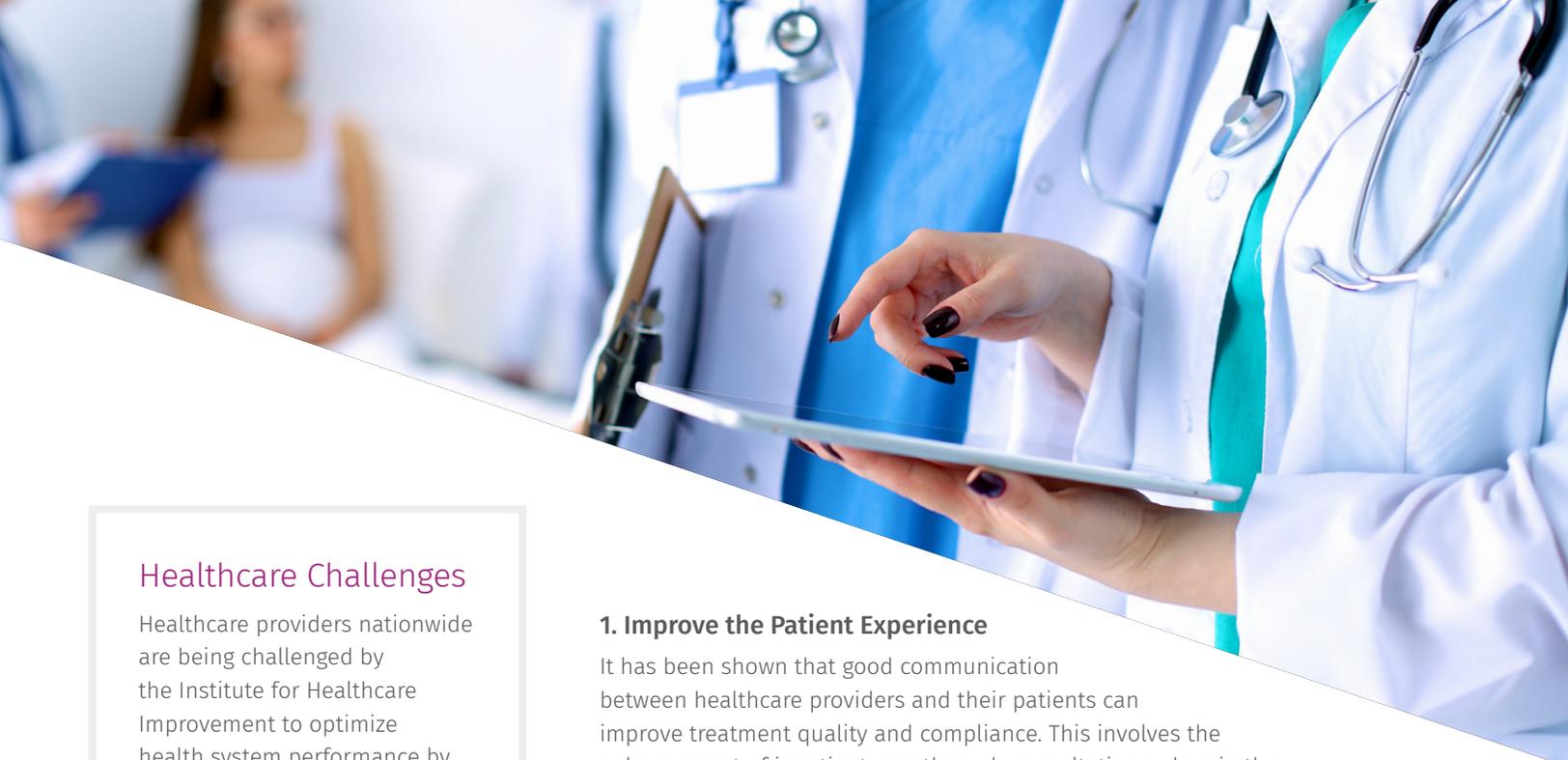
Healthcare Challenges

Healthcare providers nationwide are being challenged by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement to optimize health system performance by simultaneously addressing the "Triple Aim":

1. Improving the patient experience of care (including quality and satisfaction)

2. Improving the health of populations and

3. Reducing the per capita cost of health care

This is compounded by the pressures of meeting the complex requirements of cybersecurity and patient regulation compliance, often while using outdated methods of communicating.

1. Improve the Patient Experience

It has been shown that good communication between healthcare providers and their patients can improve treatment quality and compliance. This involves the enhancement of inpatient care through consultations wherein the provider effectively conveys the patient's treatment options and instructions, as well as through improved administration of workflow and throughput. Outpatient care can also be improved by strengthening administrative communications such as appointment coordination and condition management throughout the treatment process, as well as better coordination of workflow to reduce wait times and allow for adequate time with each patient.

