spōk

2024 State of Healthcare Communications

Observations and insights about the intersection of technology, collaboration, and patient-centricity

Executive summary and key takeaways

In the latest iteration of the Spok healthcare communications report, you'll gain perspective on the different motivations, concerns, strategies, and solutions shaping and driving a new era of healthcare. The questions asked—and the insights gathered—provide context around the various circumstances and challenges facing U.S. health systems and the workforce within them, from frontline clinical workers to back-office IT support, all unified by the mission to provide excellent patient care.

Our 2024 report details current healthcare communication obstacles, the evolution of devices used to communicate across teams, how the workforce is navigating burnout, and what the future of healthcare can (and will) look like as technology advances.

Based on this year's results, one thing is clear: positive progress is happening all around us—and even more change is on the horizon as the intersection of technology, collaboration, and patient-centricity continues to shape the ways we work for the better.

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Five major takeaways from this year's survey:

1 **Ensuring patient safety and data security is critical.**

FINDINGS: The top two motivators for adopting new communication technology are patient safety and outcomes. Additionally, those who are "extremely concerned" about protected health information (PHI) being communicated via unsecure or personal communication tools increased by 10-percentage points.

IMPLICATION: This growing concern for both patient safety and data security is likely intensified by the rapid adoption of new tools, unfamiliarity with technology, and ongoing resource restraints.

2 **Tried-and-true communication devices hold their value.**

FINDINGS: While specific tools supported by health systems slightly ebb and flow, there's consistency with the most popular tools: smartphones reign supreme in 2024 (86%), and the majority (77%) of hospitals currently use pagers, primarily for their reliability over other communication methods.

IMPLICATION: A range of communication tools will likely always be in use across healthcare teams. As long as devices are safe, secure, and enable greater efficiency, workers will adapt and adopt new tools while still relying on tried-and-true solutions that consistently deliver value.

3 **Streamlined cross-team collaboration and communication is highly desired.**

FINDINGS: Within healthcare communication tools, the largest gap between current and preferred capabilities is a "care team collaboration" feature (38%), followed by critical test results (36%).

IMPLICATION: There is limited patience for or acceptance of systemic barriers that slow down teams and delay decision-making. Cross-team collaboration capabilities that remove silos and streamline information and data-sharing are critical to improving job satisfaction.

4 **Burnout rates are improving, but it needs to remain a priority.**

FINDINGS: 32% of healthcare workers report a great deal or considerable amount of burnout, down 10-percentage points from last year. Those who only experience slight burnout or "none at all" saw a 50% increase, meaning more people are feeling less stressed.

IMPLICATION: While some health system leaders are taking a more hands-on approach to reducing stress, there's still ample room for improvement. More attention, greater support, and better solutions can help keep the momentum up if leaders remain focused on addressing burnout.

5 **Artificial intelligence is cause for hope—and concern.**

FINDINGS: Enhanced communication tools for healthcare teams (64%) and speech recognition and natural language processing (NLP) capabilities (63%) are the two most recognized benefits of AI solutions. The main obstacles to using AI are data privacy and security and ethical and legal considerations.

IMPLICATION: As AI technologies are new and still in development, healthcare leaders need to have the proper safeguards in place, including an AI readiness team, governance framework, and worker training to ensure the people using the tools are informed and the patients receiving AI-supported care are safe.

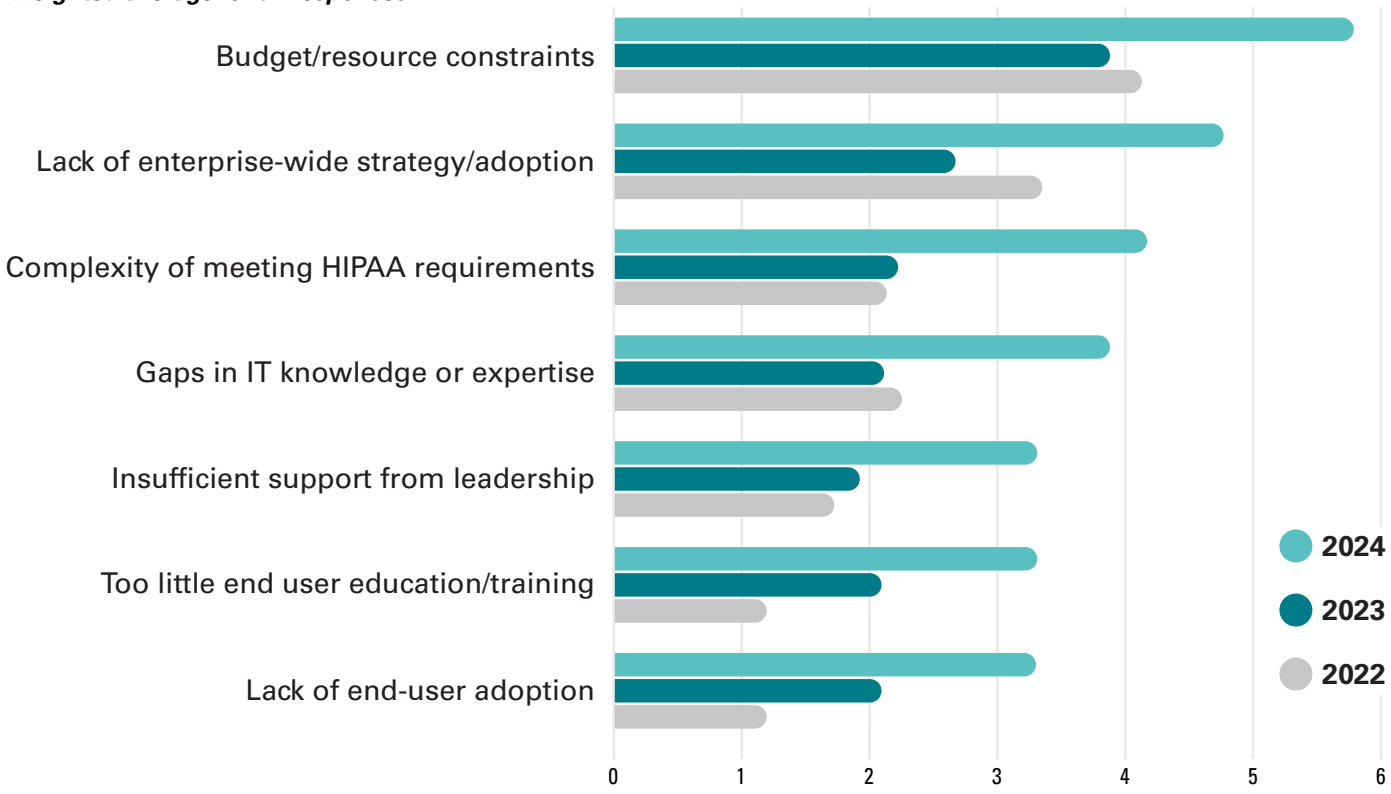
Healthcare communication challenges

Care teams not only want to communicate more easily with one another—they have to in order to improve patient experiences and outcomes. While seamless communication across care settings may seem simple or foundational, the reality is that it's quite difficult in many health systems. Too many barriers exist to sharing and receiving information, leading to long delays in receiving critical updates. These delays directly impact the patient, and they also add to worker stress and dissatisfaction.

It's time to overcome operational obstacles to streamlining communication, as the benefits of doing so are vast.

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

Weighted average for all responses



The weighted scores from 2023 to 2024 show a significant increase in every perceived obstacle to advancing hospital communications, with a renewed focus on budget and resource constraints as the most pressing concern.

