

The Practical Guide for Virtual Healthcare

Leveraging technology for superior patient care



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INTRODUCTION



In the modern world, technology has become an integral part of our lives. Most of us are never far from our mobile phone or laptop, and use technology to connect with others personally and professionally.

These tools and platforms aren't just for consumers; they are critical to enabling virtual healthcare. Many healthcare organizations have begun to adopt remote care initiatives to facilitate broader, more accessible care. Yet none could have predicted the urgency that the COVID-19 pandemic would bring to the field. Now, providers must accelerate their implementation of virtual care to ensure that patient needs are met in the safest environment possible.

The shift to remote work has impacted businesses across every industry, and the healthcare field is no different. Many patients already have in place what they need to engage in telehealth visits but, still, many providers are facing challenges to meet the demands of a virtual world.

Healthcare organizations can start with considering where technology can bring the most value to the patient experiences, as well as considering where to alleviate friction between healthcare organizations and the patients they serve.

The priorities that many focus on include:

- Inbound contact and routing
- Virtual patient care
- Secure email and file sharing

In this eBook, we'll look at each of these areas and provide insights on how your organization can streamline operations, improve care, and provide more choice for patients, doing it all remotely and cost effectively.

We'll share the best approaches, processes, and tools to help providers serve patients well during this pandemic era, and across what is likely to become the new normal to follow.

ADDRESSING PATIENT CONCERNS AND QUESTIONS

The patient experience typically begins the moment the phone rings. The ability for front desk receptionists to efficiently answer inbound calls, prioritize queries, and route callers to the proper resource plays a pivotal role in patient satisfaction and issue identification.

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the volume of inbound queries spiked for most healthcare organizations, in some cases running as high as eight times the normal run-rate. As healthcare organizations were mitigating the risk of employee COVID-19 exposure by sending employees such as receptionists to work from home, many were not so well prepared to meet the higher volume of inbound patient phone calls.



Taking the Call

It is possible to resolve a higher volume of calls with less staff on-premise. First, by streamlining call routing, and offering automated options to callers, including pre-recording answers to common questions, the call queue can become more manageable. Second, give employees the capability to take calls even when not in the office.

Looking at the top five reasons for healthcare inbound calls—appointments and directions, medical emergencies, nurse advice, prescription refills, and health insurance—not all require special attention from a receptionist.

To best develop a strategic plan for inbound call response and reducing call volume, there are several actions to take:

- **Automating your outreach:** Setting up systems that automatically reach out to patients can reduce inbound calls and improve the patient experience. The Los Angeles County Department of Health Services took on such a program to help minimize broken appointments, with an improvement rate of 73.7%. This proactive approach can certainly be leveraged to address COVID-19 concerns as well as appointment reminders.
- **Expanding communications channels:** Outreach can be achieved by more than just phone calls. Offer patients the option for how they'd like to be contacted. The ideal contact center solution will allow for recorded phone messages, text, message, or email.
- **Leave no patient call unanswered:** When patients call your facility, and the volume becomes too high for staff to respond, add structure to the flow. You can execute this by setting up queues to prioritize calls. Many of these queries may be related to frequently asked questions that don't require human interaction, such as location and hours of operation. For those, use technology like interactive voice response (IVR) to answer the common questions with pre-recorded answers, or direct callers to your website to learn more. Filtering and controlling volume to more reasonable levels helps your staff and allows patients to get the information they need quickly.



Designing for Scale

Decreasing call volume to your front desk receptionists is only half the solution. The other half is setting up scalable resourcing. To do this, you need a proper toolset. Depending on your size and scale you will want to look for solutions that are not “one-size fits all.” At a smaller scale, a unified communications as a service (UCaaS) solution can help you better manage inbound calls to one or more receptionists. At a larger scale, more functionality may be needed to get the calls to the person or group best matched to assist the caller. That’s where a cloud-based contact center solution may serve you best. With such a solution, you can enable your receptionists to answer calls from anywhere, even from home.

With the right communications platform, you can do everything remotely, making it easier to scale up or down as needed. This means, your receptionist can be working from home, answering and routing calls just like from the office. Your reception staff isn't limited by the space in your facility, and workers can still do their job and stay productive, reducing the risk of exposure.

With a cloud-based solution deployed, you can add temporary staff to your ‘virtual’ front desk during periods of higher call volumes. You can also think more broadly to find skilled receptionists outside of your immediate area, access viable talent in lower-cost markets, or tap into outsourced talent firms to help manage call volumes during peak timeframes.

