

2021 REPORT

# The State of Healthcare Communications



# Introduction

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Spok has surveyed healthcare professionals each year since 2011 to assess how clinical communication is handled in their organizations, as well as the trends, challenges, and predictions shaping this critical capability. While the state of healthcare communications is constantly evolving—perhaps quicker in the past year than ever before—the importance of communication technology can't be overstated. Communication is at the heart of patient care, and the technologies that improve communication aid the millions of care team members who spend their lives helping others and making decisions that affect the well-being of their patients.

The 2021 survey results indicate a milestone in understanding healthcare communication not only because of the long-term trends they reveal, but also because of the COVID-19 related changes that have emerged.

So much has changed for the healthcare industry in the past year. We knew it was important to understand the lay of the land in terms of communication devices and projects, information security, and motivations for implementing new technology. But we also wanted to dig deeper into the evolving impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly when it comes to the ongoing clinician burnout crisis. The full impact of the difficulties hospitals and health systems have experienced since early 2020 is still coming to light, but the toll has been massive on organizations as well as the amazing healthcare workers who have carried the heavy burden of care in the face of indescribable change and uncertainty.

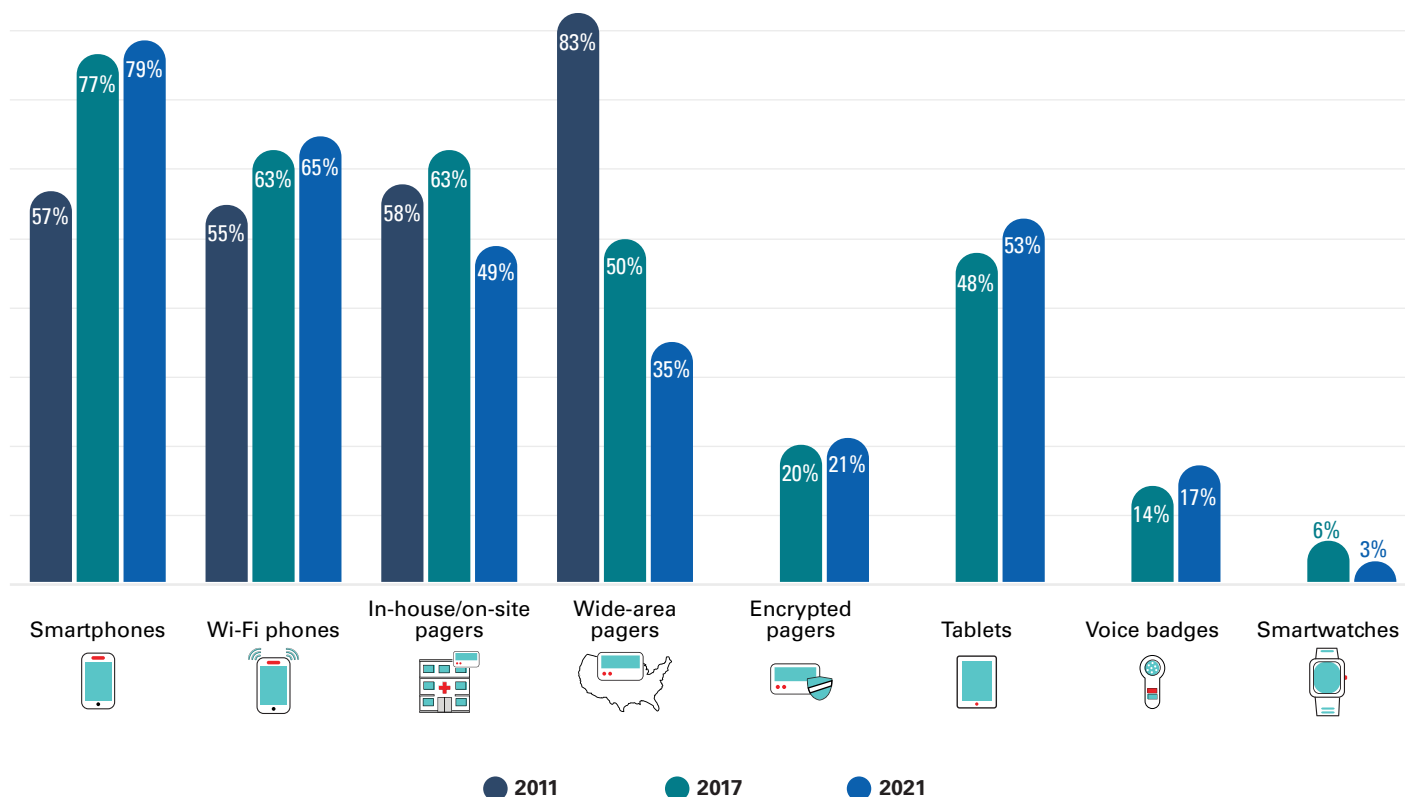
To create this report, we surveyed healthcare professionals in July 2021. More than 200 executives, physicians, nurses, IT personnel, contact center representatives, and more from around the U.S. responded with eye-opening input about the state of communication at their organization. This data provides a benchmark that can help guide your pressing healthcare communication decisions in 2021 and beyond.

