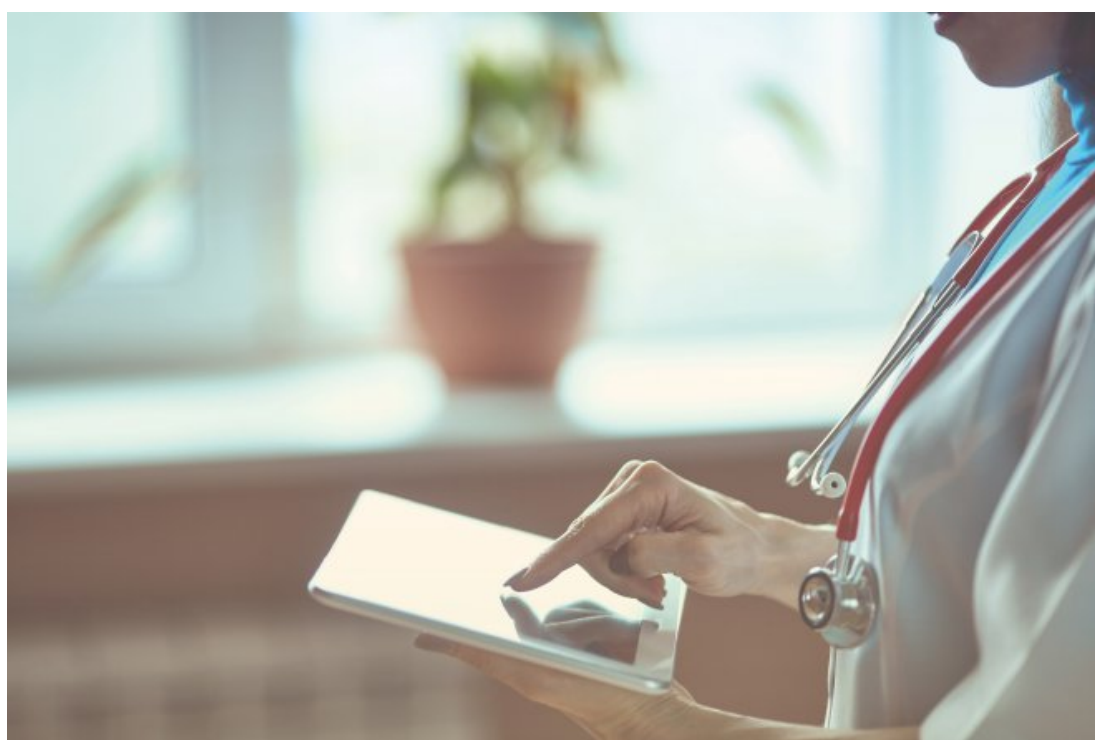


HIPAA-Compliant Communication: Why Cloud Is the Answer



By **BECKY LAWLOR** - Contributor

For healthcare organizations, safeguarding electronic-protected health information (ePHI) continues to be a critical part of maintaining HIPAA-compliant communication. Yet as the landscape of communication technologies continues to evolve — with greater use of mobile devices, SMS messages, wearables, email, and video chat — many covered entities are finding compliance hard to master.



In today's digital communication environment, cloud communications can help healthcare organizations use HIPAA-compliant communication.

According to a survey cited by Health IT Security, 59 percent of clinical informaticists and 39 percent of clinical staff acknowledged the occurrence of unsecure SMS messaging. In addition, 77 percent of IT respondents said secure messaging was a top driver in their communication selections, followed by voice and secure messaging consolidation.

As the survey highlighted, getting employees to follow HIPAA-compliant communication standards, especially for internal employee-to-employee communications, is a big challenge. One important way covered entities can reduce the risk of non-compliance is by using cloud communication service providers, otherwise known as business associates, that support HIPPA-compliant communication.



8 Reasons More Companies are Moving to the Cloud

Providing better customer service is only one reason why hotels and other businesses are moving to the cloud. Find out what the other seven reasons are.

Sharing Patient Data

Knowing what modes of communication are currently being used in a healthcare organization is critical so leaders can understand how to secure the ePHI that flows through these channels.

While older technologies like pagers and fax machines still exist, other communication tools — like email, SMS, video chat, mobile devices, and wearables — have more recently become key platforms for both internal employee-to-employee and external patient communication. Healthcare workers have found that using digital tools allows them to efficiently share urgent patient information quickly, often resulting in better patient outcomes.

Patients who use email and SMS messaging in their daily lives often prefer these digital modes of communication for the same reasons — added convenience and more real-time communication. Digital tools can improve communication with patients about appointments and follow-up care. Video chat for telemedicine is also gaining popularity, as it's cost-effective and allows patients to handle minor medical issues without needing to travel to and from their healthcare provider's office.

Covered entities are also realizing multiple benefits from these technologies. The HIPAA Journal reported that group messaging features can foster collaboration and accelerate patient admissions and discharges, resulting in saved time, increased productivity, and enhanced patient satisfaction. Mobile devices also allow remote healthcare workers, such as on-call doctors, home health workers, and outsourced staff, to communicate in real-time, receive lab reports, and conduct other important communication quickly and effectively.

Cloud communications enable covered healthcare entities to transfer some of the burden of maintaining HIPAA-compliant communication to the business associate.

HIPAA-Compliant Communication in the Cloud

There are a number of benefits to using cloud communications for covered entities, including access to data anytime or anywhere, lower costs, and greater flexibility. One of the biggest benefits of cloud communications, however, is greater protection when patient data is hosted by a HIPAA-compliant cloud service provider.

Cloud communications can centralize your communications even across multiple locations. This not only reduces costs, but when coupled with network-wide encryption, can help secure internal calls. Additionally, employees can remotely access the phone system through applications that run on a computer or a smartphone — and the SMS and voice messages that come from these can be encrypted as well. On the outbound side of patient communications, using cloud communications that are integrated with an existing CRM can help an organization ensure that employees only use the numbers patients requested to receive calls, a requirement of HIPAA.

Choosing the right cloud provider is essential, however, to ensuring HIPAA cloud compliance. Meeting HIPAA regulations is an involved process that requires significant oversight and ongoing monitoring of a provider's processes for transmitting, receiving, and storing patient data, and not all cloud providers offer the same level of compliance. When signing a business associate agreement with a cloud service provider, one way to make sure that they meet compliance requirements is by determining if the provider has been certified through a third-party compliance regulator.

Less Worry, Better Security

With its ability to cover both internal employee-to-employee and external patient communication, the cloud enables healthcare entities to transfer some of the burden of maintaining HIPAA-compliant communication to the business associate. At the same time, the business associate — or cloud service provider — is in a better position to invest in ongoing monitoring of the data it receives, transmits, and stores. The end result is less worry for covered entities and better protection of patient data.