

CONTACT CENTERS IN HEALTHCARE

A REPORT FOR HOSPITAL LEADERS

2018 SURVEY

spok.com



A NEW SURVEY ABOUT AN EVOLVING CHALLENGE

Spok introduced this survey in 2018 as another in our continuing research series to learn more about the concerns that are top of mind for healthcare executives. The examination of contact centers is especially timely as the industry considers their role in a technologically fluid environment.

We wanted to know how many healthcare organizations have a contact center strategy, a key step in moving contact centers into the future. We also asked who was involved in developing the strategy, how long it's been in place, if it's been updated, and why. We learned that communication technology—hardware and software—continues to evolve, too, and plays a critical role in how contact centers are positioned in healthcare organizations.

All that data combines to give us the picture of the current state of contact centers. In our view, the most important takeaway is that a contact center strategy needs to continually evolve, as hospitals and health systems adapt and enhance this traditional function to meet the challenges of today's patient and staff clinical workflow needs.

WHO WE HEARD FROM

We collected data for this report in April and May 2018. Nearly 400 healthcare professionals from around the U.S. responded to the survey. Thirty-four percent were executive leaders; 23 percent were directors or managers of the contact center, IT, or telecommunications; and the remaining 43% had a mix of clinical and administrative titles, from nurses, physicians, and pharmacists to quality assurance, compliance, and informatics professionals. We also asked organizations to share the approximate size of their contact centers, to help us gauge the scale of their operations.

Many thanks to all who responded. Everyone who took the time to share insights helped us create this valuable industry snapshot.

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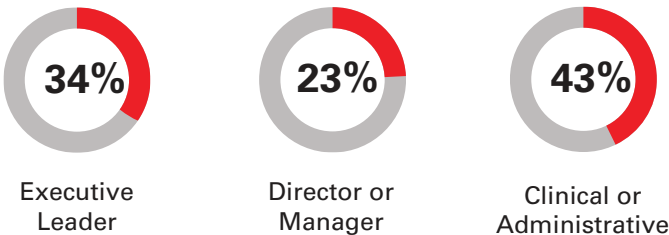
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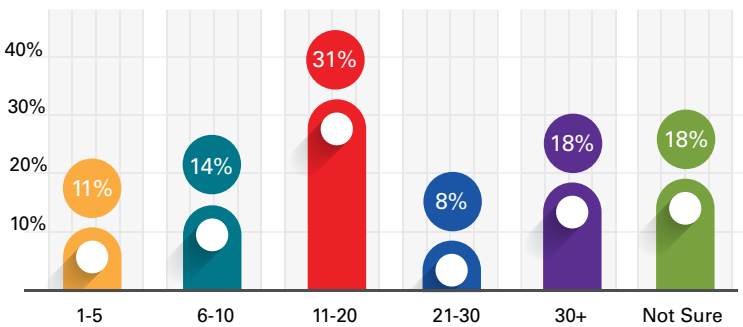
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WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT ROLE WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION?



HOW MANY FULL-TIME OPERATORS DO YOU HAVE IN PLACE TODAY?



IS THE ROLE OF CONTACT CENTERS CHANGING?

It's a given that **contact centers have key roles in ensuring a successful patient experience**. Satisfaction surveys (such as HCAHPS¹) measure the ability of clinical staff to clearly and courteously explain information to patients about their care in a timely fashion. Though HCAHPS surveys concentrate on clinical staff interaction with patients, the contact center also plays an important role in hospital-patient communication, helping clinicians access patient information and guiding family members and patients to the right hospital resources.

Some centers are also expected to deliver communication that is less visible to patients, including code blue notifications or care team schedules. **As the sheer volume of communication rises, it's no surprise that complexity increases as well.** Regulatory considerations, increasing consolidations of healthcare entities, growing pressures for value-based care, the proliferation of technology, and a constantly mobile staff all add to the challenge of reliably connecting people with the critical information they need.



Hospitals may choose an already-centralized function—the contact center—to **unify disjointed communication workflows**.

Healthcare leaders have recognized that centralizing and standardizing communications is the response to this complexity. That's why they have turned to a centralized function already in operation—the contact center—to unify often-disjointed communication workflows. In our experience, many hospitals have been exploring the contact center's potential² to become a place where widely diverse institutional communications flow through a central hub. We wanted to learn more about this: to find out if transformations are happening, and if so, to what extent.