Is Productivity a Concern?

For those worried about decreased productivity with a remote workforce, choose a contact center solution with performance tracking metrics. These metrics allow you to understand the aggregate performance of the team and to identify areas for improvement.

Contact center metrics can provide you great insights, including:

- Tracking queue performance to determine how quickly calls were answered and what roadblocks may be preventing better service.
- Measuring call volume to identify the highest volume periods, allowing you to better staff for shorter wait times and faster issue resolution.
- Calculating team performance, including how long each reception desk spends on calls, the number of calls taken and missed, and the success of issues resolution.

When forecasting demand becomes difficult or impossible, the best path to adaptation is building rapid scalability and flexibility into your communications systems. When the inevitable surge arrives, you'll already be prepared.



Tools of the Trade: Contact Center

Contact Center is a cloud-based, contact center as a service (CCaaS) platform that provides a central hub for streamlining inbound and outbound calls. CCaaS delivers features that can address all the challenges of managing patient communications.

Turnkey functionality includes:

- Routing calls based on how patients respond in the interactive voice response (IVR) tree.
- Proactively sending dynamic outbound phone calls, text message, and emails based on patient preferences and actions.
- Scaling your team up or down from any location (calls can be handled at home, the office or wherever needed).
- Accessing easy to read real-time reports that offer performance metrics.
- Using agent scheduling and quality assurance to maximize patient experiences.

Since the platform is cloud-based, deployment, training, and support are 100% remote with no requirement for your employees or our teams to engage in person. Your employees can use their smartphones, desktops, or preconfigured business phones plugged into any internet port. You can shift to a remote model without losing a minute of service, and because the platform adapts to your needs, you'll find that its benefits will continue even as the world returns to a more normal operating mode.

VIRTUAL PATIENT CARE

If telemedicine is completely new for your practice, then look at this as an opportunity to leverage technology to drive a solution. Even before it became a necessity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual medicine was rising in popularity and was already a favorable option for patients. A 2019 American Journal of Managed Care (AJMC) study found that 79% of patients believed telemedicine to be more convenient than other options and that 83% felt the care was as good as, or better than, that of an in-person visit.

Delivering a Great Virtual Patient Experience

While you are used to seeing your patients face to face, you now have the opportunity to be there for them without physical jeopardy putting anyone in jeopardy. Those who treat people with pre-existing conditions and with weakened immune systems will find this extremely valuable. The relationship between you and your patients is one of trust. That trust is important with every patient, whether you've seen them for years or they are new to your practice.

Thanks to video conferencing, you don't have to physically be in the same room with patients to engage face to face. Nor do you need them to come into your facility, in many cases, to diagnose. Video conferencing has created an opportunity for healthcare professionals and patients to interact virtually, an opportunity that was simply not available in the past.

By being able to engage with patients over video, you can make an overall assessment with far more information than the phone was able to provide. For instance, the patient can show you an area of concern via a video consultation without having to make a trip to your office. Not all conditions are ideal for virtual patient engagements, but with the advancement of video conferencing technology, this form of interaction can benefit in a growing number of scenarios.

Video-Based Telehealth Solutions

Video technology is useful to support virtual patient visits and the live video component of telehealth has many additional applications that can boost efficiency and effectiveness.

- Remote monitoring of patients, who may be highly contagious, either within your facility or at a remote location, can reduce the risk of exposure to clinicians and other patients.
- Access to specialized care professionals is also possible with video conferencing. Needed specialists can be hard to find in certain areas. With virtual visits, these specialists can offer further assistance to patients as part of the diagnosis discussion with other healthcare professionals.
- Connecting patients that have contagious conditions with their friends and family can help reduce patient anxiety and offer an important source of support for those in need.





Preparing Patients for Virtual Visits

Many of your patients may already use video platforms, professionally or personally, so they may not have to learn anything new in order to get started. Others may struggle if they are tech novices. For those who may need assistance, you'll need to determine if they have someone in their home who can help.

It's also a good idea to email patients a quick guide to telehealth that outlines how the visit will proceed and how to use the platform to stream video and audio. A list of frequently asked questions, based on your experiences with other patients, can also be helpful. Based on the responses to those questions, you can make an informed decision on who is best suited for video consultations and how to proceed with those patients who are better to see in person.