# Current communication devices and challenges

When we started the mobility survey in 2011, the healthcare communication device landscape was vastly different than it is in 2021. Smartphones had yet to become the indispensable tools they are today, and tablets were just beginning to make inroads. Likewise, encrypted pagers and smartwatches had yet to arrive on the healthcare communication scene. And while wide-area pagers were more prevalent in 2011 than they are today, pagers — especially encrypted pagers — still play an important role in care team communications.

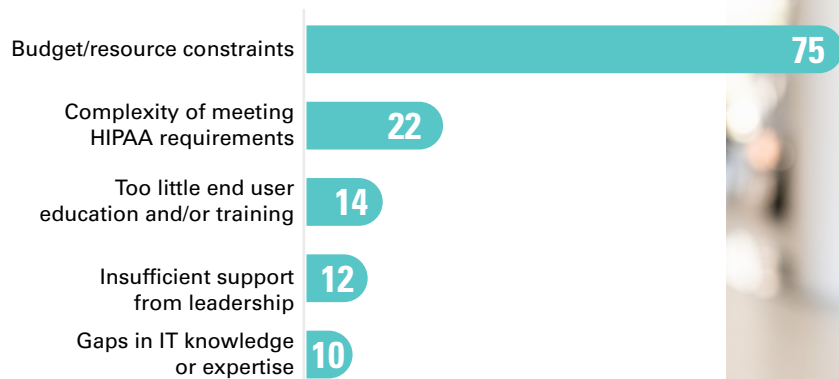
## What we learned

**What types of mobile devices does your organization support?**



Smartphones have remained the No. 1 supported device since 2012, and their prevalence continues to increase. While there is a decrease in the use of on-site and wide-area pagers, the slight increase in encrypted pagers shows reliance on these devices has remained relatively stable over time.

## What do you perceive are the biggest obstacles to advancing your hospital communications?



Respondents identified budget and resource constraints as the No. 1 obstacle to advancing hospital communications. This is consistent with 2020 findings.

The complexity of meeting HIPAA requirements and gaps in IT knowledge were often selected as a second or third-ranked obstacle with gaps in knowledge slightly out-ranking HIPAA requirements.



## How concerned are you that patient information and proprietary health system data are being communicated via unsecure or personal communication tools (e.g., consumer texting app, personal email)?



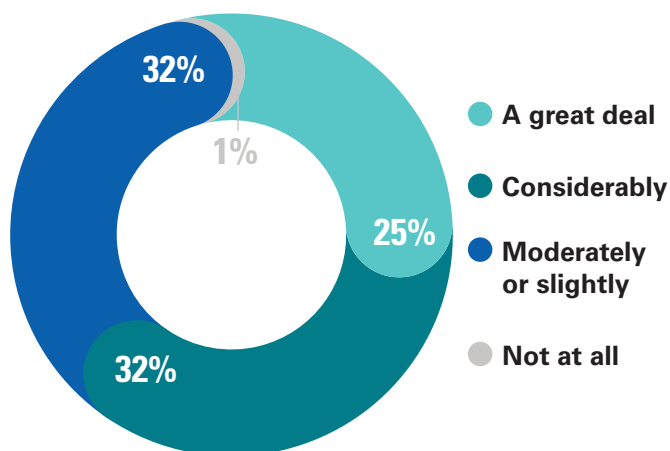
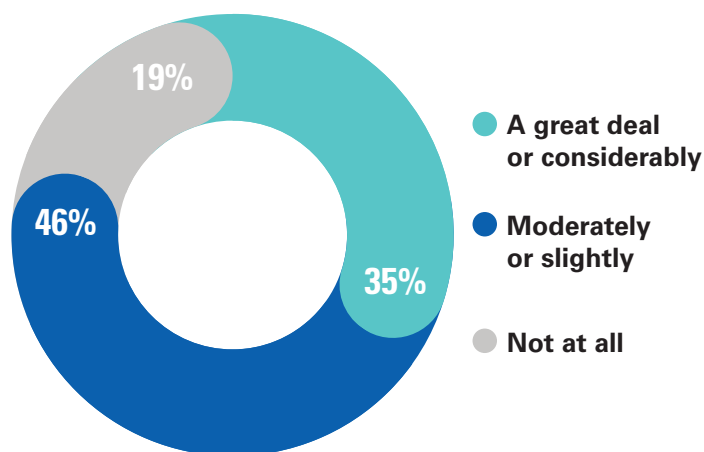
About 76% of healthcare professionals surveyed have some level of concern that patient information and proprietary health system data are being communicated via unsecure or personal communication tools. Only 13% are not concerned. Concern has grown slightly in the past year. In 2020, 17% were not concerned.

