

Six ways to optimize your EHR

FOR BETTER CLINICAL COMMUNICATION



Introduction

Electronic health records (EHRs) have proliferated across the U.S., enabling clinicians to make well-informed treatment decisions [more quickly and safely](#) using more complete patient information. While EHRs are excellent repositories of patient data, and are able to transform that data to actionable information, they aren't ideal for proactively sharing that actionable information in time-sensitive scenarios.

This eBook will explore why EHRs don't solve the challenges of clinical communication and collaboration, and outline the benefits of a unified communication platform for all members of your organization.

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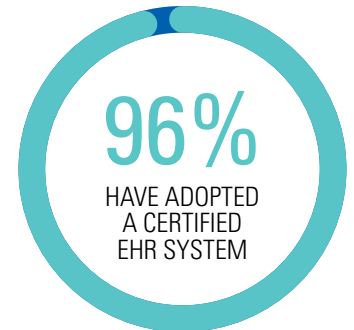
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Unified communication platform checklist



The role of the EHR

EHR use has permeated nearly all hospitals in the U.S.: according to the most recent report on the subject from [the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology](#), 96% of general acute care hospitals have adopted a certified EHR system. Yet, while EHR adoption is nearly universal, there is still much work to be done, and many hospitals and health systems are engaged in ongoing optimization efforts.



Where EHRs excel:

EHRs are invaluable when it comes to care delivery and excel in a number of areas. They are tremendous repositories of clinical data and are fantastic order entry systems. EHRs help prevent duplicate testing and provide prescribing alerts of possible medication allergies and drug interactions. They also have rules engines, which send warnings when patients are past due for certain tests or vaccinations based on their age and medical history.

Where EHRs struggle:

As information warehouses, EHRs are passive. Even though they issue clinical alerts, these alerts remain undetected until a provider logs into the EHR and opens that particular patient's medical record. It's only then that the warning or clinical alert can be viewed. There are many times when messages, alerts, and warnings are critical and time-sensitive. It's not enough to stumble upon an alert.

EHRs need clinical communication tools which can transform the data stored within them into actionable messages and alerts. EHRs were simply not designed to address a critical area of care delivery: clinical communication and care collaboration.

THE QUESTION IS:

How can you optimize your EHR to solve clinical communication challenges?

EHRs are adopting communication tools

EHRs have actually expanded the communication channels available to clinicians. The most popular options support secure email, messages within the EHR (which can be attached to patient records), and pop-ups or general broadcast notices. Some have even branched out into real-time secure chat applications, but these are only accessible while signed into the EHR.

While EHRs provide ways for clinicians to communicate, for the most part, this communication is asynchronous. It can be difficult to get real-time feedback to clarify messages. There's also no way to escalate communication, confirm that the recipient actually received the message, or communicate with care team members who don't have access to the EHR or aren't currently signed into the system. When clinicians need immediate responses, as is often the case in coordinating patient care, clinical communication within the confines of the EHR is not the best solution.



**4.5 HOURS
EVERY DAY**

on EHR tasks

The EHR's role in clinician burnout

The administrative burden of EHRs has been a topic of conversation and study as the healthcare industry works to find the right balance between the benefits of the technology and the time required of busy clinicians. In fact, recent reports found that physicians spend [4.5 hours every day on EHR tasks](#).

To address rising clinician burnout levels, the American Medical Informatics Association (AMIA) announced in March 2022 the next steps for the [AMIA 25x5 initiative](#). This collaborative effort, alongside Vanderbilt University and Columbia University, seeks to reduce the documentation burden on clinicians to 25% of current requirements by 2025. More effective communication is a complementary effort that can further optimize clinician time.



Filling the communication gap

While the communication channels in the EHR serve specific functions, they cannot serve all purposes. This is where a unified communication platform that complements the EHR comes into play. More healthcare leaders are realizing that both systems — the EHR and a complementary communication platform — are necessary.

In the healthcare environment, people and technology need to communicate flawlessly to speed response times and keep safety and satisfaction at the forefront. A robust, fully integrated healthcare communication platform fills the collaboration gaps within the EHR by connecting care teams and systems to improve workflows and deliver information quickly and securely into the hands of those who need to act on it.

Let's take a look at six specific ways a unified communication platform can extend the value of the EHR in your organization.

1 Support all members of the care team (clinical and non-clinical)

When it comes to care team collaboration, one of the downfalls of the EHR is that most don't actually support all necessary members. The only people who have access to the communication tools within the EHR are those who possess login credentials to the system, which may exclude some key roles. A true unified communication platform supports all roles and people within the health system, even if they don't have access to the EHR.



This broader group often includes staff members from transport, environmental services, food services, and so on — all of the people who touch a patient's experience. As care teams grow to be larger and more diverse, it's increasingly important that communication encompass everyone on the entire spectrum of care. A unified communication platform provides messaging tools not just for one or two stakeholders, but for everyone involved with caring for the patient.



2 Provide an enterprise-wide directory to serve as the source of truth

When contact and schedule information is not readily accessible, or it becomes inaccurate because it's stored and maintained by multiple departments, critical messages related to patient care can go to the wrong person. At best, this is inefficient. At worst, this could be life-threatening if the communication breakdown causes a delay in treatment or prevents fast response.

A unified communication platform makes the contact information of all staff readily accessible by maintaining a single, enterprise-wide, web-based directory that serves as the source of truth. This enables staff to log on anywhere, anytime to perform a variety of important updates to contact information, search the directory, and send important messages. By having one centralized source of accurate contact data for all roles across the health system, healthcare organizations are motivated to make sure it stays up to date, and they also have the ability to make available different types of information to different roles within the organization.