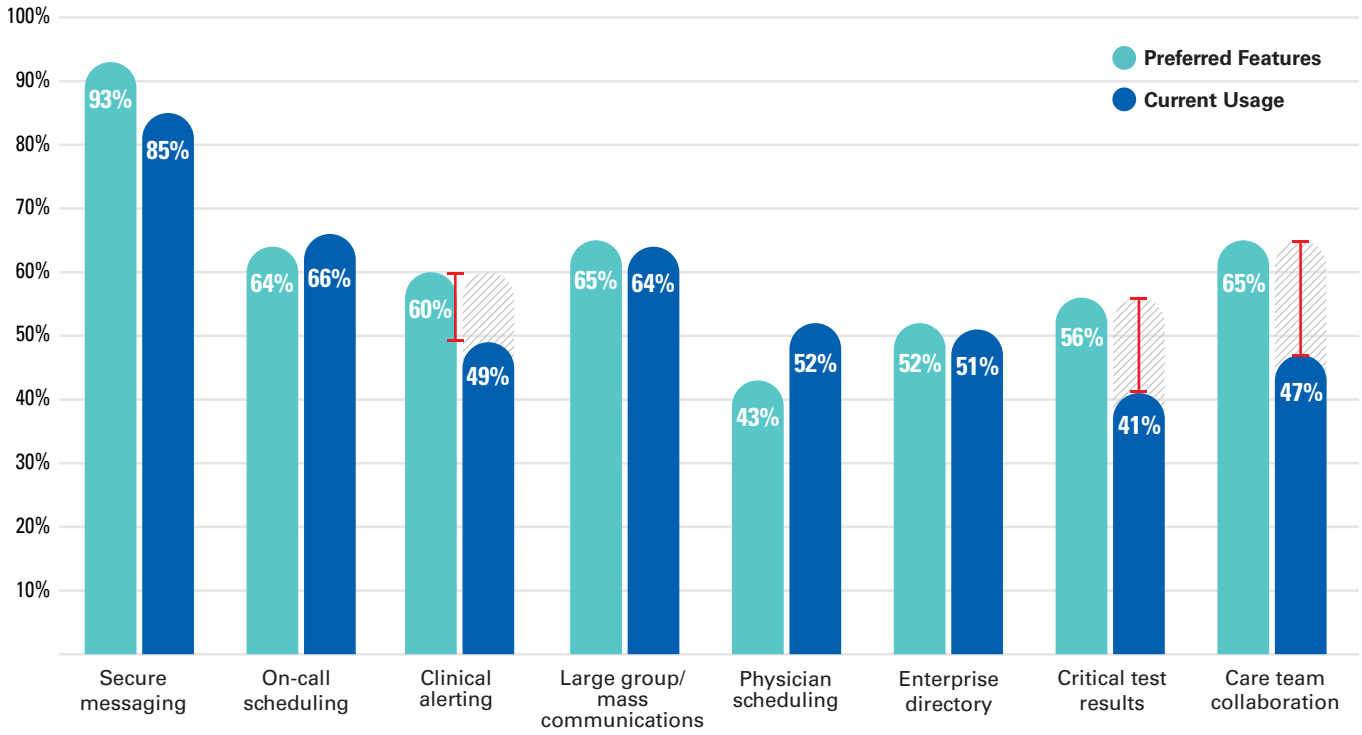
The lack of an enterprise-wide strategy and the complexity of meeting HIPAA requirements follow, reaffirming the need for a cohesive, compliant approach to adopting and advancing technology within the healthcare ecosystem. The uptick in the "gaps in IT knowledge and expertise" obstacle highlights the urgent need for more robust training and education so that users feel confident navigating new solutions and platforms.

The significant increase across all obstacles over the last year may also signal greater awareness from clinical and administrative leaders about their health system's technology strategy, particularly where the gaps exist in discussing versus deploying new technologies.

Budget and resource constraints remain the biggest obstacle with ***concerns increasing by 50% year-over-year.***

Other areas of opportunity include shaping an enterprise-wide strategy, solving for compliance complexity, and closing gaps in IT knowledge.

Clinical communication and collaboration (CC&C) platform feature preferences versus the features currently in use



Nearly all (95%) survey respondents indicated that they have a CC&C platform. For the second year, the highest priority feature is secure messaging, with roughly 93% indicating its importance. This further highlights the seriousness of meeting compliance requirements, as noted in responses about perceived obstacles.

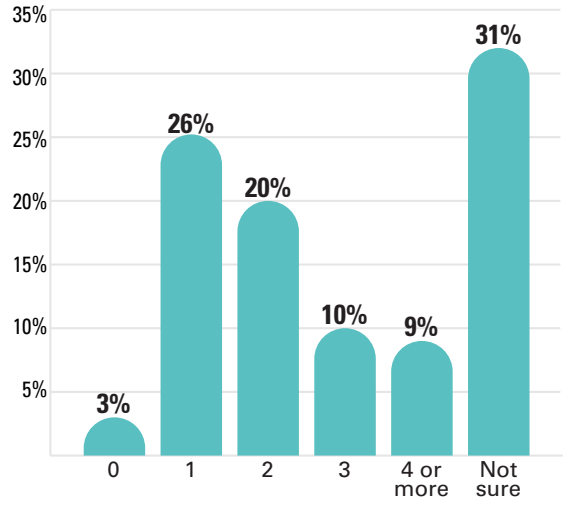
Bridging the gaps

The desire for "large group communication" and "care team collaboration" features are the second and third most preferred capabilities, with "on-call scheduling" as a close fourth. Each feature enables streamlined communication across clinical and administrative teams, allowing everyone to make faster, more informed, and confident decisions. Yet, care team collaboration is one of the most significant gaps (38%) between current and preferred capabilities, highlighting an opportunity for clinical and IT leadership to seek solutions supporting cross-team collaboration.

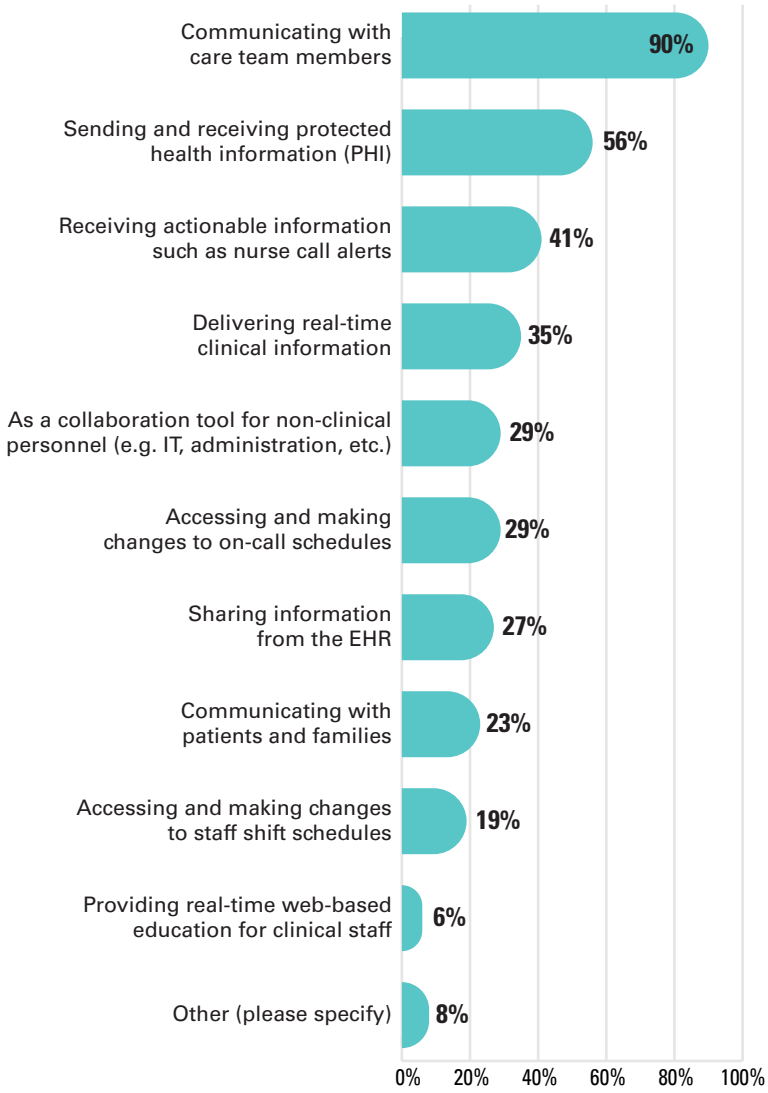
A "care team collaboration" feature is the largest gap (38%) between current and preferred capabilities, followed by critical test results (36%).