# The impact of COVID-19 on clinical communications

Much has been written about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its role in reshaping virtually every aspect of healthcare delivery continues to come into focus. Unfortunately, the situation has affected many organizations' ability to make progress on long-planned communication technology projects. Likewise, physicians, nurses, and other care team members have needed to modify existing workflows, and administrators have had to adjust policies and procedures. One important area has been how protected health information (PHI) is handled, especially during patient surges.

## ••• To what degree did the COVID-19 pandemic impact PHI being communicated via unsecure or personal communication tools (e.g., consumer texting app, personal email)?

About 81% of respondents believe COVID-19 impacted PHI being communicated via unsecure or personal communication tools. Less than 20% reported that the pandemic had no impact.

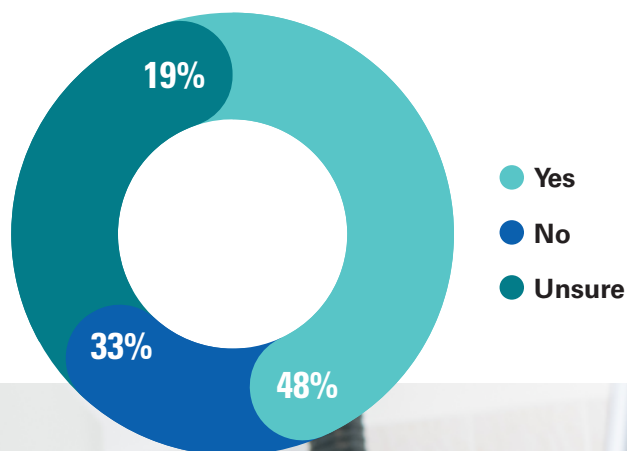


## ••• Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, how instrumental was your organization's contact center (operator services) in proactively contributing to the patient journey and the patient experience?

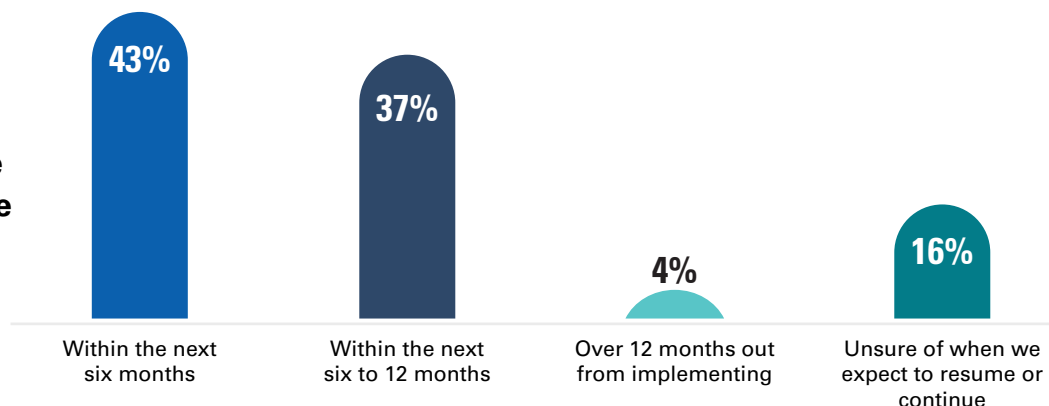
With more than 57% of respondents reporting their organization's contact center contributed considerably or a great deal to the patient experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's clear hospital leaders recognize the contact center as more than the "answer and transfer" department of the past.