Using Video Optimally

First, you need the right set-up to hold a virtual visit. The space needs to be quiet, and well-lit enough for your patient to see you clearly. This is important for establishing and maintaining trust. If you are working from home, make sure your background presents a clean environment, without too much clutter that could be distracting. Keep your look professional, just as you would while in the office.

Before your visits, take time to test your equipment – your camera, microphone, headset, and Wi-Fi speed. You'll need reliable, high-quality Wi-Fi for the best outcome otherwise your video may look grainy. Use a webcam that can rest atop your monitor if possible, instead of the standard camera built into your laptop. Position it so you are looking directly at your patient as opposed to looking down on them (the effect that laptop cameras often create). For crisp audio quality, go with a noise-canceling headset instead of a speaker.

When the visit begins, welcome the patient, introduce or re-introduce yourself by name, and make sure they can see and hear you okay as a first step. If they have issues with the connection, you may have to move to another area or adjust your microphone. Avoid multi-tasking while interacting with patients, and maintain eye contact while speaking with them. Conclude your evaluation with a summary of actions and next steps which you can then email or text to them as a documented follow-up.



Tools of the Trade: Unified Communications Software (UCaaS) with Video Conferencing

Choose a cloud-based unified communications as a service (UCaaS) solution that integrates many forms of engagement-phones, chat, video conferencing, screen sharing, fax, and file management-all into one highly-reliable and secure platform. Get a solution that is accessible from virtually anywhere from any mobile or desktop device as long as you have an internet connection.

Many healthcare organizations are already leveraging cloud-based tools for their communications and collaboration needs. The platform was designed to ensure the privacy and security of protected health information (Personal health information) and is HIPAA compliant.

Our healthcare customers use unified communications tools to:

- Communicate with patients and colleagues from an office phone or virtually any device including laptop, tablet, or smart phone.
- Interact seamlessly between on-site or remote workers.
- Conduct video conferences, share screens, or annotate images and text in real-time.
- Route inbound calls to any department, individual, or device based on pre-established call-flows.
- Make calls from any device, while always displaying an office phone number rather than personal phone information.

Video Conferencing Delivers Virtual Visits

For virtual patient engagements, video conferencing is usually essential. You can achieve all the aspects of managing successful virtual visits with a video conferencing platform.

Choose a video conferencing solution that is easy to use, cost-effective, compliant, convenient, and adheres to all rules regarding Personal health information security, including passwords for all video consults. You'll also have the ability to share your screen, which may be useful in reviewing lab reports or x-rays. Recording the session is also an option, which you can then return to at a later date or share securely with your patient.



SECURE FILE SHARING AND EMAIL: THE NEED FOR INTEROPERABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND PORTABILITY IN HEALTHCARE

HIPAA has strict regulations on sharing medical records and Personal health information, even between providers. With a shift to working remotely, and to protect emails and documents that may contain Personal health information, you're going to need a solution that's not only secure and compliant, but also easy to use and readily accessible.

Email Options

To protect Personal health information and allow your employees to access what they need to do their job, the first thing you need to consider is whether your email is HIPAA-compliant. Email encryption that supports HIPAA compliance and can be facilitated through prebuilt rules that determine, and encrypt, emails containing Personal health information. The type of encryption used by your provider should be Advanced email protection encryption that NIST recommends for healthcare.

Despite encryption, the majority of email communication that takes place in healthcare systems is between staff. As you are likely aware, providers are strongly discouraged from emailing patients or sharing documents with Personal health information outside of your EMR system. As a result, nearly all medical facilities have portals to communicate and share documents with patients.

In addition to email encryption, your ability to archive emails is also important. This functionality is essential for compliance and helps manage staff changes by making emails accessible to other colleagues and managers. Archived emails also assist with auditing records.

With a robust email archiving system, you can search through millions of emails to find what you need. Filter by subject, date range, recipients, and more, to review, and, if necessary, recover your communications.

File Backup and Sharing

Your staff is collecting patient data more rapidly than ever, and there is a pressing need to share it with your team as well as other providers or healthcare systems. Data sharing allows medical facilities to keep information that frequently changes, such as schedules, processes, and procedures across the organizations. Data sharing must meet HIPAA standards, but this is achievable with a highly secure file sharing and backup service.

Files are stored in the cloud and can be passed between those with access. They are also continuously backed up, protecting you from incidents that could wipe out your data. From a security perspective, using such a system that includes two-factor authentication is better than expanding your VPN. VPNs aren't always reliable and can be an entrance point for breaches.