Six Strategic Advantages of Consolidated Contact Centers



Many health systems are consolidating infrastructure to streamline processes, save money, and deliver better customer service. Find out why unifying this key resource can be worth the effort.

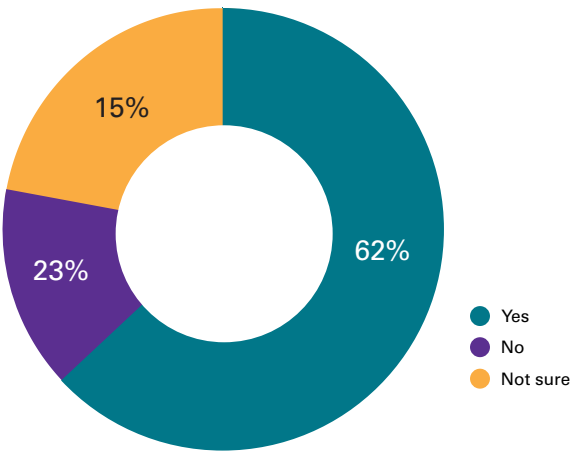
[Get the eBrief»](#)

GETTING TO A STRATEGY

For many years contact center staff were expected to “answer and transfer” and little else. These days, a hospital may ask their contact center staff to take on goals as varied as patient satisfaction, technology adoption, and critical care response times. In today’s competitive, consumer-driven environment, as a recent Deloitte report³ points out, a hospital contact center can be “a key strategic asset, critical to delivering a differentiating experience, helping drive loyalty and increasing market share.”

For this, our initial survey on contact centers, we began by asking participants if they have a strategy in place.
A clear majority answered yes.

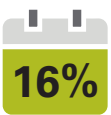
DOES YOUR HOSPITAL HAVE A CONTACT CENTER STRATEGY IN PLACE?



HOW LONG HAS YOUR STRATEGY BEEN IN PLACE?



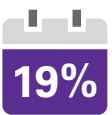
Less than one year



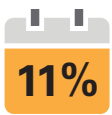
1–3 years



3–5 years



More than 5 years

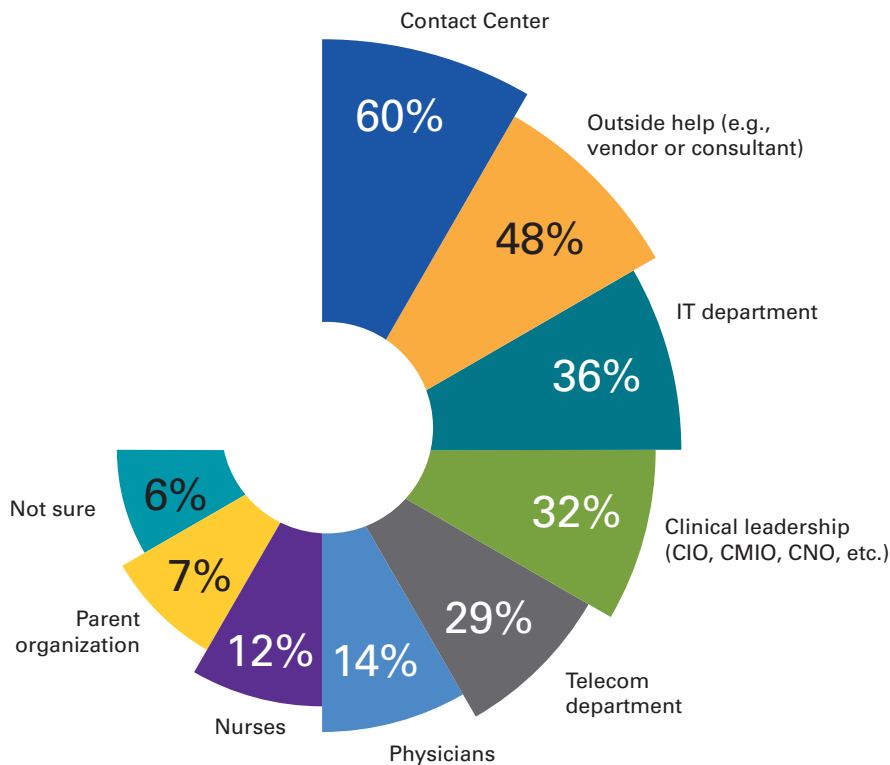


Not sure

For those with a strategy in place, **over half have had a strategy for three to five years.** This would indicate that maximizing this hospital resource is not a new idea, and many respondents are including it as part of their overall organizational plan.