Did your project teams pause any outstanding IT communication projects during the COVID-19 pandemic?



If yes, when do you expect to resume or continue implementing these IT communication projects?



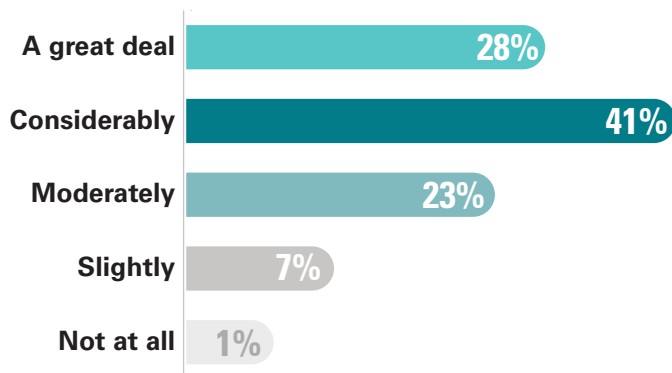
While nearly half (48%) of all IT communication projects were halted during the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly the same percentage (43%) expect to resume implementing those projects within the next six months. With coronavirus infections currently increasing as the Delta variant spreads, it remains to be seen if this predicted timeline will hold.

# Clinician burnout and the role of communication

Even before the arrival of COVID-19, clinician burnout levels had become a top concern for many in healthcare. For physicians and nurses, the weight of life-and-death decisions is often compounded by too much complicated technology, alarm fatigue, poor workflows and communication processes, and high patient loads that don't allow for enough time to care for patients in a way that feels effective.

Administrators have also fallen victim to increasing stress levels as tight margins, cyberattacks, mergers and acquisitions, and decisions about how to purchase new technology and equipment on tight budgets fill their days. Perhaps one positive change during the pandemic has been the increased importance of addressing mental health challenges. Those surveyed weighed in on the best ways to mitigate burnout going forward.

## ●●● To what degree do you believe levels of burnout have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic? (All titles)

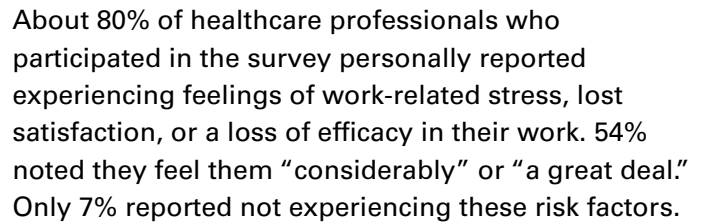


Sadly, levels of burnout among healthcare professionals have increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 92% of respondents believe levels of burnout have increased at least moderately since the start of the pandemic.

### SEGMENTED BY TITLE



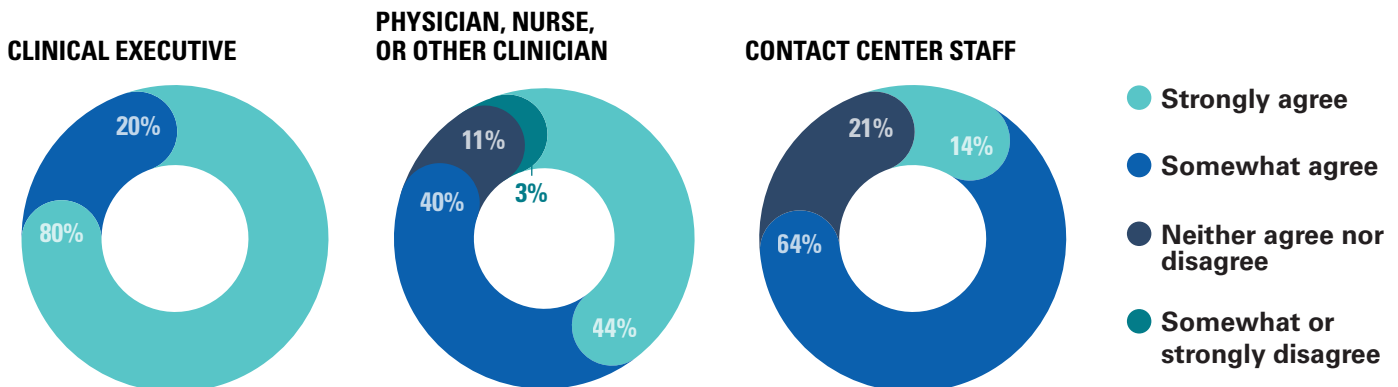
The levels of burnout since early 2020 have increased “a great deal” according to 60% of clinical executives surveyed. Every contact center staff member surveyed (100%) reported burnout has increased at least moderately since the onset of the pandemic. Interestingly, IT executives (17%) were the only ones surveyed who felt levels of burnout had not increased at all.