Collaborative file access also improves productivity. Any file changes are trackable, and documents can be edited by more than one party at the same time. With a file system that is cloud-based, it can be accessed from any device, anywhere. Built-in security controls can limit user permissions and can be easily managed. Should a device be lost or stolen, it can be wiped immediately to prevent data leaks.

SECURE EMAIL, FILE SHARING, AND ARCHIVING SOLUTIONS

We deliver all the solutions medical professionals need to manage email and file sharing remotely and securely.

Tools of the Trade: Email

You should choose HIPAA-compliant email that all providers and staff can use. It includes advanced email security, including virus protection, blacklisting, and 24/7 threat monitoring. With options for automatic Advanced email protection encryption when Personal health information is detected, and securely archiving all sent and received email as tamper-proof records. It's a comprehensive solution to email communications.

Our healthcare customers use our email platform to:

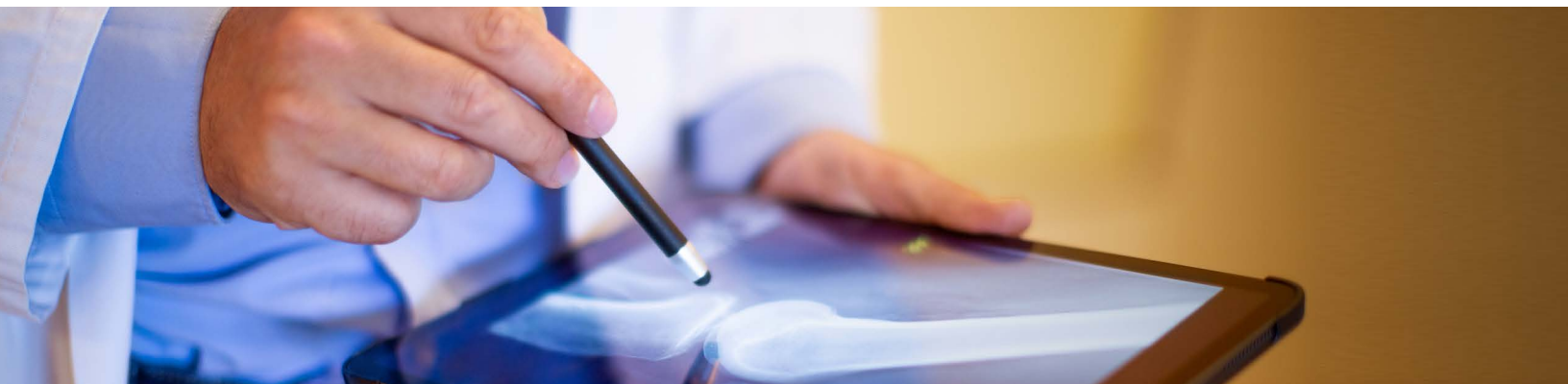
- Create a fully mobile and compliant email, calendar, and contacts platform for physicians and staff.
- Block spam and viruses from their Exchange email with 24/7 threat monitoring and protection.
- Ensure security with two-factor authentication (2FA), the most robust industry-standard authentication protocol.
- Encrypt email that contains Personal health information.

Tools of the Trade: File Management

More than just cloud storage, you'll want a file management solution that offers file sync and share as well as a real-time backup with antivirus and antimalware controls. It's a turnkey solution for healthcare organizations that need a simpler way to manage data.

With a robust file management solution, you can:

- Save, sync, and access the most current version of files from any device.
- Restore in real-time files in the cloud, desktop, mobile or other devices.
- Protect against network threats and the possibility of downtime.
- Ensure security with two-factor authentication.
- Enable secure access to patient files in the office or virtually and the ability to share.



VIRTUAL HEALTHCARE IS HERE TO STAY

While the world speculates about what the new normal will look like post-COVID-19, one thing is certain — Technology will continue to progress, and patients' expectations of service, speed and convenience will continue to grow, forcing healthcare organizations to stay current with patient care delivery.

The pandemic has taught the world that the new normal will require the flexibility to shelter in place at any time, without loss of continuity, no matter the service. On the other hand, just as other industries are benefiting from their shift towards remote delivery of services, the long-term benefits are available for healthcare as well.