The other most significant gaps align with last year's results: critical test results (36%) and clinical alerting (22%) capabilities. While many see the value of these clinical functions, which help improve provider-patient relationships and experiences, organizations are delayed in successfully integrating or using these features. Taking action to close these gaps will allow health systems to better serve their clinicians, staff, and patients.

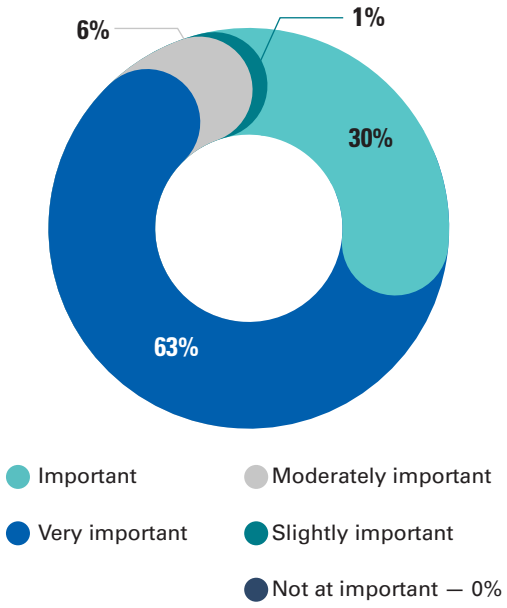
Number of secure texting apps used for clinical communications



How secure texting apps are used



How important secure texting apps are for managing clinical communications

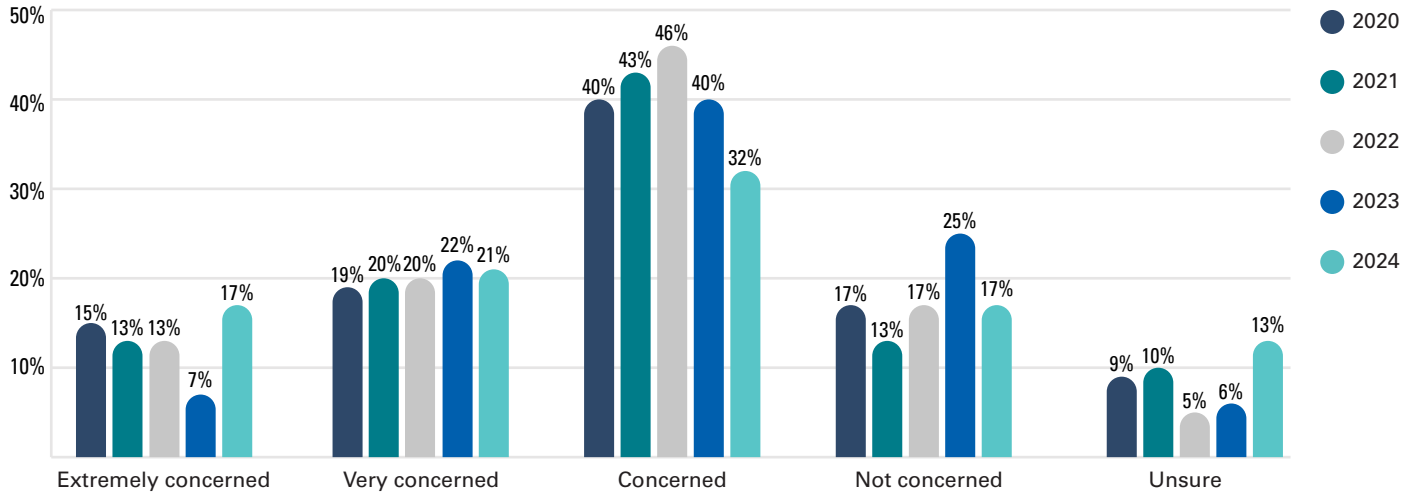


All eyes on security

Nearly 63% of respondents view secure texting apps as “very important” to managing clinical communications. These apps are primarily used for communicating with care team members (90%), sending and receiving PHI (56%), and receiving actionable information, such as nurse call alerts (41%).

While 26% of respondents have one secure texting app available to them, a surprising 31% are unsure how many secure texting apps are in use within their health system. This is likely contributing to the growing anxiety around the security and handling of PHI and proprietary health system data.

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)?



There has been a significant increase in concern about the communication of PHI and other sensitive data via unsecured or personal communication tools. Those now 'extremely concerned' saw a 10-percentage point increase from 2023 to 2024, while those 'not concerned' experienced an 8-percentage point decrease.

This jump in concern is a significant reversal from the 2023 results, which signaled a growing trust in communication tools. Today's assumed distrust in new tools may be attributed to or enhanced by a variety of factors, such as:

1. **Rapid adoption:** Adopting new technologies too quickly can cause concern. The World Health Organization even warned that the 'meteoric' rise of technologies such artificial intelligence (AI) could impact patient safety if the appropriate precautions aren't taken and all risks aren't assessed before use.

2. **Tech unfamiliarity:** As new tools make their way into healthcare workflows, many have concerns about their safety and efficacy, particularly when they're unfamiliar with how the technology was developed and how it works. One survey of nurses showed deep distrust of AI, highlighting their top concerns of AI in healthcare as "lack of empathy and patient connection, job replacement, data security, regulation of emerging technologies and upskilling."

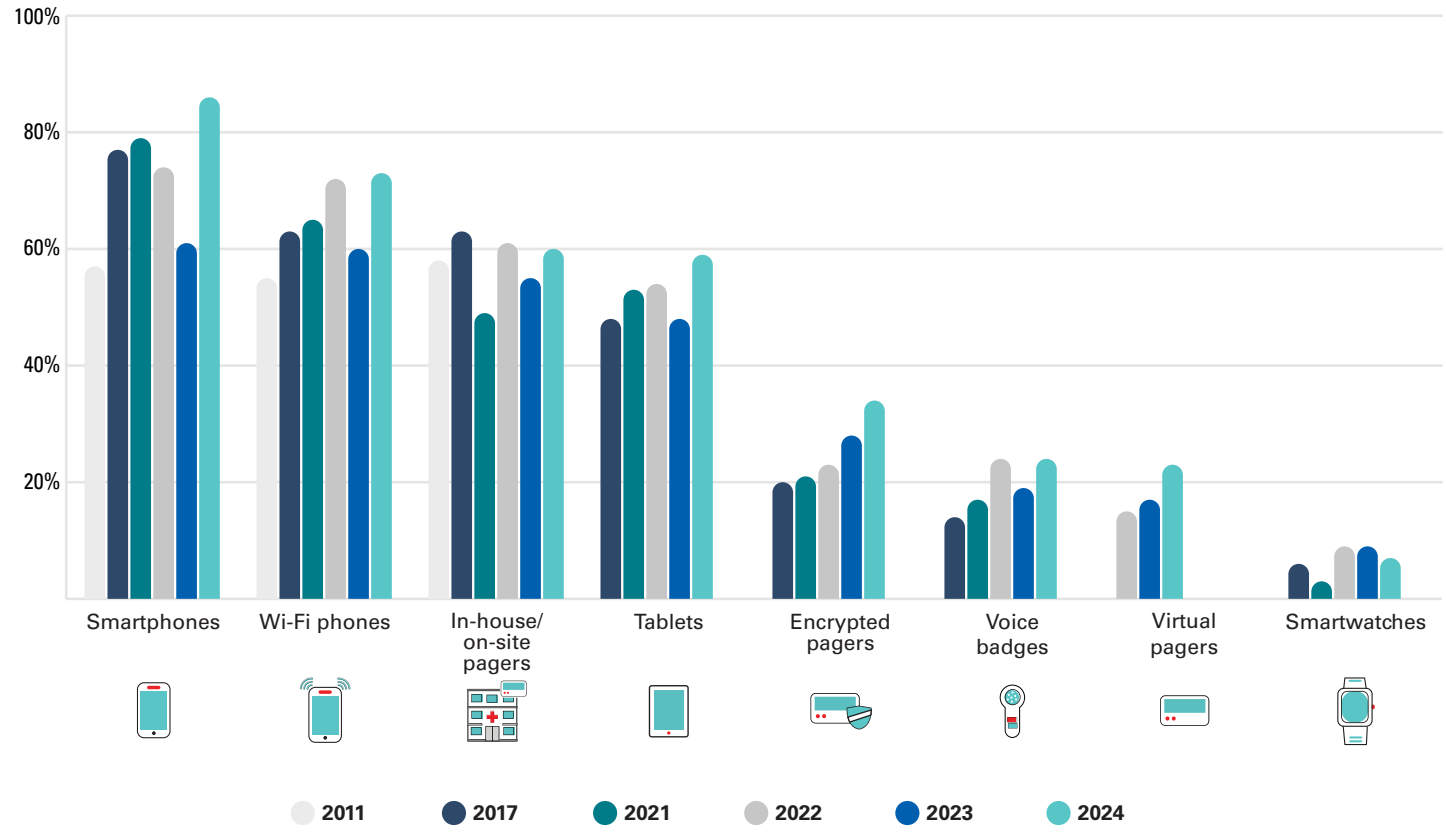
3. **Workforce and resources constraints:** The global shortage of "10.3 million healthcare professionals is expected to rise to 12.9 million by 2035." Many health systems are understandably turning to technology to improve their infrastructure and retain and recruit workers. Yet, if leaders move too quickly without thoroughly vetting or training workers on these tools, it could lead to safety concerns and increase distrust among medical professionals.