WHO WAS INVOLVED IN CREATING THE CONTACT CENTER STRATEGY FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION?



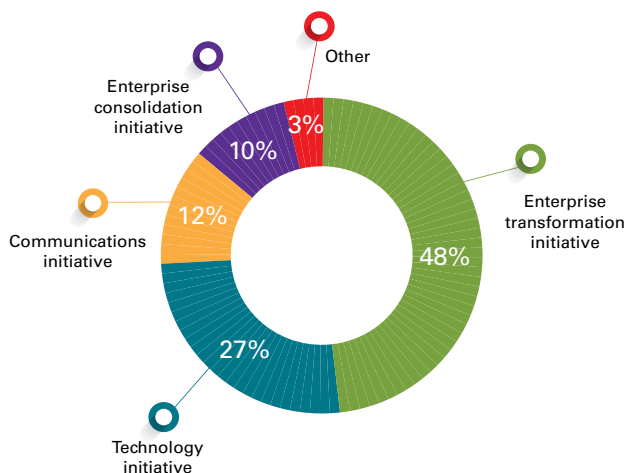
Next, we wanted to know more about how the strategy was developed. We asked respondents to tell us who was involved in creating the contact center strategy. **No surprise that the contact center led the way;** we also noticed a wide variety of other hospital stakeholders that figured prominently, with clinical staff and leadership, the IT department, and telecom playing significant roles. Nearly half of the respondents also listed outside vendors or consultants as providing help.



Grouped together, **clinical leadership, physicians, and nurses** were the staff most involved in creating a strategy, behind only the **contact center** itself.



HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE YOUR CONTACT CENTER STRATEGY?