For example, perhaps physicians' home phone numbers are only listed for fellow physicians. Additionally, the directory can house more than just contact information: It can also include preferences. For instance, a physician may prefer to receive messages on her smartphone first, then escalate to her pager if she doesn't respond.

Once again, this is more inclusive than the directory contained within the EHR, which only lists the contact information for registered users. That information may not be current either (and as such, may not be a regularly referenced source by staff). If a physician or nurse needs to contact someone who is not in the EHR directory, they need to find another source to obtain that information — another system or a colleague. This wastes valuable time and can cause communication breakdowns. A single, enterprise-wide, web-based directory that is updated in real time prevents care team members from relying on multiple sources of contact information and helps connect them quickly to the person they need at the right moment.



3 Offer on-call schedule integration and clinician status

Similar to contact information, it's often critical that care team members can quickly find on-call schedule information so they reach out to a colleague who is on duty. EHR systems have the ability to integrate on-call data with Spok.

Many hospitals and health systems rely on spreadsheets, which may have multiple versions with conflicting information. Others use paper copies that become outdated soon after they're printed. Physician schedules are complex and change constantly. At best, a manual approach to scheduling is inefficient. At worst, it can adversely affect patient care.

If urgent requests or critical test results are sent to the wrong physician because contact information is incorrect, the result is a potential delay in treatment that could result in patient harm. In fact, The Doctors Group found [communication failures played a role in 27% of medical malpractice claims](#). CRICO discovered [communication issues were a factor in 1,744 deaths](#) over a four-year period, costing hospitals \$1.7 billion.

A centralized, web-based on-call schedule enables staff to reach on-duty providers by role around the clock using accurate contact information.





4 Support multiple communication devices

All of the large EHR vendors have released mobile apps, allowing EHR users to access information quickly from their mobile device instead of having to find a PC. Regardless of whether a health system supports a BYOD environment, it's important to allow flexibility in the devices used. All members of the care team should be able to access and manage critical information quickly without being logged into a desktop computer.

A true unified communication platform is multimodal and offers the flexibility care teams want and need. Support for secure messaging, voice, alarms, and alerts must span all end-user devices, including smartphones, pagers, and Wi-Fi phones. This enables the full care team to receive messages on their device of choice whether they're initiated by the operator, staff members via the web or smartphones, patient monitoring systems, or other sources.



5 Integrate with third-party systems

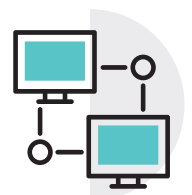
EHR vendors recognize they can't be communication experts, so they support integration and interoperability through standards such as HL7 and the use of APIs. EHRs do have some inherent information-sharing capabilities between their communication tools and the patient record, but they can't support full care team connection. Care team members rely on a variety of systems and data sources as they go through their workflows, and information exchange and/or full interoperability is critical to speeding and enhancing these processes.

With a unified communication platform, caregivers can receive messages from systems such as nurse call, patient monitoring, and many others on their mobile devices. This allows key clinical information based on events (receipt of critical lab results, admission or discharge

messages, new orders) to be sent to the end user's device of choice.

For example, a sepsis response use case:

A unified communication platform can take an EHR sepsis alert and deliver it automatically to the right clinicians, often a sepsis rapid response team, on their mobile devices. The alert includes the clinical context they need to act right away, including the patient's name, room, and MEWS score. This automated workflow promotes swift response and allows sepsis treatment to begin quickly, potentially preventing tissue and organ damage, or even organ failure and death. Ultimately, being able to reach mobile team members quickly following a critical alert improves overall workflow, staff productivity, and the patient's ability to receive life-saving care.



6 Deliver emergency notifications

Let's say your hospital is experiencing an event that many people need to be informed of as soon as possible. This could be an armed intruder, a natural disaster, an influx of patients, or a critical code. Your staff depends on fast, accurate notification of critical information via the right communication devices to prepare them and ensure their safety and that of patients and visitors. A unified communication platform equips you to do just that: You can send messages to all staff or select particular groups who need critical information.

For example, you might send a severe weather message to all staff, a Code STEMI alert to the rapid response/Cardiac Cath Lab team, and a

Code Blue notification only to on-call clinicians on the relevant floor. All recipients receive that message on their preferred device and can quickly perform the actions outlined in the message per the pre-defined response protocol.

Additionally, it's not just about sending the message out: A unified clinical communication platform promotes accountability because the individuals notified need to acknowledge the message quickly so escalations can be managed and the desired response happens.



The bottom line

EHR systems have effectively ushered healthcare into the digital age. Hospitals and health systems across the country have spent millions to implement them and keep them updated. While they offer myriad benefits to patient care, the EHR falls short when it comes to clinical communication and collaboration, especially for information that needs to be acknowledged and acted on quickly. Healthcare organizations need a complementary system that enables messaging and collaboration among all members of the care team to support the real-world communication needs of physicians, nurses, and other members of the care team, as well as the overall organization.

UNIFIED COMMUNICATION PLATFORM CHECKLIST:

- Patient-centered conversations
- Support for all staff members (clinical and non-clinical)
- Online enterprise directory available to all
- On-call schedule integration and clinician status
- Support for multiple devices
- Support for third-party system integrations
- Emergency notifications
- Real-time notifications
- HIPAA compliance
- Delivery receipts
- Audit trail
- Push notifications on smartphones



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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 Care Connect® platform to enhance workflows for clinicians and support administrative compliance. Our customers send over 100 million messages each month through their Spok® solutions. When seconds count and patients' lives are at stake, Spok enables smarter, faster clinical communication.

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