One step at a time: Building the next generation of efficient health system communication

Why eliminating fax-based communication is an important step forward

What percentage of your fax-based communication is still paper based? If it's more than you want to admit, rest assured that you are not alone.

While anecdotal, the following scenario is all too common in today's healthcare organizations:

A referral is placed to a long-term care facility for an elderly patient who recently received a hip replacement. A case manager or social worker contacts the facility and learns that they only receive patient information via paper-based fax. An attempt is made to fax documents containing pertinent PHI to the long-term care facility, but the transmission fails. Not realizing that the fax fails to submit, the busy hospital employee moves on to the next patient case. Later that day, a call is received from a frustrated director at the long-term care facility who is holding a bed. Information is faxed again, and upon receipt, the transfer process beings. When the patient arrives at the long-term care facility, a determination is made that the documentation sent is missing critical medication reconciliation information. The director attempts to contact the hospital to have the information sent via fax but is unable to get a timely response. In the interim, the patient's normal medication regimen is interrupted, impacting care quality. During this entire process, every faxed piece of paper has been exposed to multiple instances of potential PHI leaks while sitting on the machine.

It's easy to recognize the problems traditional fax creates for today's healthcare environments:

- Limited connectivity with no real-time exchange of information at the point of care

- Increased costs due to inefficiencies and labor-intensive, manual processes

- Disruptions to care coordination among providers

- Compromised safety when providers do not have access to critical patient information

- Greater security and privacy mishaps

Of the **$250 billion spent annually to process 30 billion healthcare transactions, fax represents 15 billion.**[1] In other words, faxes make up HALF of all healthcare transactions.

A recent National Physicians Survey found that 63 percent of physicians identified fax as their primary form of communication.[2]
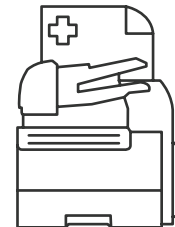
There is a better way. The digital revolution is here, and most industries are reaping the benefits of digital fax solutions and workflows. In healthcare, enterprise fax solutions powered by Direct Messaging capabilities are transforming communications for the better by streamlining workflows, reducing errors and improving interoperability to promote greater collaboration with community partners.

So, why aren't healthcare organizations clamoring to replace these archaic workflows?

Simply put, old habits die hard. And, is no place is that truer than in healthcare environments that have decades-ingrained practices. Traditional fax is a habit ripe for changing; healthcare organizations just need the right strategy to achieve success.

That's why we want to provide you with a clear understanding of challenges and opportunities across three pillars—workflow, data governance and information sharing. Then, we want to show you the best way to get started.

Pillar #1: Workflow

The Challenge: tighter margins, increased need for nimble processes

In synch with the industry's focus on value, your organization faces unprecedented pressure to achieve economies of scale while simultaneously improving care coordination for greater outcomes. It's a tall order.

A 2017 IDC report details that TIME and COST are the top two challenges associated with paper-based fax workflows. Notably, 42 percent of respondents named "time employees spend sending and receiving paper-based faxes" as the top challenge and "the cost of paper-based, manual faxing" as second[4]. Plus, if you are like many healthcare organizations using traditional fax, you may be experiencing fax failures in the 20-30 percent range.

The Opportunity: lower costs, streamlined workflows that prioritize patient care

By replacing traditional fax with a cloud-based digital solution built on Direct Messaging, you can overcome workflow challenges through seamless workflow capabilities that:

- Lower hard costs associated with paper and device maintenance

- Free up time for clinical staff to prioritize patient care

- Reduce indirect costs through Direct Messaging workflows that improve the reliability of data transfer

- Decrease redundant costs by enabling staff to verify whether a document has been sent and received, reducing the potential for duplicate efforts

While a 2017 IDC report demonstrates how digital fax solutions such as fax servers and cloud fax services, address the challenges of traditional fax workflows[3], the majority of today's providers are still engaging with traditional, paper-based fax. In addition, even providers who have moved to digital solutions often still rely on printed documents due to a lack of integration with other systems.