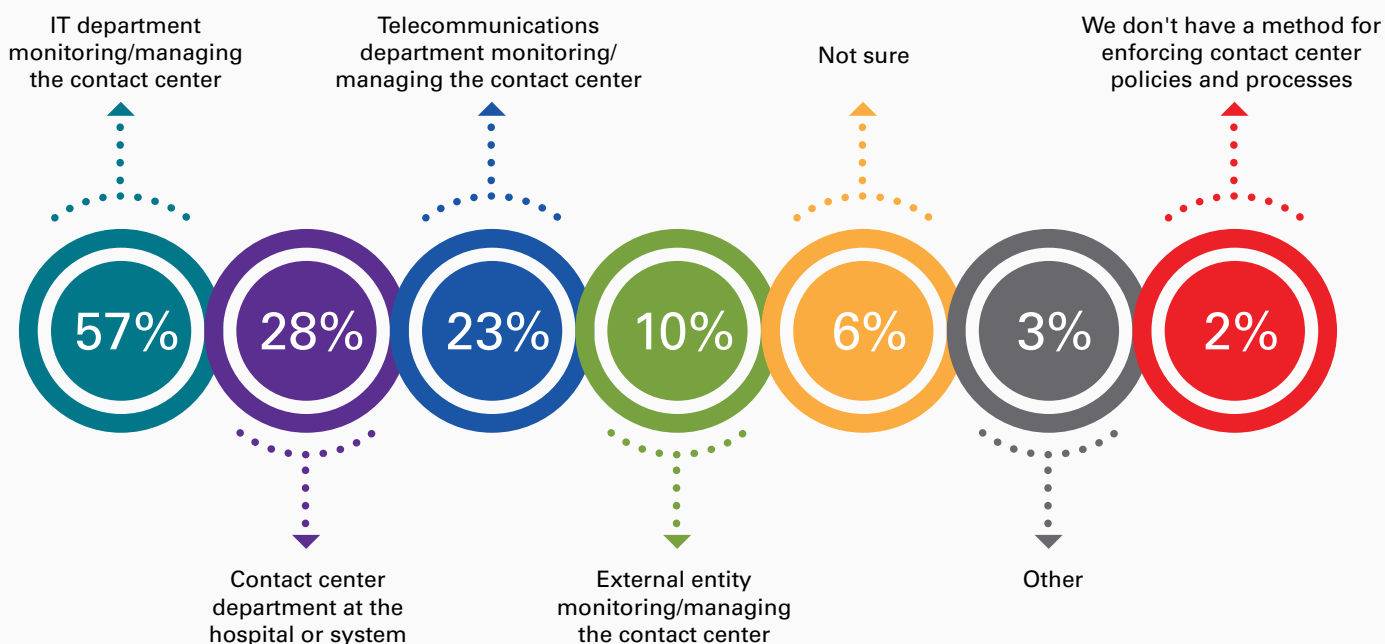


Most contact center strategies were described as an “**enterprise transformation**” initiative, far outpacing “communications” and “technology” as the primary driver.

One indication that the role of contact centers has changed is reflected in the way hospitals characterize the strategy about them. We asked survey respondents to tell us how their organization would define their contact center strategy, and **nearly half described it as an enterprise transformation initiative**. We think this signals a recognition that contact center roles and functions are a key part of a hospital/health system’s overall strategic plan, not confined to communications policies and procedures. We may further surmise that contact centers are becoming an agent of change (as opposed to a recipient of change) for an organization.

WHO ENFORCES YOUR CONTACT CENTER POLICIES AND PROCEDURES?

(CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY)



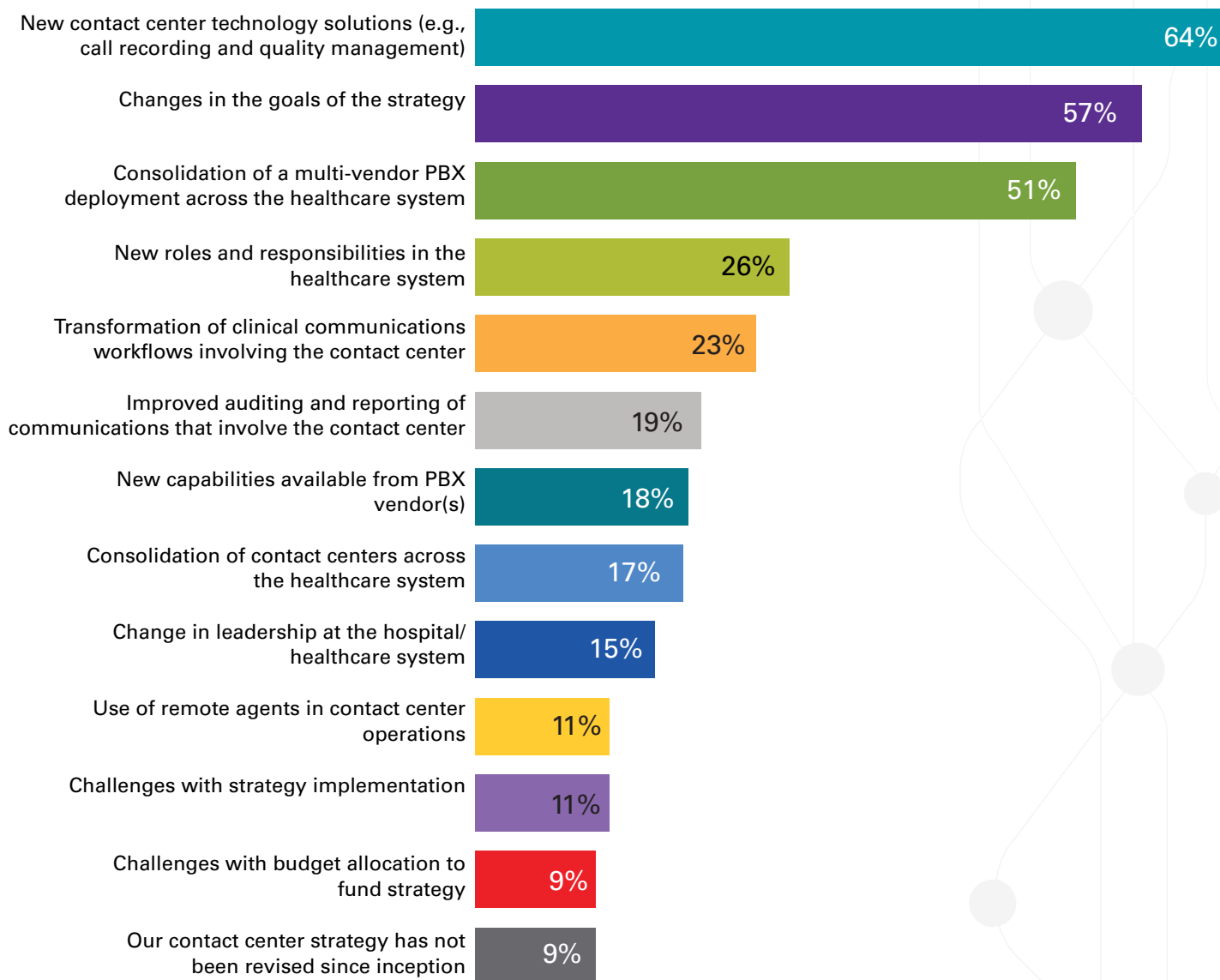
Respondents also told us how contact center policies and procedures were enforced at their organization, with a clear lean toward **their IT department**. This may reflect the increasing amount of technology that contact center staff are using.