## SEGMENTED BY TITLE



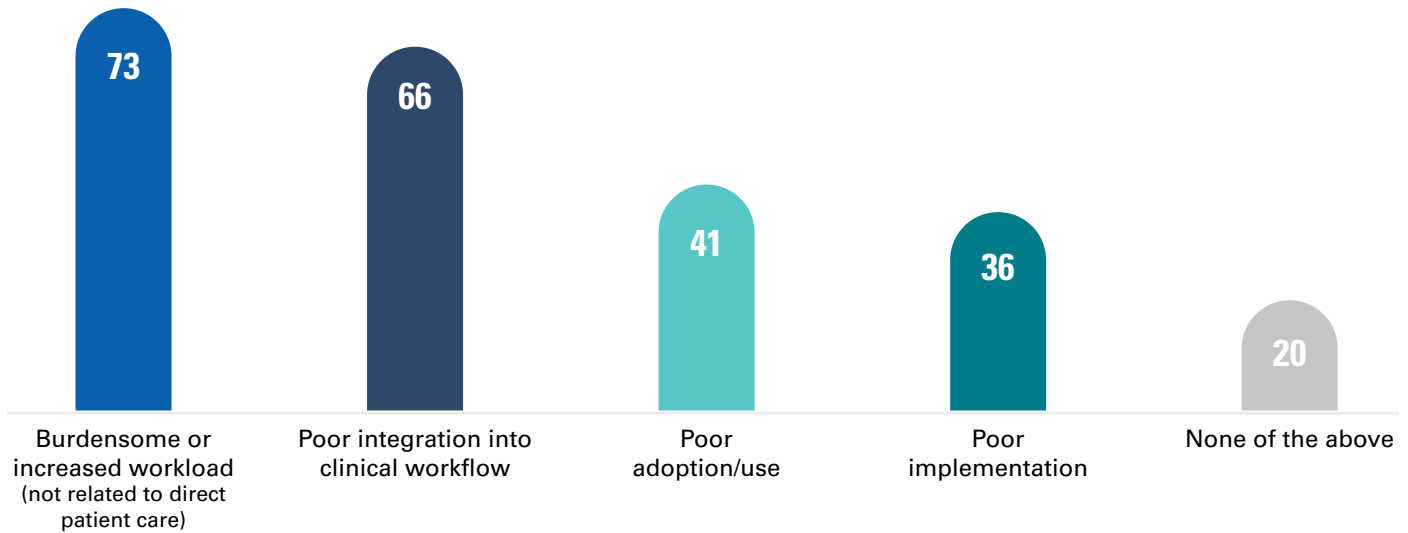
The data show that clinical executives and contact center staff report experiencing the greatest amount of burnout. IT staff reported the lowest levels of “a great deal” of burnout. When it comes to clinicians, only 4% reported not feeling any levels of burnout.



Survey respondents who have face-to-face patient interaction overwhelmingly call burnout a “public health crisis.”



