



Achieving NHS Efficiency Gains Report November 2005

Introduction: The Gershon Review

The Gershon review of public sector efficiency set the NHS the target of 2.7% (£6.5 billion) annual efficiency gains by 2007-2008. Half of this must be cash-releasing, coming from back-office functions, procurement, transactional services and improved productivity of front line professionals.

Significant savings can be achieved by the health sector making more effective use of IT and network technologies to deliver efficiencies and rationalise current processes.

Network technologies are underpinning the NHS agenda for change by ensuring that better communications improve patient care and make it more cost-effective. The health sector has embarked on this process through the N3 technology framework which at a national level is driving the modernisation of the NHS to deliver efficiencies. But, at a local level there is also a need for organisations to review their communications infrastructures to meet efficiency gains under the treasury-backed Gershon Review.

Telewest Business has been working with the health sector for over ten years. It is working to provide the infrastructure to support the national programme for delivery of 21st Century IT support for the NHS, so that its networks can carry vital applications such as electronic transfer of prescriptions, PACS and electronic appointment bookings.

As applications are implemented, the need for scalable and flexible connectivity solutions will become more and more crucial for the health sector.

In this report Christopher Small, director for public sector at Telewest Business gives some key insight into where organisations can achieve the most gains by introducing new ways of working locally to meet NHS targets.

1. Improving working lives

Remote working, whether working from home, another site or office or while on the road, is at the forefront of the strategic agenda for the UK public sector, as it takes the lead on the Government's Flexible Working Regulations 2002, which came into force in 2003.

Remote working policies can help the NHS operate more efficiently through rationalising estate space and travel budgets and becoming more financially flexible.

But remote working is not just about cost savings as the NHS initiative, Improving Working Lives, is attempting to show. The Improving Working Lives Standard (IWL) is a blueprint by which NHS employers and staff can measure the management of human resources. Organisations are kite-marked against their ability to demonstrate a commitment to improving the working lives of their employees. All organisations will be required to meet the highest standard, Practice Plus status, by 31st March 2006

Within this climate for many health sector organisations, remote working is now achieving longer-term benefits of reducing absenteeism and staff churn and improving the quality of service to the community. Employees within the health sector, including primary care trusts, hospitals and GPs are increasingly exercising their right to work from home to achieve a better work-life balance.

With the widespread availability of broadband and advances in secure connectivity solutions this is now really starting to take-off. Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) offer secure and cost-effective access to applications, whether someone's working from home or another site. Outsourcing its ongoing maintenance and management can allow an organisation to budget by providing a clear fixed cost for installation and monthly management costs.

2. Cutting down 'Did Not Attends'

The way the public wants to interact with the NHS is changing. Organisations now need to consider enabling access through multiple channels of communication which means services can be delivered wherever and whenever the public requires them.

Easier and quicker access to public services can result in greater satisfaction for the end user and builds a better relationship with the community.

For example, the ability to easily offer web-based e-scheduling is providing primary care organisations (PCOs) and the patients they serve with a new way to interact electronically and schedule appointments. "Choose and Book" or electronic scheduling of appointments is a central component of modernisation plans for the NHS. The National NHS IT Programme says that by 2005 all patients must be able to electronically book an appointment at a time and place of their choice.

But making appointment scheduling more efficient and cost-effective is only tackling part of the problem.

In Scotland alone, missed hospital appointments are estimated to cost the Scottish NHS around £21m a year with the average cost of a patient missing a hospital consultant's appointment estimated to be at £70. Ten million GP appointments a year are being missed as well as around 5 million practice nurse appointments according to a recent survey by the Institute of Healthcare Management. This is estimated to cost the health sector £180 million per year, based on each appointment being worth a minimum of £18.

Beyond this financial burden that the NHS is carrying from a high rate of did not attends (DNAs), a price cannot be estimated for the cost to patient care when a missed appointment results in increased patient waiting times and impacts on primary care targets.

More effective patient communications is needed to ensure patients know the impact of failing to keep appointments, but many doctors say the main reason that patients miss appointments is because they simply forget.

Appointment reminders, such as email, text messages and automated calls can help reduce DNAs to combat this and make appointment attendance ratings higher. A number of primary care organisations are looking at this to drive efficiency gains now.

3. E-Learning

National and local NHS organisations are increasingly under pressure by NHS initiatives, including the National Programme for IT (NPfIT), to provide information and learning to their staff within a time frame that demands a clear and strategic approach to learning delivery and the use of technology.

Under Government directives governing the NHS, emergency services and NHS Trusts have a duty to give all staff access to the Internet and email and support the possibilities of e-learning.

For example, under the Clinicians Code of Connection all ambulance services operating in a climate with an emphasis on professional clinical care by operational staff will need to ensure that they can support new e-learning applications. These will be designed to equip paramedics with information to enhance public services.

To establish common approaches to learning across the health sector, virtual learning environments are becoming increasingly popular. These ensure more efficient and cost-effective communications, while making sure that employees have the information that they need at their fingertips. Ensuring the high availability of these services will be the key to success.