LEADING CHANGE THROUGH A CONTACT CENTER

Though the majority of survey respondents have had a strategy in place for several years, the strategies are not static—which we learned when we asked respondents more about the strategy itself.

We asked what drove organizations to update their contact center strategies over time. **New technology** solutions were cited most often, followed closely by **changes in the goals of the strategy**. A wide variety of other drivers were mentioned as well, with everything from budget to staffing changes noted. For us, this reinforces the need to **review strategies and related goals annually** in order to keep pace with organizational plans as well as new state-of-the-art technology options available for communications.

IF YOU'VE UPDATED YOUR STRATEGY SINCE IT WAS FIRST DEVELOPED, WHY?



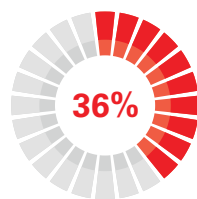
DOES YOUR CONTACT CENTER STRATEGY INCLUDE GOALS TO IMPROVE PROCESSES IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?



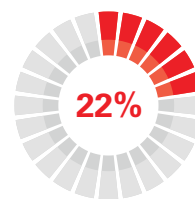
Integration of new devices that enable communication with the contact center



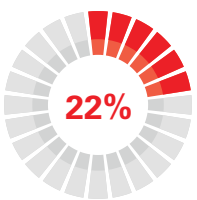
Administration of on-call schedules



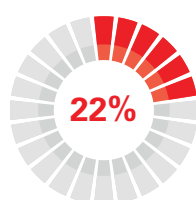
Communication between the contact center and the care team



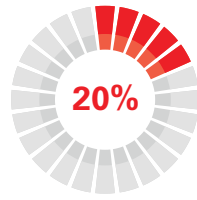
Patient satisfaction scores



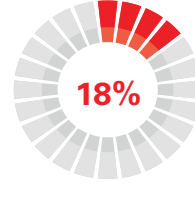
Communication with health system network of physicians and other health professionals



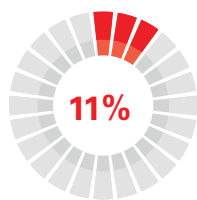
Administration of care team schedules



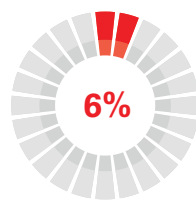
Administration of the healthcare system directory



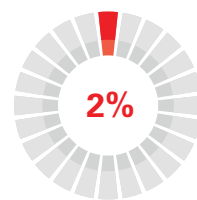
Code team or rapid response team communication



Having a unified view of the patient when addressing communication across the care team



Not sure



Other

Digging a little deeper, we asked about the goals embedded in contact center strategies, particularly as they related to process improvement. This gave us a picture of the variety of processes and functions that hospitals are asking of their contact center.

Integrating new devices and managing on-call schedules led the way, followed by **communication between the contact center and the care team**. You can see the wide variety of goals included, a sign that contact centers are critical to carrying out hospital communication priorities.



