



Rising healthcare costs are an issue for which providers are desperately seeking solutions. An increasing number of large, multi-facility healthcare networks are reducing their communications overhead by consolidating multiple communication centers into a single facility. The implementation of technology that automates call handling and improves personnel productivity throughout an organization is resulting in significant cost reduction and enhanced customer service.

HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS LEVERAGING COMMUNICATION CENTER CONSOLIDATION TO CURE OVERHEAD PAIN

Consolidation

Two premier healthcare organizations — Banner Health System and Emory University — exemplify how communication center consolidation is successfully being used as a cost-reduction strategy by the healthcare industry. While Banner's 20 facilities and 27,000 employees serve seven Western states, Emory University's internationally renowned medical network in Atlanta serves 11,600 students and 2,700 faculty members from every state and more than 100 foreign countries.

Like typical healthcare networks, Banner and Emory are continually seeking antidotes to rising costs. To shear its communications overhead, Banner chose to consolidate four independent communication centers operated by Banner's Phoenix facilities into a single center to eliminate redundant facilities, equipment and personnel. Banner's leadership did the math and found that a technology-driven, communication-center consolidation could streamline communication operations to lower costs, improve productivity, and elevate internal and external customer service levels.

Until Emory's March 2002 consolidation, there were five separate call facilities that supported Emory's healthcare community. The consolidation achieved its primary goals: improve customer service and communication, maximize staffing efficiency, improve accuracy and timeliness of message notification, standardize processes, develop answering service standards and quality indicators, and automate paper-intensive processes. In fact, the initial consolidation's overwhelming success prompted the merger of three more communication centers almost two years later.

Technology: Key Consolidation Component

Searching for a computer telephony integration (CTI) solution that could help automate its communication-center consolidation, Banner specifically wanted to:

- Reduce annual operating costs
- Improve customer service
- Standardize and enhance training
- Reduce call-processing time
- Answer 80-percent of incoming calls within the first three rings
- Reduce call abandonment rate to 5-percent

Banner was familiar with the power of technology in automating communications. For the past 11 years, according to Vince Johns, who is responsible for Banner's communication center operations, Amcom Software's computer telephony integrated solutions have been instrumental in maintaining a level of expected service and professionalism. For the communication center consolidation in 1999, Banner created a universal communications workstation by integrating Amcom Software's CTI database, attendant workstation applications, and communication-center applications with the health system's existing phone system and other communications components.

The resulting system provides quick, convenient access to patient information, in-house and area-wide paging, and an answering service. In addition, the technology integrates direct dial emergency (DDE) with other applications such as fire alarms and allows authorized users to create and update on-call calendars that replace manual, paper-based schedules.

Emory also integrated sophisticated operator consoles with its telephone system to automate operator tasks and integrate caller and directory information. As a result, communication center operators answer more calls in less time; which reduces costs, staffing burdens, data-entry requirements and operator fatigue. Technology not only increased productivity and accuracy, but also maintained courteous and professional call reception. Pre-recorded automated greetings ensure that each call is answered professionally in the attendant's voice. Recordings can be time-of-day sensitive and customized to greet callers differently based on where the call was routed.

In both communication centers, employees as well as authorized users across the organizations perform paperless directory searches, paging, and on-call scheduling from their corporate Intranet or the Internet. These applications are accessible from PCs and most all wireless and handheld devices, providing convenient access to up-to-date information.

Emory's voice-activated response system alleviates operator workload by handling routine phone requests such as paging without a live operator more easily than touchtone. The system prompts callers to articulate their requests. It listens, finds the information in the database, and performs the appropriate transaction, providing consistently pleasant, efficient 24x7 call-handling.

System Enhancements Provide Continuous Improvement

Over the past year, Banner has further optimized its consolidated communication center with Amcom's newest technology. Attendants use integrated workstations to answer calls and send pages quickly and accurately. Electronic directories integrated into each workstation make it fast and easy to search for a particular individual verses having to wade through paper directories to locate hard-to-reach doctors. The system also enables online data maintenance, and operators and managers can communicate with each other via screen pop-ups — from a doctor's office opening late to meeting notification to scheduling breaks.

"Our consolidated communication center has enabled us to reduce both operating expenses and call-processing time," says Johns. "We've cut our operator staff by 18 full-time employees — more than half — and are now processing about 3,000,000 calls per year, compared with 120,000 calls per year prior to our communication center consolidation."

Banner is so pleased with the results that it plans to build a second communication center in Phoenix to serve an additional four facilities with the two centers backing up each other.

Look Before Leaping on the Consolidation Trend:

Both Banner and Emory went through a decision process that included various considerations. The most important considerations are:

- **COSTS**

Evaluate overhead cost reduction against the required investment in technology (purchase and maintenance) and training. Don't forget to include cost reductions associated with improved staffing efficiency due to automated, paperless processes.

- **SERVICE**

Standardize processes to meet service expectations in terms of accuracy and timeliness of message notification and quality of first point of contact.

- **CULTURE DIVERSITY**

Each communication center may reflect its facility's culture, and therefore a consolidation needs to meld diverse cultures. Pre-consolidation research should include an analysis of the various cultures to be addressed in training.

- **ORGANIZATION**

Determine how consolidation will impact the organization's structure — job description and title changes, level adjustments, and reporting.

- **TRAINING AND COMMUNICATION**

Create training curriculum for communication center employees including: technology use, service metrics, and standardized call-handling processes. Communicate to the entire organization the rationale behind consolidation and anticipated benefits.

- **MEASUREMENTS**

Document pre-consolidation service levels, and determine how your organization will assess consolidation success — percent of calls answered within a specific time frame, percent of calls handled accurately, evaluation of communication center personnel etc. Communicate measurable improvements to management.



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