

Healthcare Call Center Times

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Is Automation The
Secret to Positive
Care in Healthcare
Contact Centers?



**Exploring The Role IVAs
(Intelligent Virtual Assistants)
Can Play at Your Call Center**

Is Automation The Secret to Positive Care in Healthcare Contact Centers?



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For the past few years, achieving *the quadruple aim*—improved clinician/employee experiences, better patient health, lower cost, and improvement in patient experience—has been a guiding principle for healthcare executives looking to optimize patient satisfaction and care. With contact centers as ground zero for patient communications and experience, technology

used to better analyze and improve these interactions can have a positive, transformative impact in multiple “quadruple aim” perspectives.

Yet, as we settle into a new year, healthcare organizations will continue to combat employee burnout, outdated processes and inconsistent patient experiences—from care to billing. On top of that, *recent staff shortages and supply chain*

complication only intensified these challenges. Through the pandemic, healthcare organizations met significant issues in scalability where in some areas of operations demand outstripped supply and other areas experienced a rapid decline in demand.

Many healthcare organizations have started to implement new technology solutions in the

contact center and beyond to address these challenges. In fact, *recent reports* indicate more hospitals are planning IT spending increases to adopt technology-based processes and optimize operations that directly impact experience, like ease of appointment scheduling.

As healthcare providers embrace this digital transformation, some have started to tap into patient interactions happening in the contact center as an opportunity for automation and a source of rich intelligence. Automation

can help in several aspects of the quadruple aim and solve several of the aforementioned challenges with staffing and scalability.

Over the next year as healthcare organizations navigate a complex environment—I predict that automation will emerge as a critical tool to help them do just that. Here's how:

Fostering a Culture of Improvement for Agent Engagement and Retention

Contact center agents play a critical role in delivering positive patient experiences, but healthcare organizations are challenged to maintain

performance levels with rising agent attrition and *labor shortages*. A key part of keeping agents engaged and consistently delivering the best patient experience possible is providing accurate, transparent, and timely performance feedback. As Harvard Business Review's research on *the Service-Profit Chain* points out (and countless other studies), when agents are engaged, happier, and performing better, even in remote or hybrid environments, patient satisfaction improves too.

Another recent report found that 93 percent of





healthcare professionals and 78 percent of administrative staff agree that AI will actually be good for their careers. In line with this, automation can play a valuable role by analysing conversations between agents and patients and delivering insights to managers and directly to agents, supporting performance improvement.

With automated quality management, supervisors can go from listening to a small fraction of patient interactions every month or week to understanding conversations at scale. This enables contact center

managers to measure agent behaviours and process adherence specific to their organization and more.

Perhaps more importantly, agents can receive automated, objective, and timely feedback on their performance, drive self-improvement and learning activities, and see the impacts of their performance changes almost immediately. Understanding where they sit for specific competencies within leaderboards, helps provide key benchmarks and

motivation. Engaging agents more directly in their performance improvement helps them feel more fulfilled in their roles, driving retention and tenure.

Automating Tasks and Interactions for Scalability, Efficiency, and Better Patient Service

More healthcare organizations are centralizing their patient communications, especially as patient-clinician interactions are increasingly taking place through *digital portals and self-service systems*. That

said, the majority of patient interactions are still happening in the contact center, via voice or text. Responsibilities for healthcare contact centers are increasing beyond simple answer and transfer.

To increase service levels to patients and efficiently scale with demand, some healthcare organizations are adopting virtual agents—chat or voice bots—to act as the first touch point, particularly for handling routine inquiries such as appointment scheduling, rescheduling, or bill payment inquiries. While we have seen the increase in use in virtual agents, acceptance and efficacy are also increasing. In 2019, *chatbots handled 68.9 percent of interactions from start to finish*, a 260 percent increase from 2017, and chatbots are projected to *handle 75-90 percent of healthcare and banking queries by 2022*.

Whether in conjunction with virtual agents or to reduce the burden of manual repetitive tasks for human agents, *Robotic Process Automation (RPA)* can also automate several of the back-office tasks triggered by interactions with the patient.

Gartner estimates that within three years 50

percent of healthcare organizations will be investing in RPA. Some examples of use cases for RPA in healthcare include generating cost estimates based on benefits, assisting with preauthorization, automating outreach for appointment reminders, and electronic health record updating. In addition to reducing the workload burden and reducing cost, RPA can also reduce costly errors.

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Gaining a Single View of Patient Experiences Across Technology

With a move towards patient-centered care, measuring and improving the patient experience is becoming an increasing strategic focus for healthcare providers due to a combination of factors.

1. Healthcare consumerism—with increasing deductibles, patients are incurring more out-of-pocket expenses, and as a result, becoming more involved in their healthcare decisions. The

economic purchasing power lies with the patient, who will switch providers quickly as quality and cost become a factor.

2. Virtual care/competition—With the explosion of telehealth and virtual care, fueled by the pandemic, geographic or operating hour barriers to providing care have nearly been eliminated. This has introduced substantially more competition to local healthcare providers.

3. Value-based reimbursement models—Both government and private insurance plans are moving towards value-based reimbursement models where payment is bonused or penalized based on the quality of care and service provided, in part, self-reported by the patient through Patient Experience surveys.

Providers must focus on delivering a positive patient experience and ensuring patient satisfaction to retain patients, win new patients, and maximize reimbursements. In fact, studies have shown a *correlation between providers with high patient experience scores and profitability*.

Contact centers and patient interactions from initial scheduling through to bill payment, are a core part of the patient journey, playing a critical role in the

overall experience. A great clinical experience can be wiped out by a poor contact center interaction. It's important, just as with other industries like retail, that healthcare providers can track patients throughout their entire journey, from scheduling an appointment to seeing or talking to a healthcare professional to paying for those services.

With access to the right automation tools, healthcare organizations can not only improve the experience through better performing agents and self-service, but also create a single-view journey, and extract insights from every conversation that happens regardless of channel. This makes it possible to gain a more complete view of patient experience and satisfaction. For example, if a patient communicates that

they had a great clinical experience, but then later has issues with their billing experience, understanding the whole journey while pinpointing positive and negative aspects allows care organizations to act on patient experience improvements more effectively.

Improving Care Quality Through Real-Time Automation

New automation technologies, such as remote patient monitoring, are contributing to the quadruple aim, improving care and patient monitoring from the comfort of the patient's home in some cases, while reducing cost and burden on the clinician.

In the contact center and in clinical conversations, automation in the form of real-time conversational intelligence can inform, guide, and drive next best action, which can improve experience, care, and even save lives. *Some care organizations are using automated real-time monitoring to automate patient triage and escalations, changing the direction of the interaction while it's happening.*

Imagine a patient calls to schedule an

annual physical, but mentions having chest pains—agents can be alerted to escalate that call to a nurse for triage. In other instances, a patient overdue for their physical exam might call their healthcare provider to ask a medical question. With automation, the agent will receive an alert that the patient is due for their physical and they can support the patient with scheduling in-the-moment. Similar automated guidance can help clinicians navigate patient interactions, access relevant reference or patient education materials just-in-time, and ensure the patient is understanding diagnoses and care guidance, to improve care outcomes.

In the year ahead, healthcare organizations will continue to work towards achieving all aspects of the quadruple aim—and automation tools will be essential in better catering to each patient's individual needs and driving patient satisfaction. With contact centers being on the front lines of patient communications, embracing the right technology to support agents, supervisors and ultimately patients will be a defining trend in 2022. ■