Case Study: Centralizing and Upgrading a Contact Center

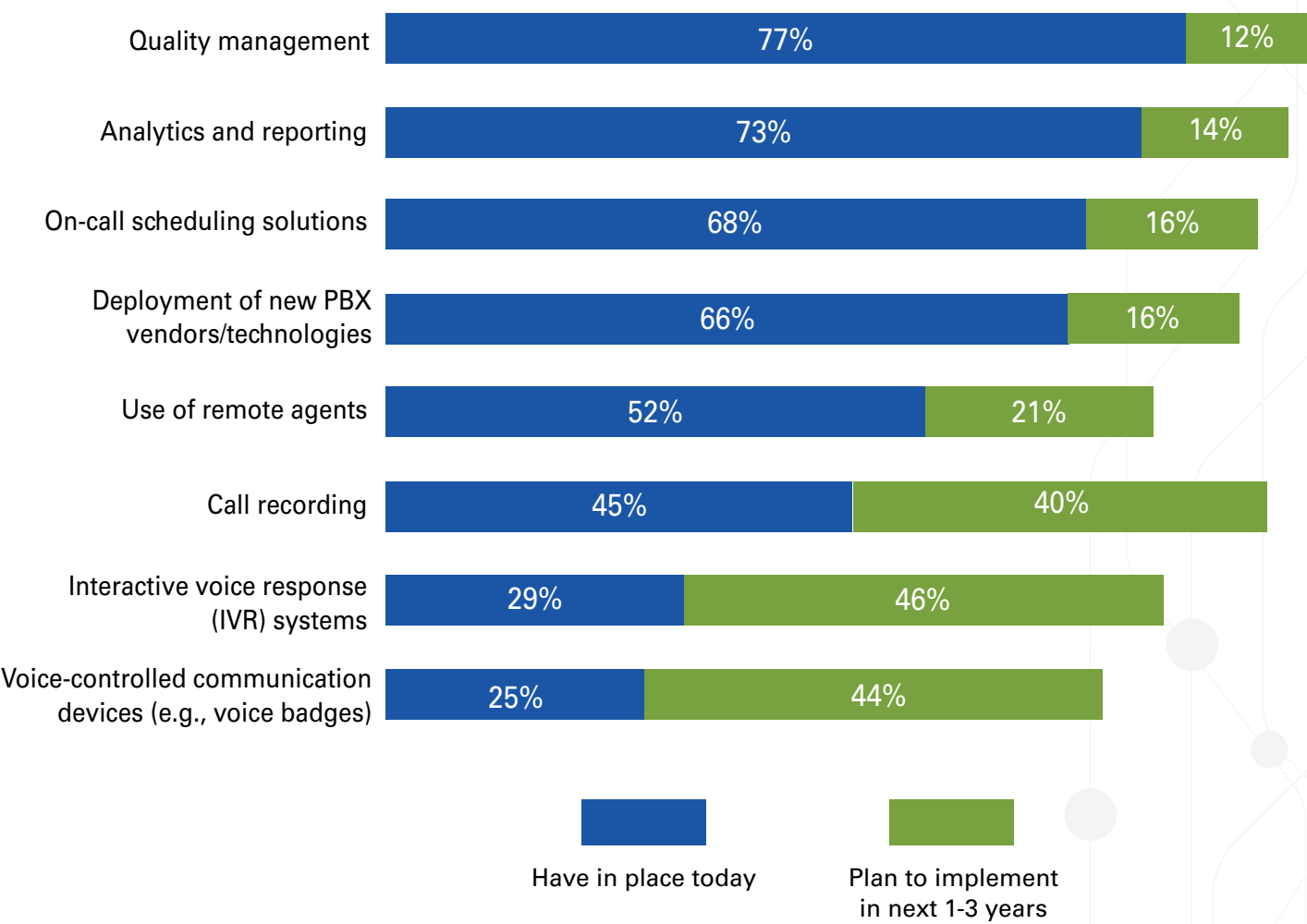
By centralizing its contact center and expanding its functions, one healthcare system has seen improved communication among caregivers and increased physician satisfaction. Learn how the McLaren Northern Michigan contact center has had a positive effect on patient care, and simultaneously reinforced its value to clinicians and other key stakeholders.

[See how they did it»](#)

WHICH SOLUTIONS AND DEVICES ARE HOSPITALS USING?

