



Five Best Practices in Communication Center Automation for Hospitals

The communication center of any hospital serves an extraordinarily important function. As the nerve center of often huge operations serving hundreds of callers and thousands of patients a day, the communication operation is assigned the task of everything from finding a physician who can give advice that can save a life to helping a caller locate a relative recovering from a surgery. It is the connective tissue of the modern medical network.

With cost pressures building in health care, however, the communication center has been assigned the additional burden of making themselves more efficient, more effective and less costly to operate. It can be a tall order to fulfill, especially with call volumes increasing annually at most health care providers. Many organizations that have reorganized and re-energized their communication centers have turned to “best practices” methodologies to gain productivity while improving performance of their staffs and managers.

The best practices movement has been strong in many industries. It represents, in fact, a sharing of information that may be valuable to competitors and collaborators alike. In health care, the movement toward best practices has been seen in the growing success of “evidence-based” medicine which collects the best data available before proffering treatment to individual patients. Best practices techniques for operations such as communication centers collect aggregated data and experience from a broad spectrum of health care providers who have undergone significant – and successful – transformations. Those results form the basis of what the industry sees as “best practices” for successful implementations in the future.

This white paper will showcase the experience of one health care provider who has achieved

higher productivity through changes to their communication centers through five strategies: automation, consolidation of call center operations, making the right technology choices, creation of new work processes and development of an authentic “team” environment. The paper investigates the tactics underlying these strategies and shows how they form an effective platform for producing a communication center more capable of handling growing call volume while efficiently helping customers locate the staff and information they need.

Step One: Automation

Health care institutions automate for the following reasons: To reduce abandoned calls, increase the speed of answers, improve operator morale, reduce operator fatigue and provide web-based communication. They see automation as a way to consolidate operations, reduce costs and decrease operator-assisted calls. Not surprisingly, within the next five years 85 percent of healthcare providers plan to improve their communication centers, with 53 percent planning to automate. Additionally, 47 percent also intend to consolidate and 12 percent to increase staffing.

Clearly, the health care industry is finally trending toward automation of communication centers because it is the key to all other strategies focusing productivity and operator performance. Consider the example of Emory University and Emory Healthcare, which first installed computer telephony integration in 2002. Emory’s medical network in Atlanta serves 11,600 students and 2,700 faculty members, as well as the general public through its nationally renowned hospitals and clinics.

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The results were nothing short of exceptional. The automation software allowed Emory's communication staff to more easily and quickly page employees, forward calls, schedule events and handle growing call volume. Emory's communication center decreased schedule production time and increased its ability to prepare those schedules further into the future.

The center can schedule all activities of its individual staff members, from meals and breaks to training and coverage for other departments. The care provider found much more accurate call data and was better able to forecast when the communication center would be busy and when downtime would occur. Armed with this knowledge, the provider's communication center maximizes operator efficiencies during high call times and assigns communication specialists to development and projects during slow times. Despite fewer specialists, the new technology actually led to a decrease in operator fatigue while improving Emory's collection of call statistics.

Step 2: Consolidation and Reorganization

Consolidating several call centers into one operation is one trademark of communication centers which have successfully implemented automation applications. It is much more inexpensive to deploy cost saving technology in one call center rather than three or four. And with current technologies transferring calls to clinics and ancillary operations is seamless and unrecognized by callers who have little idea the operator they are speaking to is 20 miles away from the clinic from where their call will eventually terminate. The time lag of call transfer has been reduced to virtually nothing.

In 2000 Emory merged each individual information technology and communication departments into one cohesive operation, called "NetCom" with the tagline "Connecting...One Emory!" Now that all Emory communication departments were speaking the same language

and with the right technology in place, in 2002, they were able to merge three separate call centers into one. They then had the following goals: To be an "exemplary" first point of contact; to maximize staffing efficiency, to improve accuracy and timeliness of message notification, to standardize processes, develop answering service standards (and quality indicators) and paperless call processing.