While these observations and insights might contribute to increased concerns, what's clear is the urgent need for clinical and IT leadership to communicate more effectively about the tools available for use and their associated security features. It's equally important to communicate about those tools that are not authorized for use to ensure everyone understands and follows protocol.

The evolution of healthcare communication devices

Over a decade ago, innovative mobility strategies led to a cautious but steady integration of smartphones and other Wi-Fi-enabled devices into clinical practices. Today, those same devices are the primary enablers and drivers of cross-team communication.

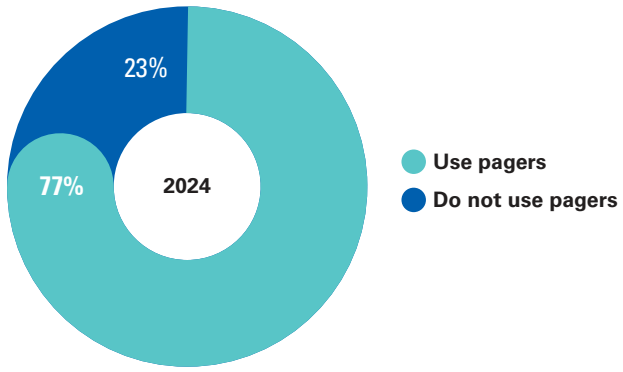
Types of mobile devices supported by your health system



Smartphones and Wi-Fi phones continue to be the most used devices, followed by in-house pagers and tablets. Smartphones, Wi-Fi phones, and tablets all saw a considerable increase in types of devices supported this year.

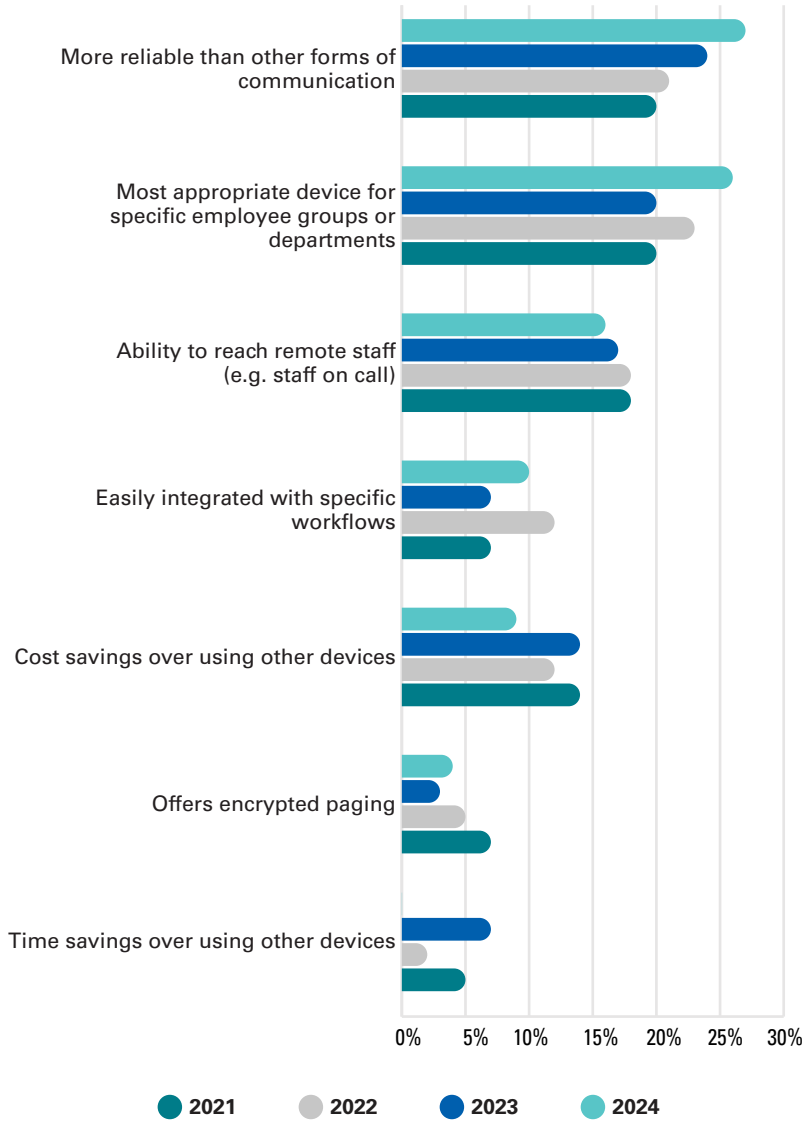
Pagers: The tried-and-true communication device

Health systems that use pagers



As a reliable communication tool, pagers continue to deliver consistent value: 77% of surveyed health systems use pagers. Those who don't use them may rely on smartphones and tablets instead – the other most popular devices in health systems.

The primary reason pagers are still maintained



For the second consecutive year, hospitals' primary motivator for maintaining pagers is their reliability over other communication methods. There's also a greater emphasis (6-percentage point increase) this year on pagers being more appropriate for specific roles within hospitals. Other reasons like the ability to reach remote staff and cost savings decreased this year, while pagers easily integrating with specific workflows increased as a motivator by 3-percentage points.

The takeaway:
While new advanced technologies may sound promising, tried-and-true solutions like pagers continue to drive value and hold their place in our modern healthcare landscape.