4. Demonstrating best value

One of the most important considerations for any NHS trust is to demonstrate best value. Ensuring accountability and managing the bureaucracy that is involved in this process can mount up in costs, time and human resources.

To ensure transparency and best value for any communications driven initiative, a case must first be generated to balance savings and service improvements against costs. The next step is to ensure that the purchasing process procures the best fit technologies to meet needs; approved to Government standards and that clearly demonstrate accountability.

Frameworks where the health sector can purchase equipment in groups from approved suppliers are really helping to deliver efficiencies in this area. The Welsh Ambulance Service and Islington Primary Care Trust are just two amongst many organisations which are modernising their communications infrastructures through working within such frameworks. There are two main ones that organisations should consider from

the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) and NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency (PASA). Telewest Business became an approved PASA supplier this year and has been working with the OGC for many years.

5. Managing suppliers

Supply Solutions are also enabling the health sector to work better with suppliers and get the best value from externally procured services. Whether it is the installation of high-tech back office system, the building of a website or the ordering of medical supplies, effective purchasing at every level is fundamental to the smooth running of an organisation.

Communities benefit from increased control over suppliers that enables the health sector to react more quickly to citizens' needs whilst realising cost savings.

Advanced network technologies today offer high levels of connectivity to support this new age of procurement. Much of this procurement or indeed any interaction with suppliers is via the web supported by a range of Internet connectivity to suit all needs. Additionally, the way voice and telephony are managed can impact significantly on your supplier relationship. Advanced call handling voice solutions can enable organisations to work effectively with vendors regionally, nationally and globally.

To communicate even more closely with your suppliers requires dedicated connections. Supply solutions can enable links or multiple extranets that enable high-speed, dedicated digital transmission to deliver better ways of communicating to different audiences. For example using an IPVPN solution, a network can be configured to allow suppliers or third party organisations secure access to part of an intranet. This is ideal for sharing information and encouraging open collaboration.

West Midlands Ambulance Service (WMAS) has recently installed a fully managed private network, connecting for the first time its operational ambulance stations and also district headquarters. The WMAS provides emergency cover for 3.2 million people, NHS Direct and non-emergency services to others, and the County Air Ambulance to 7.8 million – emphasising the need for effective communications. In the future paramedics will have access to information relating to patients such as drugs that need to be recalled and a drugs database to improve the control of supplies - currently in its pilot phase.

6. Sharing the reward

Maintaining digital communications can be a complex challenge for NHS Trusts and emergency services which are typically distributed across multiple sites. Due to constraints, many of these organisations have been left with networks that are built up from a jumble of technologies (leased line, ISDN and dial-up connections), which makes management time consuming and difficult.

As interconnection to the N3 network continues, there will be a corresponding need for better connections within the NHS. Hospitals, ambulance stations, pharmacies and

GP's surgeries need more flexible local networks that links to the N3 network that allow higher bandwidth and more responsive data transactions.

Management of the network also invariably becomes more difficult as more applications become dependant on network performance. There are also a limited number of network specialists available in the NHS or emergency services. And as the health sector switches over to new technologies, such as converged applications over IP networks, this will become more of an issue.

To achieve greater efficiencies there is a drive towards using Managed Data Networks. These bring four principal benefits: cost control, resilience, focus and future proofing. The first of these benefits is down to a MDN's ability to deliver more bandwidth and functionality for the same budget.

Additional benefits can be had through sharing this reward with partner organisations. Between local Primary Care Trusts and hospitals, 90 per cent of data traffic still happens locally. By joining Community of Interest Networks (COINs), organisations can now share the reward of having access to managed data network.

Hospitals and healthcare centres can join together to procure a managed service and so simplify the process at the Healthcare Trust Level. Putting in place higher performance standardised networks is also increasing collaboration between the NHS and their colleagues in the police and fire services. Adopting a next generation Ethernet means that bandwidth can easily be increased to meet an institution's requirements.

These tools are not restricted to operating within single organisations. Through intelligent networks you can easily create regional infrastructures across the public sector so that, for example, local authorities, health trusts, emergency services and educational institutes can gain economies of scale and benefits of collaboration by sharing a network.

Through deploying a managed data network organisations can benefit from a substantial increase in productivity. The end result should be an increase in patient care and overall increase in staffing levels devoted to public service, as resources previously devoted to network monitoring and maintenance are freed up. Managed Data Network's also offer the flexibility to increase or decrease bandwidth, as required. For instance, if a hospital needs to increase the bandwidth to improve electronic patient record storage, it can be done on demand, with a managed Ethernet service. So you can have the bandwidth when you need it and you only pay for what you need.

7. Managing Risk

Communication is fundamental to the daily operations of the NHS. Networks have increasingly becoming the life blood of NHS organisations, providing access to critical data in real-time that underpins the quality of patient care. So imagine a scenario when there's no network and our emergency services without a communications infrastructure.