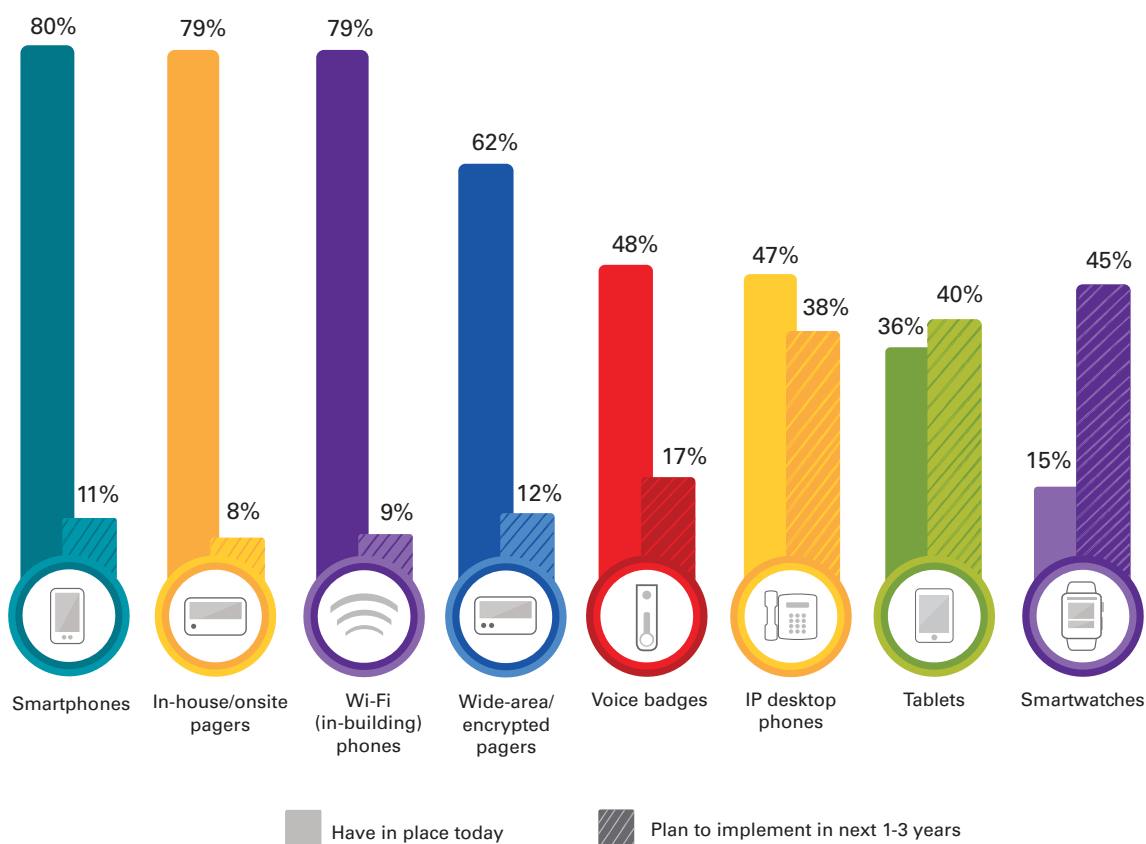
Healthcare organizations are continually evaluating their needs. That’s why we wanted a snapshot of solutions our respondents have in place today for their contact centers, as well as what they’re planning to implement in the next 1-3 years.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SOLUTIONS DOES YOUR HOSPITAL USE TO ENSURE THE SUCCESS OF YOUR CONTACT CENTER?



Quality management got the highest response for the monitoring method currently in place, with **analytics and reporting** a close second. To us, these responses demonstrate how contact centers are playing a diverse role in organizational success today, beyond the traditional “answer and transfer” tasks of the past. The data also demonstrates the wide range of contact center solutions in place for a majority of survey respondents—each hospital uses multiple solutions. After the top two solutions, **call recording** had the most respondents (in total) currently using or planning to implement in the next 1-3 years.

AS PART OF YOUR CONTACT CENTER STRATEGY AND OVERALL HEALTHCARE COMMUNICATION PROCESSES, WHICH DEVICES DO CONTACT CENTER STAFF USE TO CARRY OUT THEIR JOBS?



We also asked about the kinds of mobile devices that contact centers use in their work—those in use today, and those that are planned for the next few years. **Smartphones** led the pack, closely followed by onsite pagers and Wi-Fi phones.. And perhaps surprisingly, **smartwatches** were the distinct frontrunner of “plan to use” devices to be adopted in the next 1-3 years.