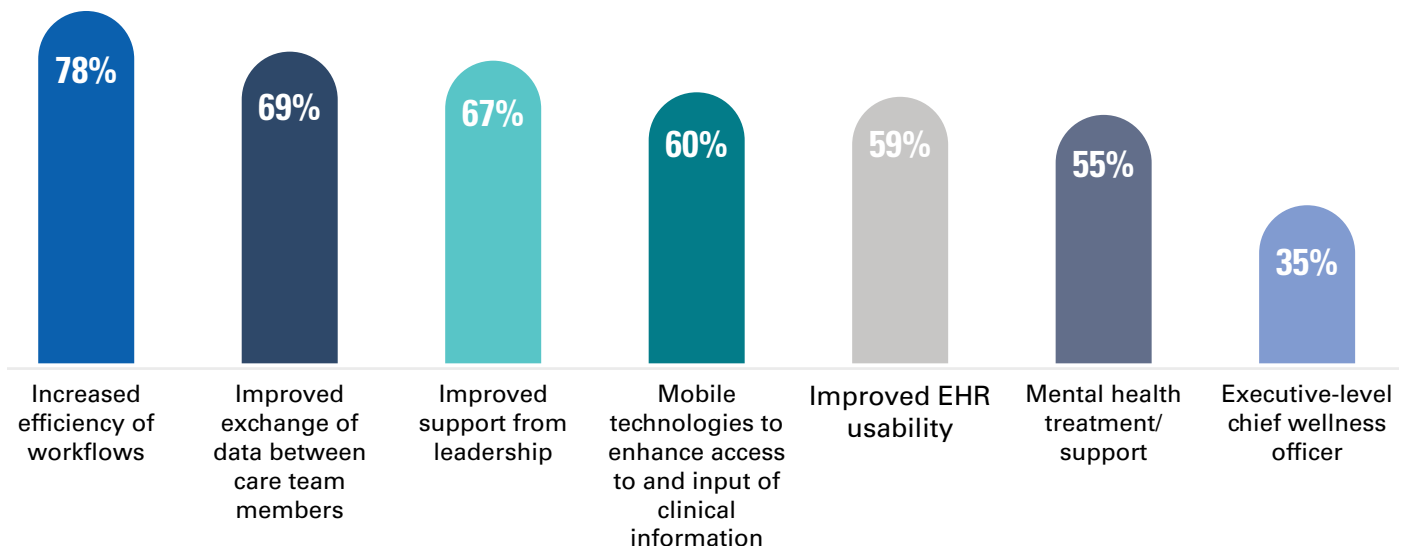
When you consider your experience with clinical tools and technology, do any of the following contribute to the risk of alarm fatigue or clinician burnout? (select all that apply)



Burdensome or increased workload not related to direct patient care and poor integration into clinical workflows were the two most common clinical technology contributors to alarm fatigue or clinician burnout. These were also the top two contributors in our 2020 report.

How helpful are recommended strategies for addressing the risk of burnout?

Percent of respondents who identified the below strategies as “extremely” or “very helpful” in addressing the risk of burnout:



# Looking to the future

With nearly 18 months of pandemic-related learnings now under their belts, the healthcare professionals surveyed have a clearer picture of what they expect to see in the future as far as communication technology. Nearly half of those surveyed are likely to make device changes in the next year. These results show that the patient experience remains at the heart of these important decisions, with the ongoing need to improve workflows coming in second.

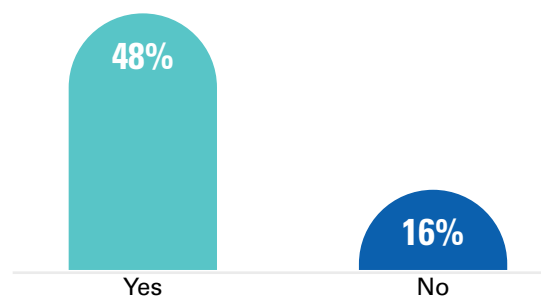
My hospital is likely to pursue, or is actively considering, a change in devices or communication technologies in the next 12 months.

About 48% of respondents agree their hospital or health system is likely to pursue or is actively considering a change in devices or communication technologies in the next 12 months. Only 16% are not.