There are many feasible scenarios that could lead to a network outage. This in itself can create a complex challenge that can drain resources as organisations create contingency plans.

The health sector needs to be prepared to separate and duplicate all network service and technology elements, both internally and externally across multiple sites to make sure that public service is not compromised. But at the same time taking the approach of paying twice for mirroring your communications infrastructure in the event of disaster can break the bank.

Managed Data Networks built on intelligent networking technologies that can re-direct critical data traffic in the event of disaster are now available. These ensure that you are not paying for redundant bandwidth just in case you need it one day, but at the same time you have an effective contingency plan in place.

8. Clear lines of communication

To ensure their much coveted star ratings, NHS organisations must ensure the efficient and timely response to inbound enquiries. Particularly, in the event of a major incident how NHS organisations interact with the public and maintain clear lines of communication becomes paramount.

Major hospitals, for example can be expected to handle millions of inbound call enquiries a month. But when dealing with an emergency situation the surge in demand on contact centres can be overwhelming. If not managed efficiently, not only can this have a detrimental effect on the perception of the Trust, but increasing caller frustration during an incident can impact the ability of a hospital to allay public fears and maintain public calm.

Accessing reliable, up to the minute data is vital for handling emergency situations, but throwing hundreds of contact agents to man the phones is neither a practical or cost effective solution.

Advances in inbound telephony services have now made it possible for communications managers to have full and immediate control when managing incoming voice traffic. These allow organisations to take full advantage of non-geographic contact numbers that many health sector enterprises are moving towards to help create a uniform face for their organisation to the outside world. Putting in place a non geographic number, which is free to the caller goes a long way to removing the confusion of having in place multiple external contact numbers for different NHS Trust departments.

Introducing a network based, inbound call management infrastructure takes this a step further. To plan for any contingency, call centre managers can set-up pre-approved emergency call plans that can be activated remotely over the Web in a matter of minutes.

In the event of a major incident at the main site, intelligent networks can now also automatically re-route calls to a disaster recovery site if there is telephony failure at the main site. At any time individual call plans can be accessed and modified putting control of voice traffic back into the hands of the organisation. Over flow plans can be instigated during an emergency and announcements can be simply up-loaded giving live up-to-date information to public callers.

More complex interactive inbound call management systems can also be used to help manage skills based routing. This can be vital to reducing call handling inefficiencies and to minimise caller frustrations by ensuring calls are routed to either the right department or to contact centre agents best equipped to handle the enquiry. Callers ringing the wrong number for information and being asked to redial can be a common occurrence particularly when there is public confusion over an incident. During emergency situations voice announcements can be uploaded and back-up plans can be activated at the click of a button. This frees up contact centre staff to deal with more complex public enquiries.

Advanced inbound call management allows organisations to react instantly to changes in traffic volumes, protect their network and launch disaster recovery procedures so every call gets answered. Although this has major advantages in the state of emergency, implementing a cutting-edge telephony solution offers better ways of working in day-to-day operations. With virtual solutions on the market, organisations can access the benefits of these technology advances without having to make an upfront commitment in hardware.

9. The right service provider

From making sure patients turn up to appointments to ensuring staff achieve greater productivity, communications is helping the health sector drive greater efficiencies under the Gershon Review.

Any communications network that underpins this change needs to be fully scalable to allow for increased demand; extra bandwidth and more sophisticated applications.

The challenge for the health sector is to find a service provider that can meet their exact local requirements with a cost-effective solution. This provider must also be flexible enough to adapt to specific local needs through a partnership-based approach.

This could mean jointly assessing a strategic issue such as whether or not to outsource specific areas, or an operational issue such as security. So, the service provider will need to possess more than just technical skills; they'll need to someone experienced of working within the public sector.

The health sector needs to ensure that it doesn't just focus on the ability of technology as it manages communication improvements, but also on the ability of the people providing it.

10. Telewest Business in the Public Sector

The public sector division of Telewest Business has been set up to serve the needs of Government exclusively. We have aligned our strategy to meet the e-Government agenda and achieve the goals of 'Broadband Britain'.

Our mission is to meet the needs of the public sector in connecting communities by providing a total suite of innovative and efficient broadband solutions.

Connected communities bring together organisations within the public sector their customers, employees, suppliers and partners. They enable 'Best Value' service delivery through extensive access, efficient communication, cross-departmental working and reduced costs.



Our strategy is driven by this mission and to make the concept of connecting communities simple and achievable we have separated it into three broad areas. For each area, we have developed a suite of solutions that draws on our national network and broadband local loop access.

- Community Access Solutions - providing access to the community through multiple channels of communication
- Unified Solutions - joining up Government organisations to facilitate the effective flow of information
- Supply Solutions - providing links with suppliers to maximise efficient procurement methods

So that we can focus on tailoring this concept to the individual needs of different organisations across the public sector we have specialist teams focused on specific government sectors.