

zoom

Healthcare's modern contact center: Best practices for building a patient-preferred model



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Most healthcare organizations are focused on improving the consumer experience, while simultaneously dealing with staff shortages and operational inefficiencies. How exactly can providers, payers and life sciences companies meet consumers' expectations in a highly efficient, scalable way?

Part of the answer lies in improving organizations' contact centers. To learn more about the current state of contact centers in healthcare, including existing gaps and opportunities for improvement, *Becker's Hospital Review* recently spoke with a leading expert on healthcare contact centers — Ron Strachan, healthcare CIO advisor at Zoom.

Question: What is the history and current state of contact centers across various parts of the healthcare ecosystem, including providers, payers and life sciences companies?

Ron Strachan: Historically, there have been major gaps in contact centers in the healthcare ecosystem. Many providers — including health systems, hospitals and practices — haven't even had official call centers or contact centers. If a patient or a family member had a question, they would place a call and rely on the switchboard operator to route the call to the right party. Sometimes, the switchboard operator would be knowledgeable and would route the call properly, but often, calls were sent to the wrong department or person, resulting in frustrated callers. Perhaps the caller tried again with better results or perhaps not. Or, maybe a caller left their name, callback number and a short message, which might have resulted in a call back — or not.

This lack of well-run central contact centers resulted in frustrating experiences for many consumers, as well as a lack of efficiency for provider organizations and a lack of visibility into how many calls were received, how they were routed and whether consumers' needs were met.

In contrast to providers, most payers have traditionally had some type of a "call center," which served as the front door to the health plan. Payers staffed these call centers with agents who would receive inbound calls. Interactions were usually voice-based, and agents had no intelligence about the caller. The agents would use a system to answer simple questions about coverage or deductibles. If individuals had additional questions, they may have been able to leave a message and may (or may not) have gotten a call back.

For life sciences companies, a reason a patient may have initiated contact was for a question related to a clinical trial. Like payers, some life sciences companies staffed call centers to respond to inbound questions, but this was not necessarily a competency or a priority for life sciences companies.

Looking at the current state, leaders across the healthcare ecosystem have elevated the importance of contact centers. We've seen an evolution from "call centers," which fielded inbound phone calls, to multi-modal "contact centers," where organizations interact with individuals through multiple modes, including text, email, chats, video, inbound and outbound calls and more.

Overall, healthcare leaders are becoming much more strategic about contact centers as a tool.

Q: Why have contact centers become more important and more strategic in healthcare?

RS: There are a few reasons. First, patients have become “consumers” and their expectations have increased. This includes heightened expectations for convenience and fast responses from service providers. Consumers don’t have the patience to wait on hold or be connected to the wrong person and have to call back. If steps in the journey are not easy, consumers will simply switch to another provider or payer.

Also, consumer expectations have increased related to their use and comfort with technology. People of all ages are using technology more than ever before. As many consumers become tech savvy, they are willing to use self-service tools such as chatbots with artificial intelligence behind them. Because consumers increasingly use technology to book travel, manage banking and schedule appointments, they expect the same experiences in healthcare. Healthcare organizations that don’t offer easy-to-use contact experiences and technologies will be at a disadvantage versus the competition.

The other major reason that contact centers have become more important in healthcare is due to the industry’s pressing staff shortages. Leaders want to deliver positive customer experiences and interactions but need to do so in an efficient, scalable way with limited human resources.

Q: To deliver on consumers’ experience and contact center expectations in an efficient, scalable way, what technologies are essential?

RS: First and foremost, healthcare organizations need a robust contact center platform. This platform must be comprehensive in enabling voice, video, chat and AI-driven chatbots. This platform must be able to integrate with other important healthcare systems and applications, such as the EHR, and must be built with intention.