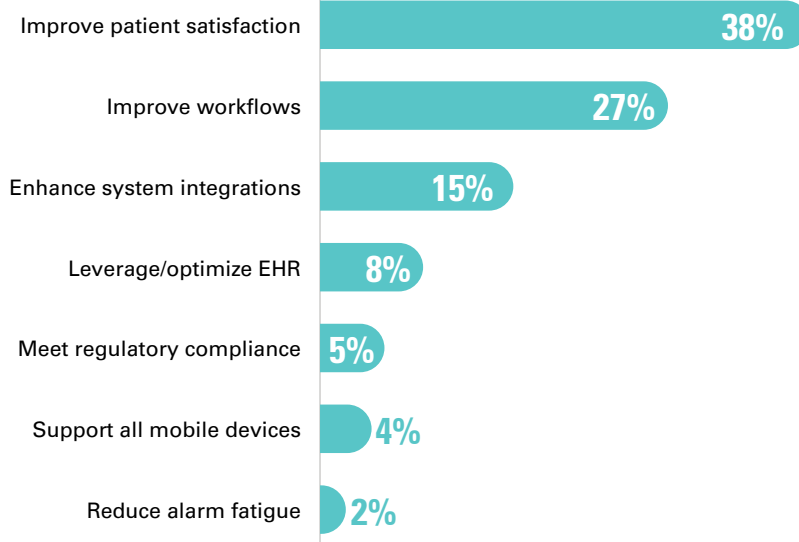
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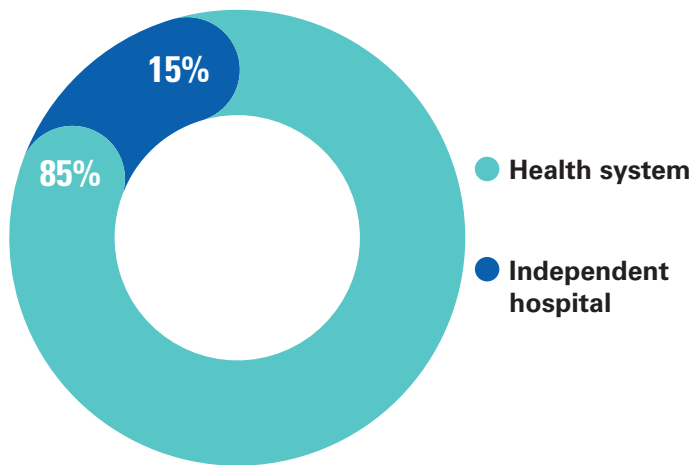
When considering communication technology in your hospital, what is your motivation for new technology? (Please rank in order from most important to least important)

The No. 1 motivation to implement new technology is to improve patient satisfaction, followed by improving workflows.

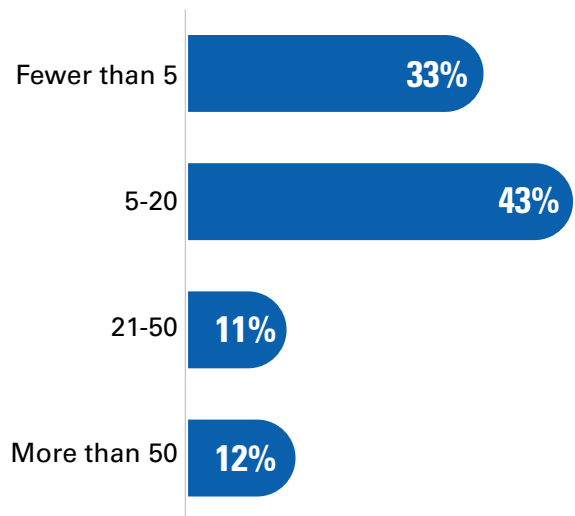


# Survey demographics

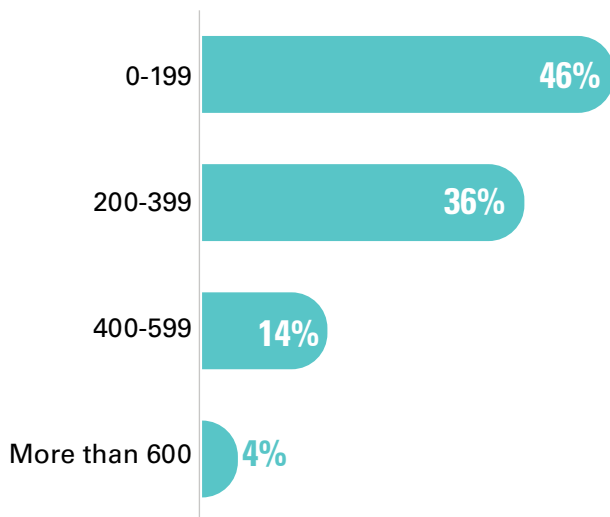
## ORGANIZATION TYPE:



