

Hospitals Continue to Replace Pagers with Smartphones

By Daniel Casciato

For decades, pagers have been a critical component to healthcare communications mainly because they have provided consistent and dependable communications at a low cost. As communications technology has evolved, however, many healthcare systems are now making the transition from the pager to a Smartphone, such as a BlackBerry device or an iPhone.

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A study conducted last year by Manhattan Research found that 64 percent of doctors use Smartphones. Count physicians at Heritage Valley Health System among them. They began utilizing Smartphone text messaging as soon as the technology was available.

Heritage Valley provides the technology to allow for text messaging to the device. In addition, it took the opportunity to integrate text messaging as a conduit for integration of its mobile electronic health records and e-prescribing technology.



Norm Mitry, CEO of Heritage Valley Health System

“Our technology allows for any Smartphone to include text messages, e-prescribing and electronic health records, which allows physicians to receive clinical information in a secure fashion, all on one device,” says Mitry.

Smartphones have been a huge hit at Heritage Valley. There has been no resistance to the technology since the organization provides the option for both a Smartphone and a pager. As for the type of Smartphones it has purchased, Mitry says that it’s the physician’s choice.

“We have the technology to direct text paging to any Smartphone device,” he says.

So far, it has made a limited direct financial impact, since it has been able to reduce the number of pagers and pager solutions required.

“Success is credited to the text messaging tool our Information Systems department created internally,” says Mitry. “The infrastructure is critical to the success of utilizing Smartphones and it is crucial to test the technology before going live.”

Likewise, over the past 24 months, Greensburg-based Excelsa Health has embarked on a patient safety issue centered on remote physician communication. Like many healthcare systems, they carefully considered the pros and cons of making the switch from pager to Smartphone.

“The cost of pager and ease of use of the pager was definitely a pro,” says Aaron Burd, manager of network operations for Excelsa Health. “However coverage and verification of receipt on a pager were cons. One other con was that a pager was an alert device only and not a true communication tool.”

The organization selected several models based on functionality and required end user services. Ultimately, it decided on the Apple iPhone, Motorola Q, and the Verizon HTC.

With the reduction of close to 1,600 pagers it experienced a substantial cost savings at the onset, according to Dave DiFabio, director of information technology and information security officer for Excelsa Health.

“However, the increased functionality of the Smartphones added to our monthly expenses but still leaving a cost savings overall,” says DiFabio.

He adds that the purpose of this was to increase the service level to its customers—the patient—and not as a cost savings.

“So the real gain was in the improved response time for the physicians and the ability to verify that a physician did in fact receive a page via the Smartphone,” he says. “This was not a function available with the low-cost pagers utilized by Excelsa Health. These Smartphones also give the physicians mobile access to our Clinical Portal and patient information and to a cell phone all in one unit.”

Ashish Ahuja, CTO at SigmaPage in Chicago, says that many physicians are happy to consolidate all their communications into one device.

“Smartphones do so much more than pagers can,” he says. “They support apps that facilitate easy sharing of information and schedules. Text messages and emails facilitate fast communications.”



Ashish Ahuja, CTO, Sigma Page

SigmaPage leverages Smartphone technology to seamlessly integrate on-call scheduling with on-call paging. It offers a technology called Klik2Talk, where nurses and hospital-based personnel can talk to physicians directly with the click of a button without knowing their phone numbers.

“Physicians do not like to share their Smartphone numbers since they fear it will get abused and they will receive calls at the wrong time, such as late at night or when they are not on call,” says Ahuja. “Our product takes care of this privacy concern. At no point in time do we display physician contact info to the end user.”

Interested in making the switch to a Smartphone? Burd advises other hospital systems to be prepared to handle added support.

“Smartphones require more post implementation support so the governing body (IT / telecommunications) needs to be prepared,” he says. “Also, keep the selection of support phones to a minimum, no more than 3 to 5. This will also help in change and control down the road.”

For more information on Heritage Valley Health System, visit www.hvhs.org; for information on Excelsa Health, visit www.excelahealth.org; and for information on SigmaPage, visit www.sigmapage.com. †

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Dave DiFabio, director of Information Technology and Information Security Officer for Excelsa Health



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