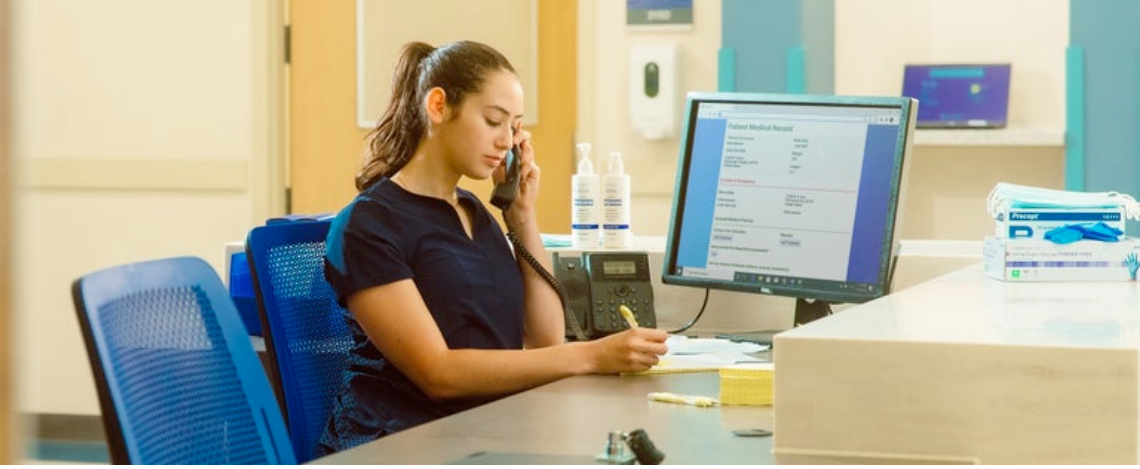
Integration with the EHR is so important because information captured by the contact center is entered into and becomes part of the EHR. This ensures that critical information is accessible in the EHR and prevents the patient from having to reenter information. All-around integration with the main, foundational system in healthcare is crucial.

The same logic applies to payers, where the contact center platform must be integrated with payers’ foundational systems, to make all interactions even smoother.

For life sciences companies, a contact center platform must instantly know who the patient is and know all of the details about a particular clinical trial, and the life sciences representative must be able to immediately access all relevant information to assist the patient.

For all of these organizations, a robust contact center platform requires built-in intelligence to know who the patient or consumer is, to understand what they are asking and to route their question or inquiry to the most appropriate person.





Cloud technology is another important feature for contact centers. Advantages of the cloud are flexibility and technology extensibility. This means that contact center professionals don't need to be located in an office or a physical call center; they can be located and work from anywhere. This flexibility makes it easier to staff the contact center with confidence.

Cloud technology also enables integration with different applications and datasets while being secure.

Q: Does Zoom offer a robust contact center platform? If so, what is unique about it?

RS: Yes. Zoom has a best-in-class omnichannel contact center platform that is optimized for video and integrated into the part of Zoom's main platform. Within Zoom's contact center platform is the ability to integrate to the host system, out-of-the-box voice features (i.e., Zoom Phone), chat and chatbots that use AI. Also, one of Zoom's strengths is the ability for users to make a video call. This is especially important in healthcare since there is no substitute for being able to see a patient. When a patient contacts a contact center, they can easily request a video connection.

Video conferencing has clinical benefits in that patients who are experiencing symptoms can connect via video with a clinician, who can see the patient and pick up on physical, nonverbal cues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people became more accustomed to using Zoom as a platform and being on camera, and this continues to make sense clinically as it offers a far richer patient experience.

Video also makes sense in nonclinical aspects of healthcare, as the ability to simultaneously have voice and video interaction delivers a richer, better contact experience.

Zoom's platform is easy to use and integrates with the key digital tools within an organization. It is highly configurable, which enables payers, for example, to build their workflows based on conversations or chat interactions and what members are looking for. Using intelligent routing, the individual will be directed to the right person in the organization.

Zoom's contact center platform is also extremely dependable in that reliability is built into the core architecture. Since Zoom is a cloud service, there is redundancy and Zoom has data centers around the world.

Conclusion

Every player in the healthcare ecosystem — providers, payers and life sciences companies — are focused on delivering better experiences at every stage of the consumer journey, which includes interactions with contact centers. While the quality of healthcare call center interactions was previously lacking, this is no longer the case as modernizing the contact center experience has become a top priority.

Operationalizing that priority requires a robust, multimodal contact center platform that integrates with the EHR and other applications, along with a cloud-based architecture. Zoom's platform — with chat, AI-driven chatbot, video and intelligent routing — fits the bill and provides a richer experience for consumers, with increased efficiency and scalability for healthcare organizations.