Consolidation, along with a full scale automation of the communication center with computer telephony integration, led to many advances by Emory that will be discussed in detail in the following sections. One clear outcome has been a staff reduction. The full time equivalents dropped from 48 agents to 22 agents. Emory managed to retain the best performers, with 15 of 22 agents holding senior positions. The health care provider dropped from four lead agents to three and its three supervisors fell to just one. On the other hand, Emory increased staff slightly in a few key areas. It added the positions of analyst, process coordinator and quality and training manager; none existed prior to the reorganization. It maintained one director and one operations manager. All told, the communication center staff dropped from 57 positions to 31 positions.

Step 3: Making The Right Technology Choices

Every institution should take the time and energy to thoroughly review communication call center vendors. Before starting the process they can study what other hospitals in their area, or nationally, have done when upgrading their communication centers. After a period of study, they should write a richly detailed "request for proposal" document to instruct vendors as to what they are looking for in a new communication center. (Amcom offers a free white paper on this issue called "Writing an RFP For Communication Center Automation.") And when blending vendors together they should ask each if they have worked together

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on other telecommunications projects – and what telco projects of a similar nature they have completed.

At Emory the communication center management and staff decided to select three different vendors for the project after reviewing their RFPs and their promises of a return-on-investment. The vendors were familiar names in their respective fields and had collaborated with one another on past projects. A lead vendor was chosen for the important role of communication automation. A second vendor was chosen by Emory to provide workforce management tools. A third vendor came onboard for call recording and monitoring.

The team worked together closely and the success can be seen in the results achieved with just the first year of installing the new technology. The communication automation vendor implemented computer telephony integration – on-call calendars, paging, voice recognition software – that brought forth the following advantages: decreased schedule production time, production of schedules further in advance, more accurate capture of call data, maximized operator efficiencies, decreased operator fatigue and improved reporting of call statistics. An enterprise self-service station, where staff could bypass the communication center, also proved to increase operator productivity and increased satisfaction throughout the entire Emory community.

The workforce management application provided several web tools and real time agent adherence, or RTAA, which allows managers to monitor and proactively manage agent performance. The management tool allowed for more flexible scheduling (such as 10-hour shifts and 45 minute meal period options), improved scheduling and more reporting flexibility. The communication center uses the workforce management application to maximize slow times with development projects, improve real-time management and the scheduling of all activities of the workforce.

The call recording and quality monitoring technology offered additional benefits. The technology allowed Emory to capture all calls, to monitor calls for quality, to provide coaching and feedback based on that monitoring, to use data and to use examples for teaching new hires. With the recording of calls the communication center had a non-biased first hand account of what happened during calls. That, as it turns out, was an invaluable risk mitigation tool.

After a year of having the new applications in place Emory saw some impressive gains in performance and productivity. The percent of calls in the service level improved from 68 percent to 76 percent. The average speed of call answering improved from 29 seconds to 16 seconds – an astonishing 44 percent faster performance. And the percent of calls answered increased from 86 percent to 92 percent. For Emory, the technology upgrade proved to be a winner in terms of improving the experience of both callers and operators.

Step 4: New Processes

Automation and consolidation always bring a new array of process improvements to communication centers. Automation provides enough data for managers to offer job performance reviews based more on productivity and quality than personality. Emory created a monthly score for each communication specialist based on his or her productivity, attendance and quality. Emory calls this a “PAQ” score. The productivity score, for example, looks at nine different productivity measurements – among them calls answered, automatic call distribution time, talk time, productive hours, paid hours – before arriving at a point score between one and five. The score is based on the communication specialist’s productivity compared to average recorded by the communication center average for performance area.

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Specialists receive points for attendance and quality in the same manner. The attendance measure is based on an employee's attendance record, unscheduled absences and late-to-work days. The quality score is based on the monthly monitoring of 10 calls performed by agents using multiple raters and a custom monitoring tool. Monitors give points from 1 to 3 to communication specialists based on, for example, whether they create an initial positive impression, and verify caller's information and the purpose of the call. The data from productivity, attendance and quality are translated into not just a score, but assigned one of the following ratings: "outstanding," "exceeds," "meets," "needs" (work) and "clearly unsatisfactory."