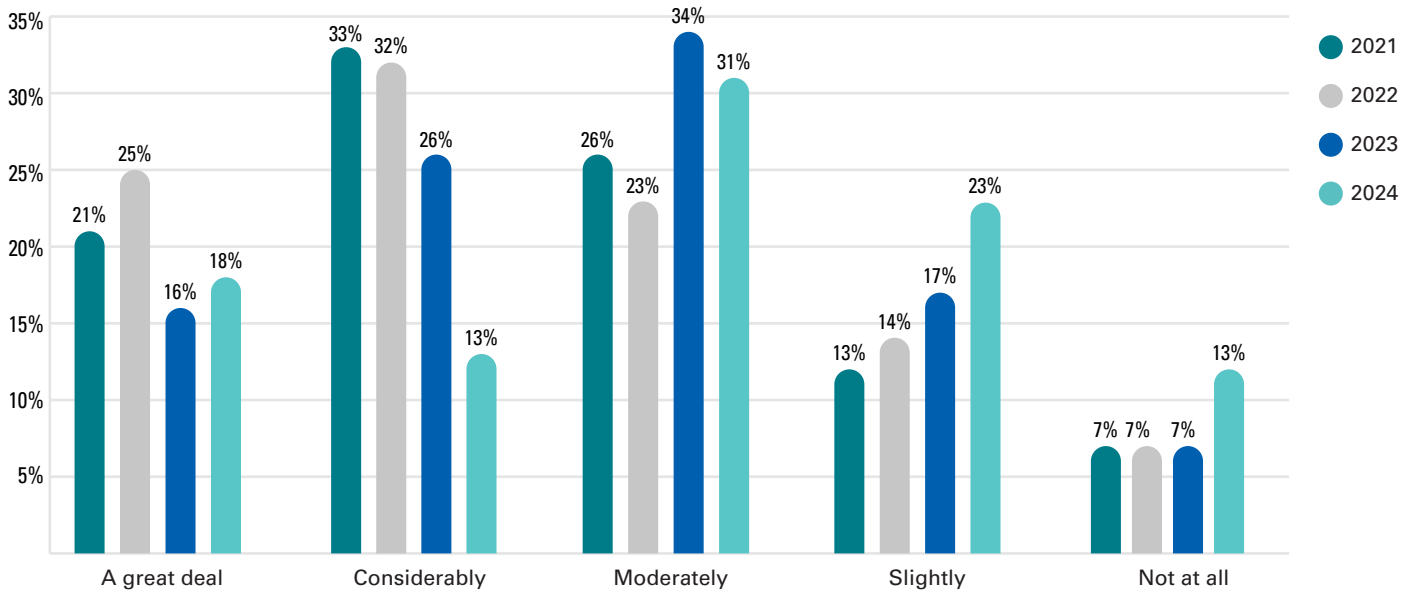
How the industry is addressing burnout

The burnout crisis within healthcare organizations continues to hold steady. Whether due to long work hours, limited capacity, or ineffective workflows, burnout doesn't only impact medical professionals themselves but also the patients they care for and the systems they support. When one colleague feels emotionally and mentally drained, potentially leading to reduced hours or leaving their job, it creates a domino effect: even longer hours and less capacity for their colleagues who stay—until they're faced with the same decision.

Fortunately, this year's survey results indicate a slight improvement in burnout and stress as leaders start taking a more hands-on approach to addressing challenges. Yet technology-specific stressors remain prevalent, with many respondents recommending enhancements such as increasing workflow efficiencies to help reduce workplace tension and stress and, even more than that, creating a more streamlined, efficient ecosystem that better supports workers so they can focus on their highest priority: delivering quality patient care.

Despite improvement, this is not a time to ease up. Healthcare leaders have an obligation to correct the burnout epidemic impacting their workforces. The only way forward is to acknowledge the problem, listen to the specific issues causing avoidable stress, and take action by offering more and better resources to do their jobs effectively.

To what degree have you <u>personally</u> experienced feelings of work-related stress and/or lost satisfaction/sense of efficacy that might contribute to burnout in your work?

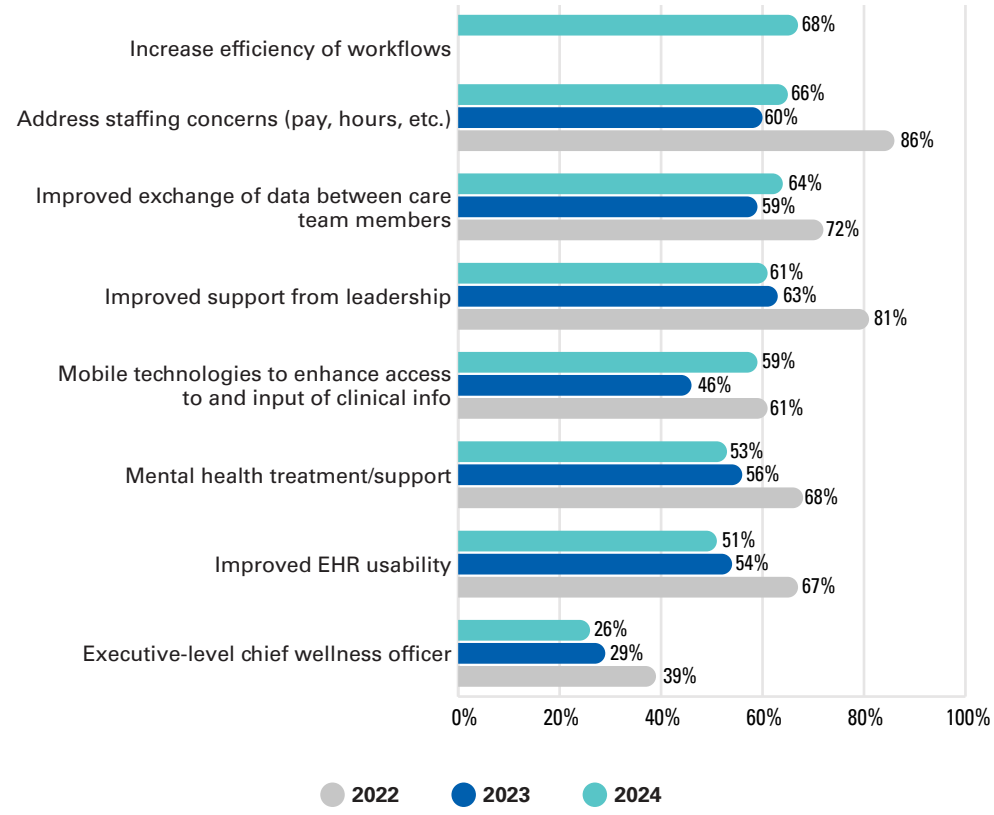


> "Burnout costs the U.S. health care system $4.6 billion a year, largely due to physician turnover and work-hour reductions. For every physician who leaves due to burnout, the related cost to the organization is $500,000 to $1 million or more depending on the specialty."
>
> AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

This year, 32% of healthcare workers report a great deal or considerable amount of burnout, down 10-percentage points from last year. Conversely, those who only experienced slight burnout or "none at all" shifted by 24% last year to 36%, a 12-percentage point improvement. This decline mirrors a recent survey from the American Medical Association, which saw physician burnout rates drop below 50% for the first time since 2020.

