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Aligning healthcare organizations and staff through digital signage

[Jeff Collard](#)
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Effective leaders know that if you want to improve operational and behavioral efficiency, you need to clearly and consistently articulate the goals of the organization and – more importantly – share details of progress towards those goals with healthcare staff.

Most healthcare organizations are good at the first part, but traditionally they have struggled with the second. Information silos and a general lack of detail about progress on a day-to-day basis make it difficult for staff to know whether their behavior is aligned with critical initiatives such as increasing efficiencies, improving the quality of patient care, and removing the bureaucracy that increases the cost of operations. That is why having an effective communication strategy is vital, and why many healthcare organizations today are turning to digital signage as one way to help them overcome some of these challenges.

Looking forward, not back

Of course, this sounds good in theory. But how do you build a communication conduit that provides staff with the information they need on a timely basis and empowers them to take action that raises the organization's standards?

To start, you need to define organizational values and tie those to performance indicators that relate to delivering services. In so doing, ideally you will leverage leading indicators, such as current key performance indicators (KPIs) that everyone can see and react to, rather than relying on trailing indicators, such as static reports of past activities. People are more likely to respond to real-time information because they can still affect the end result. On the other hand, yesterday's information is already history, so the viewer may find it has little relevance to achieving today's goals.

To be effective, the information must be relevant to the decisions that staff is expected to make each day. By giving greater visibility to information about immediate conditions and other KPIs, hospital staff has a more compelling reason to change their behavior and focus on improving results. Involving everyone in the organization to achieve intended outcomes can result in new innovative practices that streamline procedures.

Facilitating change through digital signage

Digital signage or large format displays are becoming commonplace in retail stores, airports, hotel lobbies and everywhere else people congregate. In most cases, these are simply a static visual communication tool – yes, they are more flexible and visually appealing than traditional printed signs – but they are still merely playbacks of previously recorded messages that have no context. This is changing, however. There are now solutions that take advantage of the attention-grabbing power of digital signage to deliver real-time information from a variety of sources in a more impactful way.

There is certainly no lack of data in healthcare facilities; the challenge is making that information actionable. By combining a visual medium such as digital signage with an effective information delivery system, you can leverage existing assets to reduce operating costs and increase efficiency and the quality of service provided. Relevant information may originate from a combination of databases, including facility scheduling or tracking systems, and even patient information that can be obtained by innovative means such as barcode or RFID scanners. This data can then be triggered on demand based on information that is specific to the time, patient or situation. For example, scanning the barcode on a patient's identification bracelet as they enter the operating room can trigger the display screen in the OR to show vital information about that patient and their scheduled surgery. This not only improves quality control, as hospital staff can verify the patient and procedure, but it is also a means of providing the medical personnel with a clear view of the information they require (such as lab results, pathology and x-rays).

Traditionally, healthcare facilities have deployed digital signage systems to inform visitors about the facility, such as with wayfinding applications or donor appreciation messages. A few progressive organizations, however, have recognized the potential to deliver targeted information to their staff at the time it is required.

Visual data-sharing improves operational performance

A perfect example is St. Joseph Hospital, a 3,800-employee healthcare facility in Orange County, Calif. In a large hospital, a great deal of coordination is required to move patients through the operating facility seamlessly, from pre-operative through to the recovery areas. Efficiency depends on answering common questions in real time, such as:

- Which treatment rooms are available?
- Which patients are ready for surgery?
- Has a procedure in an operating room been completed ahead of schedule and can that operating room be prepared for the next surgery?
- What resources and staff need to be coordinated for an upcoming surgery?
- Is all the information grouped together to help better understand the workflow of the facility and identify available capacity for emergency cases?

While this information exists at desktop workstations, St. Joseph wanted to give their staff immediate access to that information by using a digital signage solution to display it on large overhead screens mounted strategically around the OR facility.

As staff in the OR strive for continuous improvement, closing the feedback loop in real time allows them to become part of the solution, which ultimately results in increased facility performance. That's just one example of why making information readily accessible to healthcare workers is an important part of ensuring efficient delivery of services. Linking the information source directly to the delivery system is the automated engine that drives this.

Keep in mind that if information is handled and interpreted by multiple people prior to delivery, you run the risk of inconsistency, delays and errors. Digital signage alone can't solve those issues; but by linking signage directly to the source through software that is context-sensitive, accurate information that is specific to a time and place can be conveyed to those who need it, at exactly the right time, – in a visual format that's easily understood whether the viewer is a surgeon or part of the cleaning crew.

The case for healthcare accreditation

Digital signage is common in manufacturing operations under ISO standards, where employee involvement is considered a driver towards continuous improvement. In healthcare services, there is now a similar movement to report performance levels against standards. The difference, however, is additional criteria must be considered due to privacy, ethical, political and economic concerns.

A properly configured digital information and signage system reports information directly to staff without the need for increased paperwork, spreadsheet manipulation and formatting for review. Placing this information on the screen allows hospital staff to see how they are performing against the facility's standards in real time rather than waiting for a report, and make adjustments as needed to assure the highest level of performance.

Digital signage is a highly visible way to demonstrate that processes and workflow are central to the organization, and makes a positive impression on those who are charged with evaluating quality of care. The signage becomes yet another checkpoint to help staff verify the accuracy of assignments, prepare for the next patient, and track performance of the facility.

Replacing a manual system with an automated system can also reduce audit preparation costs by documenting activities as they happen rather than trying to reconstruct them later. These systems can also help to put patients at ease, knowing there are quality control measures clearly in place. Both compliance audits and patient tours are that much more impressive when people observe healthcare workers armed with real-time information about the procedures and scheduling.

Shared goals and decision support

There is additional value beyond the short-term benefits of improving the day-to-day workflow within a facility. Improving morale and giving staff a sense of their role in a complex team environment is crucial in the healthcare industry. Healthcare professionals are often working longer hours to care for more patients in a shorter period of time. Digital signage information systems give them context for how their contributions fit into the larger picture.

Building and reinforcing a strong team culture requires clear communication of values and measurement of how the organization is progressing toward goals. Digital signage can have a huge motivational impact on your staff and ensure that everyone receives the most accurate and up-to-date information possible, so they make the right decisions quickly and become involved in the entire organization's success.

Jeff Collard is President of [Omnivex Corporation](#) ([www.omnivex.com](#)), the developer of enterprise-wide software that manages all aspects of digital signage networks, including content management, real-time data acquisition and distribution, and remote device management. He can be reached at icollard@omnivex.com.

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