The result? Emory now tracks disciplinary issues in a more scientific method and defect logs determine learning needs and terminations of employees. Shifts are offered based on performance, not seniority. Specialists in need of help with some performance measures receive monthly training. Those who continue to perform badly will be let go, with reason and evidence to back that decision. The entire process is based less on favoritism of bosses and more on actual performance of employees. Staff has embraced the process improvements, according to Emory's managers and executives.

The hospital also revamped its hiring process significantly. The hiring begins with selecting people through a temporary agency specializing in staffing call centers. This saves Emory time and money since these employees will already completed reference checks, drug screens and background information. Potential hires are tested for data entry, listening skills, grammar and spelling and customer service aptitude. They are asked to read a paragraph over the phone to a voice mail box and to showcase their interviewing techniques.

If hired, new employees receive a six to eight week orientation with a heavy emphasis on customer service skills and workplace expectations. If they fail to meet those expectations they will be released. The agency continues to employ Emory hires for three months before the hospital takes them on as temporary employees for the following three months. After that six month review period employees will be considered for permanent positions.

Should they make the grade new hires enjoy a graduation complete with recognition from management team members, a certificate, lunch and dessert. Again, the concept is to elevate new hires by making them feel part of the team by showing that their work matters greatly in the day-to-day operation of Emory's medical network.

Step 5: Developing a Team Environment

A team environment starts with valuing employees. Simply changing the name of call center operators to "communication specialists" helped Emory encourage greater responsibility and attention among its staff. The upgraded title led to an increase in the staff's pay from 12 to 16 percent, another clear signal of their value to the health care center. The management also rewrote job descriptions of staff positions to reflect the new responsibilities of team members.

Emory developed several employee appreciation efforts and a special program to highlight the devotion to the team environment. One employee appreciation project called "Lets Recognize Each Other" notes staffers birthdays, perfect attendance, service anniversaries and PAQ scores. If a communication specialist receives recognition from customers outside the call center they receive a BRAVO award – "Bestowing Recognition for Actions Valued by Others" – during a staff meeting.

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Another program directs selected call center communication' specialists to serve as a team leader for 12 to 13 agents assigned to their group. They must create a name and a logo, leading to such monikers as "Team All Stars," "The Early Birds," and "The Unique Connectors." Again, the role of the exercise is the development of the "team" environment that has so profoundly influenced the performance of Emory's communication center.

The employee recognition does not end there. The communication center celebrates retirements and births, service anniversaries, customer service week, new hires, and even the date of when Emory's call centers merged. The department showcases Black History Month, holds fun contests involving decorating pumpkins and office cubes. The communication center maintains a scrapbook, hosts a "movie day," offers employees occasional treats and highlights good team and individual performances in the division and departmental newsletters.

The new approach to employees and new hires has had astonishingly positive results. Other departments within Emory have requested training from the communication center after hearing about its employee training and retention program. Employees and callers complain less frequently. Job satisfaction has grown considerably. Staff receives feedback on a regular basis, leading to improved performance. Morale has jumped, with turnover plummeting from 21 percent to 7 percent annually over the past three years.

Conclusion

For Emory University the implementation of an automated call center combined with the creation of a team environment and new hire standards has been an unqualified success. It would be hard to determine, of course, whether the communication center would have yielded the same results by only implementing new technology. Rather, management and participants believe the approach of using automation to spur changes in the treatment of employees, new hire selection and training and the promotion of teams all played roles in producing a communication center keenly attuned to the needs of staff and to the technological demands inherent in operating a busy health care department.

Indeed, technology is often only one piece of a puzzle that, once completed, leads to greater productivity and a more satisfied workforce. It can be – and often is -- the starting point and catalyst for re-engineering a department, or a company. Yet a human touch must be present to create the right environment for encouraging employees to strive to be high performers. That is where employee recognition, higher salaries and more prestigious titles come into play. Technology is but a tool, a building block that, when accompanied by employee recognition and incentives, will yield exceptional performance in a communication center environment.