Helpful strategies for addressing the risk of burnout

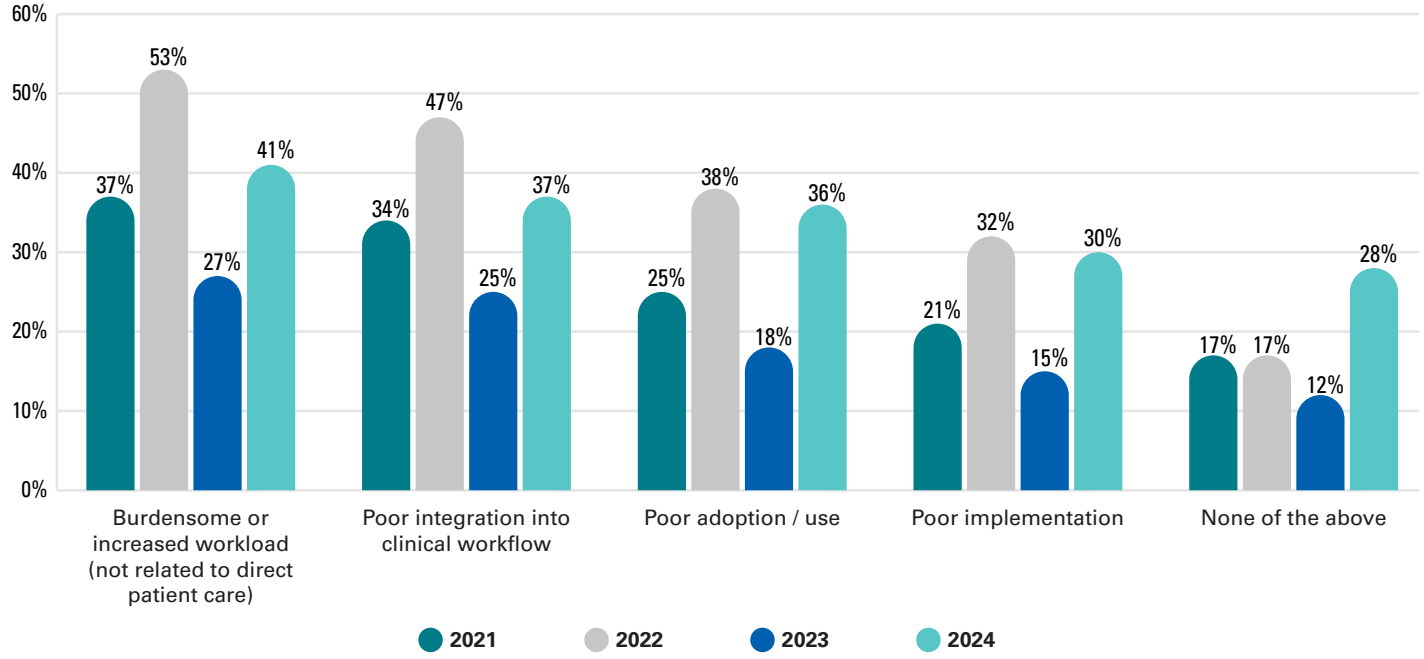
Percent of respondents who identified the strategies as "extremely" or "very helpful" in addressing the risk of burnout



A new addition to the list—increasing workflow efficiencies—claimed the top spot for strategies that can help mitigate burnout, followed closely by addressing staffing concerns and improving the exchange of data between care team members. Mobile technologies that enhance access to and input of clinical data also saw a 13-percentage point increase from 2023.

These highly desired strategies highlight the impact of existing communication and data-sharing barriers that slow teams down as they try to piece together the information needed to make informed, timely decisions.

Factors that contribute to the risk of alarm fatigue or clinician burnout, as it pertains to clinical tools and technology



While 2023 results saw a decline in technology-specific setbacks that cause stress, 2024 saw a significant uptick in every factor. As more technologies and tools are introduced to existing workflows, there needs to be an increased focus not only on what those solutions can achieve but also exactly how teams should use them to experience the most value. Proper integration, implementation, and adoption are critical. Otherwise, the purpose and promise of these tools will fall short.

"Burnout within healthcare cannot be taken lightly. It's a systemic issue that has far-reaching implications for both the people experiencing intense stress and the patients they care for and support. Safeguarding the well-being of medical professionals is of utmost importance, and though it's promising to see improvements in burnout rates, there's still ample room for improvement. More attention, greater support, and better solutions can help keep the momentum up if we, as an industry, remain focused on solving this issue."

TIM TINDLE
CHIEF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY OFFICER, SPOK

The future of healthcare communication

> “ By investing in technology and talent to augment human work, health systems can create a *more efficient* and *empathetic experience* for both patients and workers.”
>
> DELOITTE INSIGHTS

If the promise of new tools and technologies entering the marketplace comes to fruition, the future of healthcare communication will look vastly different than where we are today. We’re already seeing strides in streamlining communication workflows, including enabling bi-directional data exchange that allows every team involved in the patient experience to move faster and with more confidence, and we anticipate more augmentation to manual, time-consuming processes to come.

Exactly how health system professionals feel about the future of healthcare and where they want to see the industry go is constantly evolving. However, despite the understandable concerns and hesitations about how capabilities and experiences may change, there’s an industry-wide acknowledgment that change does need to occur, with many starting to embrace technological advancements that will enable informed decision-making, enhance provider experiences, and improve patient outcomes.

The rise of AI

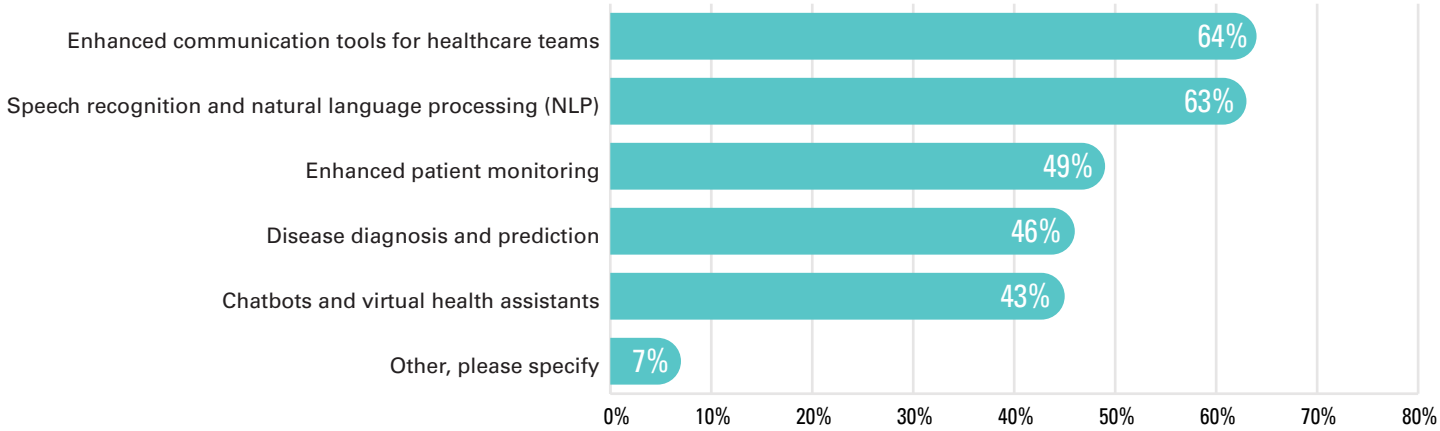
Artificial intelligence, in particular, continues to garner interest from health systems. From patients experiencing increased speed to diagnosis thanks to enhanced medical imaging interpretation… to clinical staff having more time to focus on quality care delivery as time-consuming administrative tasks like clinical documentation become automated… to contact center operators being empowered to improve their response and transfer times with support from interactive speech technology, enhancing communication and coordination across the entire health system: the benefits of using AI are vast.

LEARN MORE ABOUT AI IN OUR EBOOK

The Practical Guide to AI in Healthcare

DOWNLOAD NOW

How AI can benefit healthcare



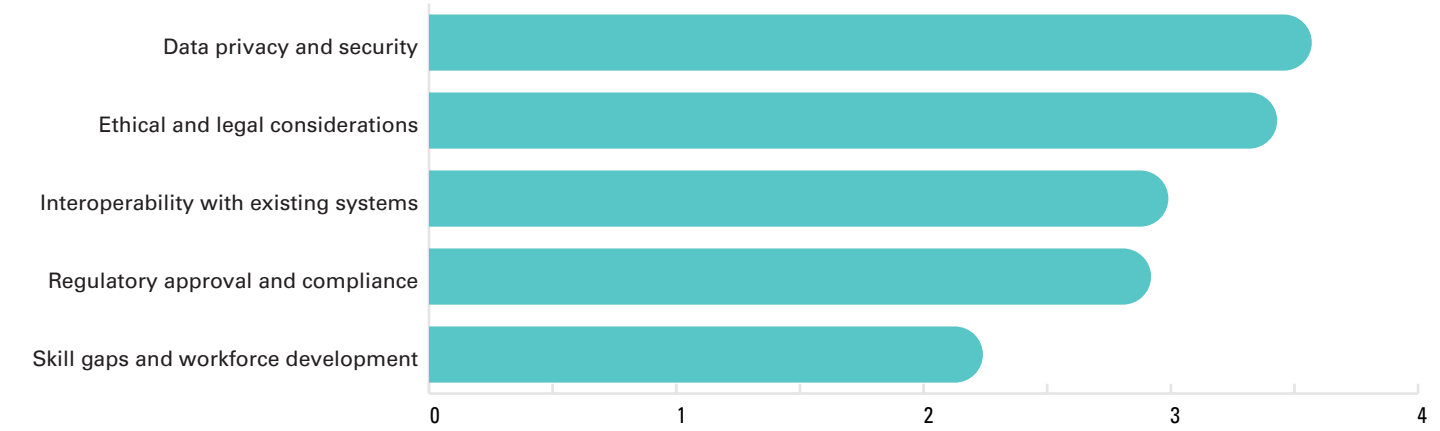
The two most recognized benefits of AI solutions are enhanced communication tools for healthcare teams (64%) and speech recognition and natural language processing (NLP) capabilities (63%).