The Demand for Care Is Variable, Plan for Scale

During the COVID-19 pandemic, inbound call volumes spiked to unprecedented volumes, placing serious pressure on virtually every organization from grocery stores to unemployment agencies and everything in between. Patients are also fearful of exposing themselves to unnecessary risk and are seeking remote ways to conduct routine check-ups or to get a quick diagnosis for non-emergency conditions. Your practice is probably dealing with a high call volume of worried patients, and it's hard to determine if they need prioritized care or just some quick advice, which may be especially true in practices that treat chronic conditions.

Companies in many industries have already organized their supply chain and customer care teams to scale with demand. It's widely known that excessively long call waiting times create poor customer service experiences, so why not design resources to scale quickly and seamlessly as demand dictates?

Decrease Risk for Your Staff While Maintaining Service Continuity

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many practices have had to deal with a shortage of staff, which further affected service capacity. As staffers contracted COVID-19, they were required to self-quarantine or, worse, receive medical care. Other employees who may have pre-existing conditions or other challenges that leave them more susceptible to complications also required removal from front desk duties. Those who remained were tired, putting in long hours to keep up with demand.

For any organization seeking to maintain continuity of care while reducing the medical risk for employees, all these compounding difficulties can be overcome with the right technology to operate remotely. Freeing up staff to work from anywhere allows you the benefit of imminent flexibility.





Reduce Operational Cost

Another challenge providers are facing is a drain on fiscal resources. Many have had to pay higher than average costs for materials and PPE. The last thing they want is to incur more expenses. But a cloud-based CCaaS or UCaaS solution can actually decrease operational costs. First, the platform is an all-inclusive payment model, so the cost variations are only attributed to users, not usage. You may also be able to augment your staff with lower-cost temporary roles outside of your geographic personal health information area.

As everything lives in the cloud, there are no initial or on-going costs for expensive hardware. You're looking at operating costs versus capital expenditures. Last, the technology required to facilitate a remote platform is already in place, whether it's a laptop, smartphone, desktop, or tablet.

Serve Patients Better

The model of healthcare has already begun changing as patients are now seen as consumers. In most cases, these patients have options about which physicians they see and expect instant and continued communication from you, with expectations set by other industries who are leading in virtual communications and service.

By adopting communications tools that enable better engagement and can occur anywhere, they'll likely appreciate the better experience. You can then serve more patients in a timely and effective manner. Also, by offering virtual visits, you can better meet the needs of those patients that are too concerned to come into the office. They still require your care; now, you can provide it with less risk.

EMBRACE MOBILITY

With the right cloud-based communications and collaboration platform, you and your staff can achieve optimized mobility. Patient care can be driven remotely by those who were previously required to work on-site from your healthcare facility.

Technology offers you the chance to engage via smartphone, PC, or tablet from virtually any internet-enabled location. Inbound calls can be forwarded to physicians or clinicians who are on call when an emergency arises. One can easily transition a call from the phone to a computer or tablet device and switch between chat, audio, and video conferencing, as necessary. Anyone in the care process can easily check messages without having to call into a system.

Adapt Quickly

In some instances, the change couldn't happen fast enough. If a patient calls into your office and hears she is the 35th caller, you must adapt quickly to reduce this inefficiency. With cloud-based technology, a new contact center or unified communications solution can be up and running in as little as two days. Making the transition from on-premises phone or call center platforms does not require a single person to be on site.

With cloud-based solutions, the supplier can deploy the solution, train the entire staff, and support them 100% remotely. Further, staff can implement their remote locations quickly and use their PC, tablet, or mobile device to get up and running from any internet connection. Should you opt for business phones, they can be preconfigured and shipped out, requiring only an internet outlet for use.



VIRTUAL HEALTHCARE IS A WISE CHOICE FOR ANY PROVIDER

Right now, there's an urgency to build, scale, and deploy. The transition, however, is not a throw-away investment. As many are concerned about managing the immediate needs of patients in the current environment, virtual healthcare leverages technology to prioritize and automate services that were only manual in the past.

Deploying new operating processes in the right areas of your organization, and leveraging cloud-based communications and collaboration tools, allows you to care for more patients, more effectively. Delivering this impactful care can drive cost savings while increasing patient satisfaction.

In this guide, we've provided you best practices on how you can transition to providing communications and care virtually while also making it easier for your team to work from home. We've been delivering these solutions for healthcare for years, offering comprehensive and integrated communications tools that enable providers such as yourself to remain compliant and productive with fewer challenges.

No matter where you are on the spectrum of being virtual-ready, we can help. Connect with us today to learn more about our solutions for healthcare.

Questions? Contact Us Today