UC technology can help healthcare organizations boost patient satisfaction through better management, faster response times and service excellence. It frees up nurses to spend more time caring for patients by accelerating the process of relaying messages and following up with consulting clinicians and labs. Moreover, the integration of nurse call systems lets a patient talk directly with a nurse even if he or she is away from the nurse's station. Giving physicians and key staff members the ability to take patient calls while on the move—either within the facility or while working remotely—reduces patient frustration caused by an inability to communicate with their care provider.

A more collaborative approach to care is fostered by UC, as are more meaningful provider-patient conversations. Mobile bedside workstations let patients view their health record and treatment plan alongside their physicians. Digital whiteboards can be used as advanced patient flow and tracking systems that replace traditional static displays to enable a more continuous patient flow of clinical activities while eliminating wasteful actions and permitting smoother handovers between shifts.

2. Contribute to Better Health

To improve the overall health of populations, healthcare systems must attempt to break through the patient-provider communication barrier that is often the cause of patient nonadherence to treatment. It is imperative that patients are aware of how to properly care for themselves, but the fact is that most patients are unable to recall sufficient amounts of information correctly. Therefore, healthcare organizations must facilitate patients' ability to connect with their provider to have questions and concerns resolved in an efficient and timely manner. Communications tools such as email and video conferencing can be used to follow up with and monitor outpatients undergoing treatment so that medical staff can check in on their recovery progress.

Two key factors leading to preventable adverse events in healthcare settings are communication problems and poor clinical management. Studies have shown that medical errors most commonly occur during the ordering or delivery of treatment, especially when dispensing medicine to patients. The use of UC along with electronic medical records (EMRs) can eliminate the occurrence of lost charts and misplaced reports. That's because UC provides real-time access to up-to-the-minute information—ultimately minimizing communication problems. When you combine UC technology with EMRs, doctors have the ability to pull up the patient's full medical history right on the spot so they can reduce the likelihood of missing important details and prescribing the wrong drug.

Professionals can work together to ensure the best possible outcome for each patient, no matter which device they use or where they are based.

Unified Communications can also enable healthcare professionals to have video consults with other specialists to ensure that patients receive a diagnosis when they need it. UC provides a single platform where all of these professionals can work together to ensure the best possible outcome for each patient, no matter which device they use or where they are based.

3. Reduce Costs

The streamlined processes, enhanced operational efficiencies and optimized staff productivity within healthcare environments employing UC allow for the treatment of more patients and ultimately, increased revenues. Everyday tasks that are normally very time consuming can be transmitted via UC platform to save time while cutting costs and waste.

Instead of utilizing phone calls, paper documentation and face-to-face interactions to handle routine processes such as admissions, discharges, transfers and reimbursements, this communication can be automated using UC. Outpatient facilities can also use process automation for routine appointment calls and prescription deliveries. The integration of UC tools with claims software interfaces can allow collections departments to automate follow-up calls and have responses routed back to collections personnel.

For multisite healthcare providers, significant cost savings can also be realized through system consolidation, as centralized consolidation of disparate systems will eliminate costs of equipment and support at multiple sites.

Those that opt for a hosted unified communications solution (UCaaS) have the added benefit of turning what was traditionally a capital expense (CapEx) into a pay-as-you-go operating expense (OpEx). UCaaS comes with additional cost savings and benefits over premises-based UC systems, including:

- People, platform and project management costs
- Electricity and HVAC hardware maintenance and software upgrades
- Data center costs
- 24 x 7 x 365 Support
- Faster time to market

Choosing the Right UC Provider

Today's healthcare providers can choose from a number of UC delivery models, from on-premises solutions deployed within their own data center environment to fully hosted UCaaS solutions maintained and updated by a service provider. One of the most important steps to developing a successful UC strategy will be to have a partner with the willingness to work with you to deliver a complete communications solution that meets your current security and patient privacy requirements while enabling flexibility for future growth.

Organizations evaluating UCaaS providers should look for a trusted advisor that offers best-in-class cloud services with extensive, reliable network services performed by dedicated network engineers who are experts in their field. Your mission-critical environment demands the highest service-level agreements (SLAs), so be sure your partner provides a written SLA guaranteeing service levels—up to "four nines" (99.99%). And to make the most of your investment, your UCaaS solution should integrate with your existing systems and third-party applications.

A company like Kinetic Business by Windstream can help healthcare providers improve patient satisfaction and health while reducing costs through advanced technology that fosters personalized healthcare experiences. The best UC partner will deliver and manage a comprehensive solution that will free up your staff to focus on administering the best care to patients.

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