NLP is a form of machine learning that uses speech recognition, text analysis, and translation capabilities to analyze natural human speech. Its goal is to comprehend text and language like people do. In healthcare, NLP applications can create, understand, and classify clinical reports and published research and transcribe provider-patient interactions in real-time, significantly expediting the clinical documentation process.

Enhanced patient monitoring, disease diagnosis and prediction, and chatbots and virtual health assistants are perceived as (nearly) equal benefits. As more success stories and use cases come to light for these capabilities, we anticipate they'll rise in priority, sparking excitement for the future of AI in healthcare.

Obstacles to overcome in order to use AI

Weighted average for all responses

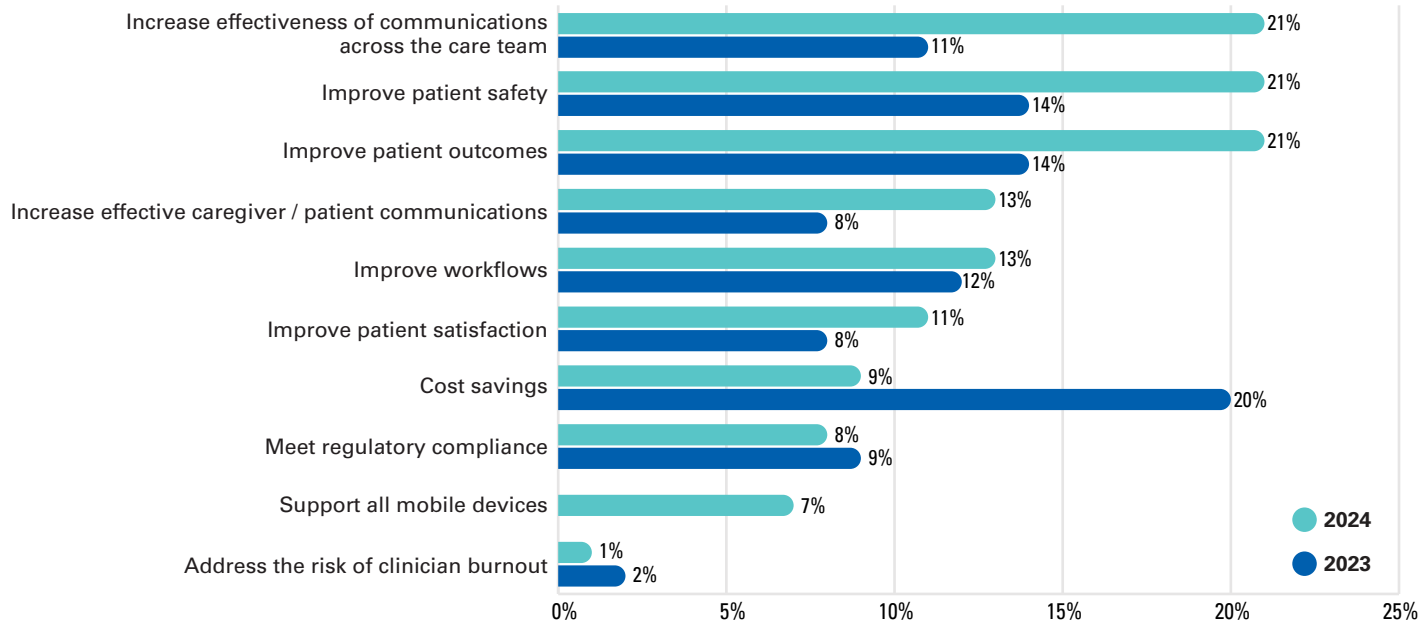


Unsurprisingly, given the increased concern in this year's results about privacy, respondents said the main obstacle to using AI is data privacy and security, followed closely by ethical and legal considerations. As many of these technologies are still in development, with new iterations frequently launched, these concerns are valid. It's important to note using AI tools improperly could have a significant impact on health outcomes and jobs and would likely have significant financial implications for the health system.

To overcome obstacles and avoid known and unknown risks, healthcare leaders should start with proven, practical use cases and build from there. Establishing an AI readiness team and governance framework will also help safeguard the organization, the people using the tools, and the patients receiving AI-supported care.

Motivators for advancing communication technology strategies: Why and when

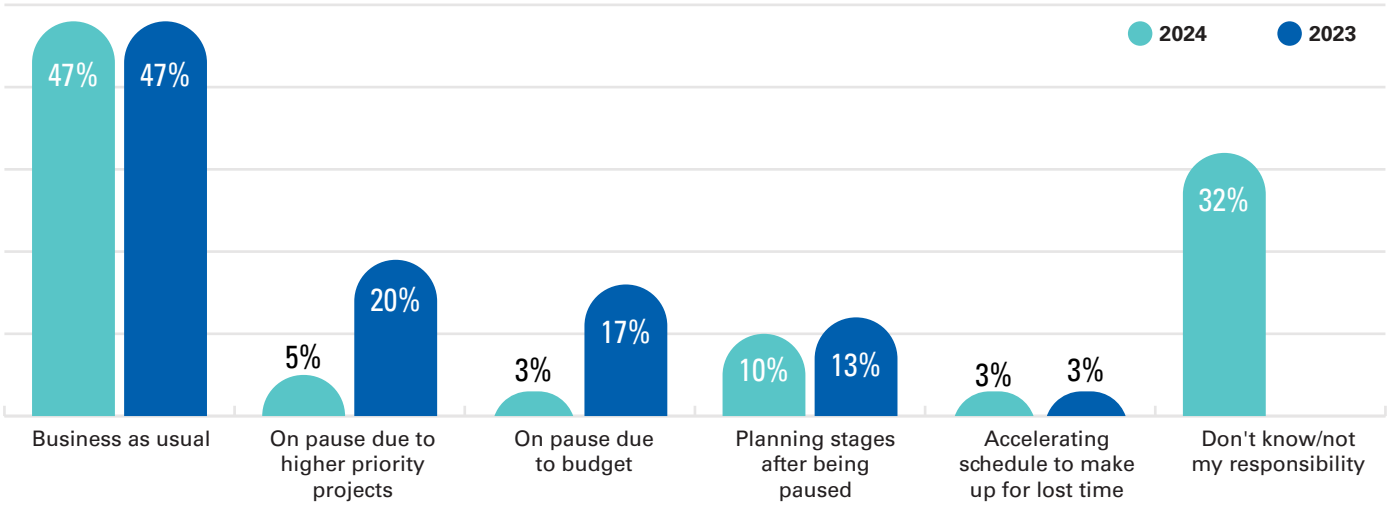
Motivation for using new/different communication technology in your hospital



"Improving patient safety and outcomes" and "increasing communication effectiveness across the care team" significantly rose in rank as motivators. "Cost savings" decreased by 11 percentage points, while the top two motivators – "patient safety and outcomes" – increased by 7 percentage points, and "increasing communication" nearly doubled. "Increasing effective caregiver and patient communications" also increased by 5-percentage points.