Pillar #2: Data Governance

The Challenge: security risks, errors

Traditional fax opens your organization up to greater security risks. Manual processes are inherently error prone, and a limited audit trail means you can't track down the source. In addition, fax failures often lead to duplication of efforts because the staff does not have access to verification data. You've probably witnessed it first-hand: a staff member submits the same fax twice resulting in more than one order of the same test.

In addition, a simple misdial or abandoned fax tray can result in a PHI breach—a rampant problem across the healthcare industry. In fact, one survey found that more than 4 in 10 healthcare respondents have read a paper fax intended for someone else.[5]

The Opportunity: improved data governance, risk profile and accuracy

Data governance is a priority across the industry for many reasons. One notable reason is that healthcare organizations want to avoid the fallout of privacy and security breaches amid heightened criminal sanctions for HIPAA violations.[6]

Cloud-based digital fax solutions built on Direct Messaging improve this outlook by:

- Ensuring the confidentiality and integrity of content through use of S/MIME encryption and signatures, and the authenticity of the message's sender and receiver through X.509 digital signatures

- Centralizing management of fax communication and standardizing fax transmission processes across the enterprise, reducing risk by capturing an audit trail of where and when faxes originated as well as who sent them

Digital transformation is broadly defined as the use of technology to create value and competitive advantage through new relationships and new models.

A 2017 IDC report found that fax volumes will increasingly shift to the cloud, eliminating fax machines through integration with users' desktops, email, back-end applications and multifunction peripherals. Across the industries identified, the report found that 90 percent of fax users have already integrated or are evaluating integration of fax with other technologies or applications for more seamless communication.[7]

Pillar #3: Information Sharing

The Challenge: lack of connectivity to support coordinated care delivery

If your organization is like most in the industry, your network is probably comprised of a variety of EHRs and disparate clinical systems. And, your community partners or referring physicians all operate on their own practice management system, which makes them very disconnected from your enterprise and the system as a whole. At a time when there is an unprecedented need for connectivity and collaboration, this is a problem.

The Opportunity: real-time information sharing supporting more proactive care delivery

Cloud-based digital fax solutions overcome the challenges of interoperability through content-neutral designs that enable structuring of any type of document with or without EHR Direct Messaging capabilities and develop a much more connected environment with your community partners. The outcome: improved care for patients, reduced staff interruptions and rework, enhanced physician experience and increased market share for your enterprise. This real-time access to patient information leads to more informed decision-making and allows providers to move care from reactive to proactive for better population health outcomes.

Changing Habits: implementation Best Practice Considerations

A closer look at where to start

The time is now for healthcare to take the plunge into modern, digital communications. It's one reason the Office of the National Coordinator (ONC) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) are aligning efforts to change the current dynamic with traditional fax processes. CMS Administrator Seema Verma set a goal in the ONC's 2018 Interoperability Forum to replace the current use of fax machines with digital health information by 2020.[8]

Improving fax communications means getting everyone on the same page—internal staff and community partners alike. Optimal strategies start with a clear understanding of the human element. Otherwise, a lot of time and resources can end up in the healthcare industry's crowded IT implementation graveyard.

If your organization is ready to make the shift to more sophisticated digital transmission of patient data, you will need a well-planned, thoughtful strategy that considers:

- Buy-in from community partners who are independent and don't have to agree to process change

- Technology expertise that ensures the implementation proceeds with minimal hiccups

- Change management that helps users embrace new workflows and processes in a sustainable fashion

- Training that is ongoing and customized to the unique needs of each partner organization

Next Generation Fax Communication

The evolution of value-based care models necessitates that healthcare organizations prioritize proactive, collaborative care across the continuum. Digital health information exchange and real-time access to patient information at the point of care are critical to these underlying strategies—and Direct Messaging is only the beginning. Imagine what's next if you take the first step to connect your entire system in real-time.

A seemingly small piece of a greater health IT strategy, transferring fax communications to a digital framework, can have a profound impact on workflows, connectivity, care delivery and the bottom line. Forward-looking health systems recognize that embracing next generation fax workflows that draw on Direct Messaging to merge manual and system-to-system communication is an important component of digital maturity.

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