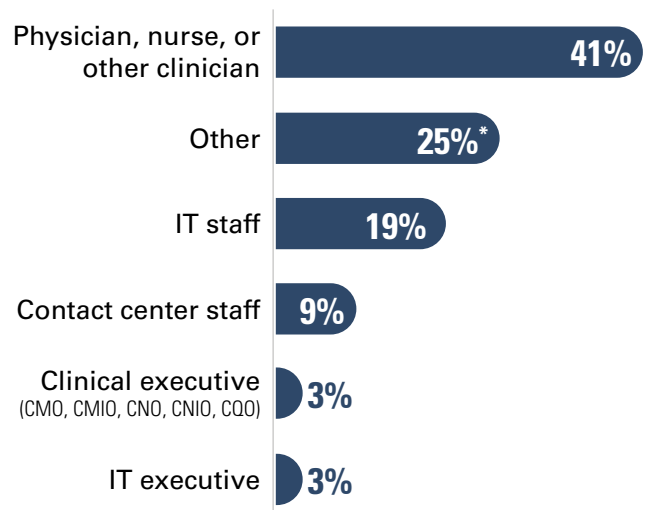
## NUMBER OF HOSPITALS IN HEALTH SYSTEM:



## AVERAGE BED SIZE:



## TITLE IN ORGANIZATION:



\*Those who identified as other included business analysts, pharmacists, and roles related to patient services.

# Conclusion

We are incredibly grateful to all the healthcare professionals who took time from their demanding schedules to respond to this year's survey. Your responses have yielded valuable information that can help you and others tackle your biggest communication challenges and guide planning efforts in the coming months and years.

The data from this survey tells a story of how COVID-19 impacted healthcare communications. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it's that speeding delivery of patient care is critical. One of the most efficient ways to achieve that is to connect caregivers with the people and information they need, when they need it. Faster communication means faster, more precise care.

While each hospital and health system may consider the data differently, we found three major takeaways:

## 1. Communication via unsecure or personal communication tools is a concern

As we all know, sensitive patient data is everywhere. It's in electronic health records, medical images, lab results, billing files, research initiatives, and even provider communications. There are seemingly endless ways protected health information (PHI) can be exposed throughout a hospital or health system.

Our survey shows healthcare professionals are concerned that PHI is being communicated via unsecure or personal communication tools, and that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the exchange.

With security and privacy issues [on the rise](#) in 2021, perhaps it's not unexpected that survey respondents are concerned. Looking ahead, hospitals and health systems may need to bolster initiatives to meet HIPAA standards for PHI protection and to avoid noncompliance, reputational harm, and serious financial penalties. It could also signify the need for health systems to have in place an advanced, HIPAA-compliant critical communication solution.



## 2. Clinician burnout has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Improved communication could help address the risk.

Healthcare professionals overwhelmingly believe levels of burnout have increased since the start of the pandemic. Perhaps surprisingly, contact center staff (operator services) reported burnout at some of the highest levels. At the same time, our survey also indicates that the contact center was a critical component of the patient experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The consistently positive responses from clinicians on several suggestions to curb burnout paint a picture of opportunity. Survey respondents seem to agree that improving communication technology could help address the risk of burnout through increasing efficiency of workflows, improving exchange of data between care members, and adopting mobile technologies.



## 3. New communication technologies are on the horizon

While healthcare IT communication projects were halted during the COVID-19 pandemic, our survey shows that many healthcare professionals expect to resume implementing these projects in the next six months. These results indicate that healthcare organizations understand the positive impact enhancing healthcare communication technology can have to help address clinician burnout, improve patient satisfaction, and enhance system integrations.

As we saw in this report, COVID-19 has fundamentally altered healthcare delivery. It raised security challenges for PHI communicated on personal devices, added to burnout levels, and waylaid communication technology projects. Yet, respondents expect to resume these projects quickly, suggesting survey respondents agree—advancing hospital communications is one important path to provide the best care to each patient.

If you have a question about something you read or would like to learn more about how Spok can help advance your care communications, please [contact us](#).





## ABOUT SPOK, INC.

Spok, Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Spok Holdings, Inc. (NASDAQ: SPOK), headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, is proud to be a global leader in healthcare communications. We deliver clinical information to care teams when and where it matters most to improve patient outcomes. Top hospitals rely on the Spok Go<sup>®</sup> and Spok Care Connect<sup>®</sup> platforms to enhance workflows for clinicians and support administrative compliance. Our customers send over 100 million messages each month through their Spok<sup>®</sup> solutions. When seconds count and patients' lives are at stake, Spok enables smarter, faster clinical communication. For more information, visit [spok.com](http://spok.com) or follow @spoktweets on Twitter.

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