These results align with burnout indicators that signal a desire for more streamlined communication capabilities and more efficient workflows. Respondents are clearly focused on the impact new tools and technologies have on direct patient care and their workflows.

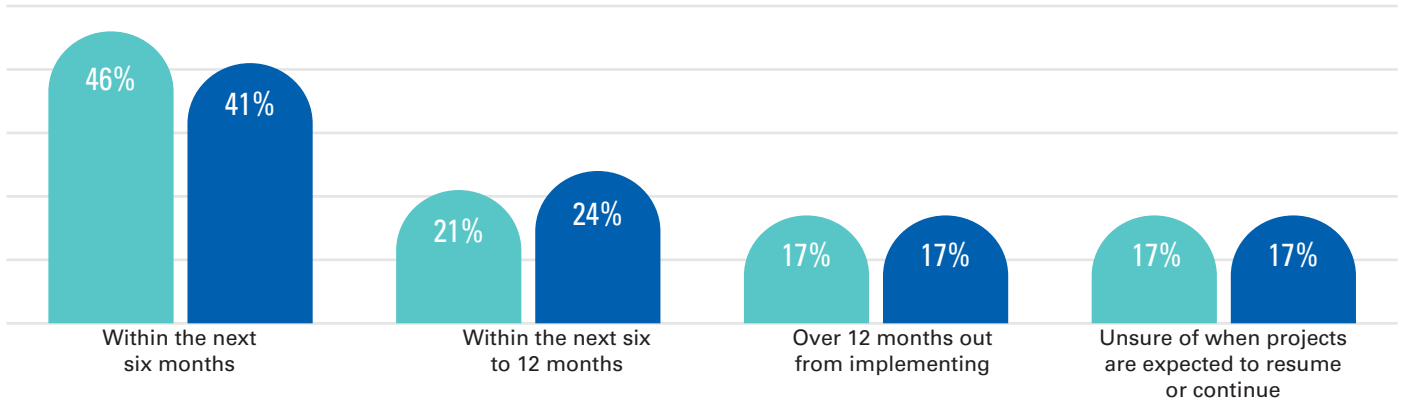
What is the current status of IT communication projects in your hospital/health system?



"Business as usual" projects remain the same from 2023 to 2024, while many respondents (32%) don't know the status of IT communication projects and/or aren't responsible for them. While frontline or IT workers may not be directly involved in launching a new IT communication solution, healthcare leaders should consider communicating the technology strategy, key milestones to be aware of, and what to expect more broadly so all stakeholders feel more informed.

Notably, Deloitte research shows a correlation between burnout and lack of trust in leadership: "only 45% of frontline clinicians trust their organization's leadership to do what's right for the patients, and even fewer, 23%, trust them to do what's right for the workers." Assuming leaders are adopting new technologies to improve workflows and patient outcomes, there's an opportunity to transparently communicate the "why" and "how" to gain buy-in and improve trust amongst those eventually impacted by new IT communication tools.

Expected timing to resume or continue implementing IT communication projects



Two-thirds (67%) of IT communication projects are expected to resume or continue within the next six to 12 months, indicating an urgency to deploy new tools and, perhaps, a collective optimism about what IT communication projects aim to achieve across healthcare operations.

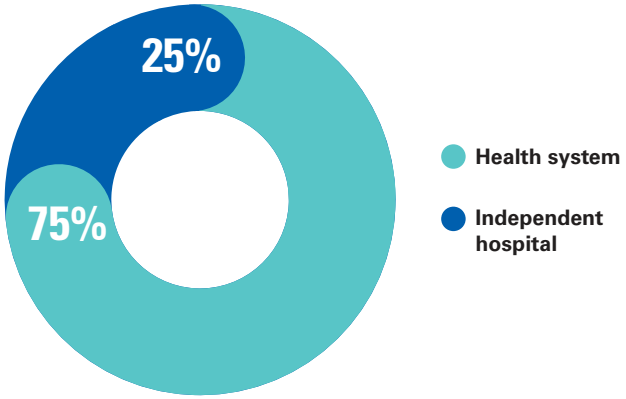
Reflections

The healthcare industry is at a pivotal point, ready to embrace much-needed change with a workforce prepared to adopt new tools and technologies that foster team collaboration and enhance care quality and delivery. Despite the challenges that lie ahead, such as safety and security concerns and the complexities of advancing technology strategies, it's clear the industry is committed to evolving and advancing healthcare for the betterment of frontline workers, operational support, and the patients they're dedicated to supporting.

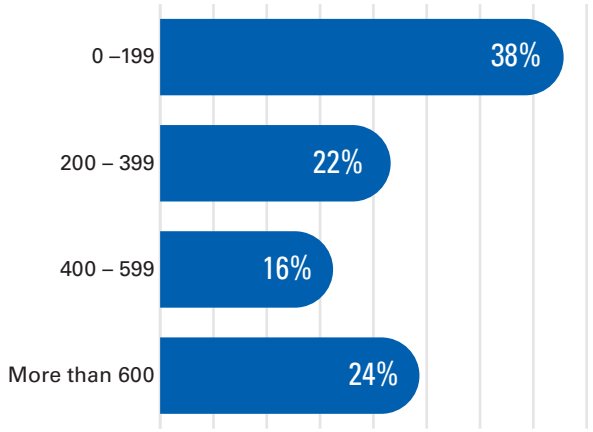
It's time to embrace the optimism, lean into the challenges, and drive forward new solutions and strategies that improve healthcare delivery and operations. Stay informed, thoroughly assess and test new tools and technologies, and regularly communicate how IT communication strategies will impact the workforce—this is how you'll navigate the evolving landscape easily and confidently.

Survey demographics

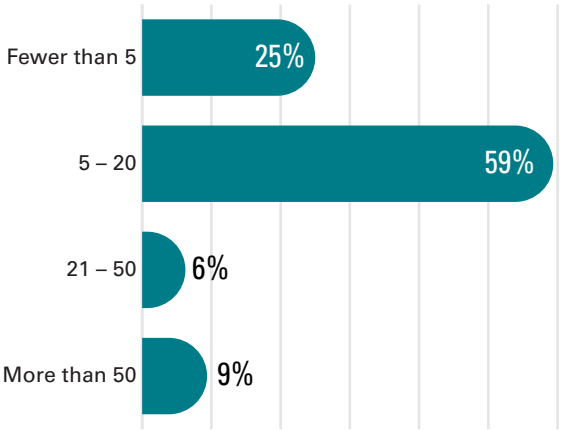
ORGANIZATION TYPE:



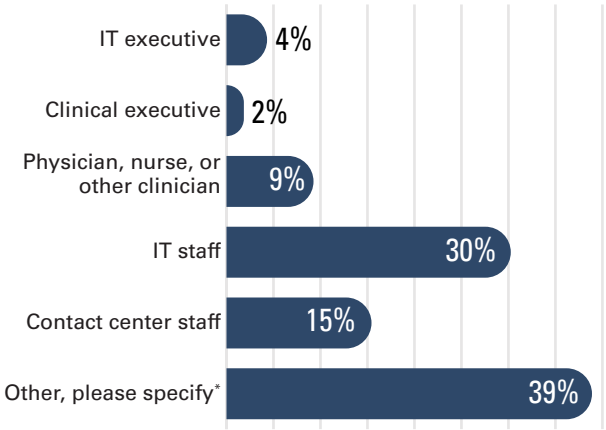
NUMBER OF BEDS IN THE HOSPITAL OR HEALTH SYSTEM:



NUMBER OF HOSPITALS IN HEALTH SYSTEM:



TITLE IN ORGANIZATION:



*"Other" titles included administrative roles, pharmacy and lab specialists, and roles related to operations, communications, and patient services.

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