The increasing use of advanced devices might indicate the need for improved security, efficiency, and capacity of data for clinical communications. For many hospitals, onsite pagers continue to be a popular communication option for non-clinical roles such as housekeeping, security and contact center staff.



The Use of Advanced Mobile Devices in Healthcare

In our 2018 Mobile Strategies survey, we asked healthcare professionals which types of mobile devices were supported by their organization (for use by clinical or non-clinical staff). Smartphones and Wi-Fi phones topped the list, followed by in-house/onsite pagers.


[See what else the survey revealed»](#)

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

We ended the survey with an open-end question, as we asked respondents to look into the future. Most of the opportunities for improvements centered broadly on better communications. We broke down their specific responses into three categories.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS YOUR BIGGEST OPPORTUNITY FOR CONTACT CENTER IMPROVEMENTS OVER THE NEXT 3-5 YEARS?


Address consolidation of systems/internal duties and functions.



As healthcare mergers and acquisitions continue at a record-breaking pace⁴, consolidation of communications is a bigger issue than ever before. Many hospitals and health systems have been through or are contemplating mergers with other entities, carrying important implications for the contact center in merging communications as well.


Other respondents also considered “internal mergers.” One comment called for “the implementation of the contact center as a service to provide a centralized support model for reporting, quality, and workforce management to areas that resemble call centers, but lack traditional call center management experience.”

Implement new technologies, including artificial intelligence.



Responses in this category ranged from simply “improve technology/get more automated” to “the implementation of virtual assistants and improved speech analytics.” As one respondent noted, it’s becoming increasingly important for contact center staff to be technologically savvy—a skill whose importance will only grow over time.

Achieve two-way communication, between care teams and the EHR, as well as between care team members.



Many responses focused on the issues of improving data exchange and putting the EHR to better use. It’s clear to everyone that EHRs are a significant resource for data storage, as a recent Harris/Stanford Medicine poll⁵ documents, but lack the ability to act as a clinical tool to aid clinicians in improving patient care. Calls for interoperability fell into this category, including the need for “integration across all modalities” and requests for “real-time analytics.”

Ensuring “faster, seamless” communication among care team members was another opportunity cited. Assuring that the “right messages” are delivered to the “right devices and people” was mentioned by several respondents. Achieving this aim speeds responses to care team members, and thus may significantly improve patient care.

THE CONTACT CENTER AS A PATH TO TRANSFORMATION

This initial survey was intended to provide a snapshot about the state of hospital contact centers. As we conduct additional surveys, more data will help round out the picture, showing trends and building context. In the meantime, we can draw some lessons from the responses we received in this survey.

Healthcare organizations are well aware **they operate in the midst of relentless change**. Regulatory additions and subtractions, consolidations of healthcare entities, proliferation of technology, and a constantly mobile staff all contribute complexity to communication workflows. Many hospitals are asking: Can a contact center be the agent for transforming communications in a hospital or health system?



Many hospitals are asking: Can a contact center be the agent for transforming communications in a hospital or health system?

Over 60 percent of our respondents seem to answer that question favorably: They have a contact center strategy in place (almost 70 percent for three or more years) and nearly half of them call it an “enterprise transformation initiative.” In our view, that **raises the level of a contact center from “department” to “organizational change agent.”**

It’s clear from the survey that the transformations are not yet complete. Most respondents list an abundance of processes and issues that need continued attention, as well as plenty of future opportunities to be addressed. The number of disciplines and departments with a stake in the contact center is also sizeable, adding a layer of critical collaboration to the strategy. **The amount of investment—financially, and in improving staff and patient experience—is significant.** We’ll continue to ask for and report data through upcoming surveys as we follow the trends for the evolving state of contact centers.

References

¹http://www.hcahpsonline.org/globalassets/hcahps/survey-instruments/mail/july-1-2018-and-forward-discharges/2018_survey-instruments_english_mail.pdf

²<http://cloud.spok.com/EB-AMER-Contact-Center-Consolidation.pdf>

³<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/life-sciences-health-care/us-lshc-enterprise-contact-center-providers.pdf>

⁴<https://www.healthcare-informatics.com/news-item/report-hospital-ma-activity-hit-record-breaking-pace-2017>

⁵<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/doctors-call-for-overhaul-of-electronic-health-records-300659100.html>



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