

LEARNING FROM CRISIS: HEALTHCARE AFTER COVID

WORD360



TABLE OF CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION	03
1. EMBRACING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION	04
Infrastructure is key	04
Finding balance	05
2. INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION	06
Speak to everyone	06
Tackling inequalities	07
The only solution is a global one	08
3. UPSKILLING STAFF	09
Communication efficiency	09
On-demand as standard	10
SO, WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?	11
THE WORD360 SOLUTION	12

INTRODUCTION

***“Good communication doesn’t just happen;
it is the result of good design”***

– Stephen Few

COVID-19 has changed the way we live and work, forcing rapid adaptation to new methods and practices. As we approach what we hope is the close of this particular chapter, we see that this pandemic, for all its unpleasantness, will leave us with some parting communication lessons that we can't ignore.

Throughout the healthcare industry, and indeed the working world as a whole, embracing digital has been key to communication. In the midst of this, we've learned just how important infrastructure is to enabling this embrace, and also how digital is not and cannot be the only solution.

We've seen just how important it is to be inclusive in our communication, and that leaving people in the dark only serves the virus. COVID-19 has shone a stark light on health inequalities, and shown how even in times of isolation we must work on a global scale to overcome large-scale health problems.

Finally, the pandemic has demonstrated how ensuring that your staff are informationally equipped to handle new paradigms and new adaptations is just as important as the adaptations themselves. Our march towards digitisation has also aided the production of an on-demand approach to communication, and shown us how to satisfy this new need.

In this whitepaper, we'll examine these lessons and the issues that gave rise to them to help provide actionable information for improving communication in healthcare post-COVID.



1. EMBRACING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

We have been collectively forced into an accelerated adoption of digital communications technology, from video calling to new software solutions. Zoom, for example, had added more new users by March of 2020 than it did in the entirety of 2019. Everyone now expects to be able to get online and their smartphones, even in a hospital setting.

The two key lessons to come out of this particular facet of the pandemic have been the need for strong IT infrastructure, and knowing how to balance digital services with more traditional and personable ones.

INFRASTRUCTURE IS KEY

In 2002, the government of Myanmar (then Burma) began construction on the city of Naypyitaw. Destined to be the nation's new capital city, this incredible infrastructure project involved the creation of a carefully organised city of the future, with 10-lane highways and huge public facilities.

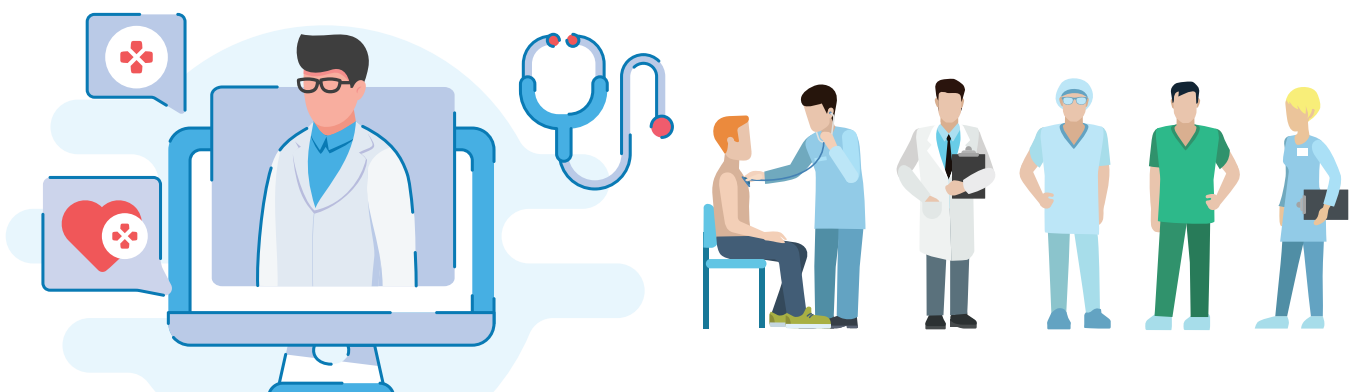
What this means is that when inevitable population growth comes to Myanmar's capital city, it'll be quite some time before Naypyitaw goes the way of many now crowded and ancient European cities.

Naypyitaw, happily, serves as a perfect analogy for the need for strong IT infrastructure in healthcare, and in fact infrastructure in general. Those healthcare systems best placed to handle this pandemic and indeed whichever one comes next are those with a strong IT infrastructure.

Much like the 10-lane highways of Naypyitaw will allow for huge volumes of traffic when the time comes, this IT infrastructure allows for the rapid adoption of new digital solutions and subsequently for their heavy use in times of high demand.

This IT infrastructure acts as a base from which new projects, systems, and solutions can be launched, allowing organisations to be much more flexible and for changes to be much less of a gargantuan task when they come around.

The NHS itself is currently in the process of transitioning from its now ageing N3 communications network onto the new Health and Social Care Network (HSCN). This new network aims to improve all facets of public healthcare communication by integrating social care, providing competition between providers to lower prices and improve service, and offering greater security.



FINDING BALANCE

Digital communications have been a lifeline throughout the pandemic, and our adoption of them has been, in some cases, total. However, in a healthcare setting this cannot be the complete answer.

For example, at Word360 we've continued to work in tandem with a list of NHS trusts and organisations to provide remote video and telephone interpreting services throughout the pandemic, in place of traditional face-to-face services. This has allowed healthcare providers to continue to operate safely and efficiently, and these remote services have been and are still vital to ensuring accessibility for patients whose first language is not English.

However, as a patient, would you want your doctor to have an end-of-life conversation with you through a laptop? Or a mental health consultation over the phone? No, likely not. Digital communication and remote interpreting are invaluable tools for healthcare, but knowing how to balance them with face-to-face, human-led services is just as important. Face-to-face interpreting provides a wealth of contextual cues such as body language and facial expressions which are crucial for communicating emotion.



2. INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION

The pandemic has taught us just how important it is to include everyone in medical communications, as well as shining a light on those who've slipped through the cracks.

It's also demonstrated just how crucial it is that isolationism doesn't preside over global cooperation when it comes to finding healthcare solutions.

SPEAK TO EVERYONE

In a statement on the 10th February, Boris Johnson said that while vaccinations were going well, there remained a number of people roughly twice the population of Birmingham who'd not come forward to be vaccinated out of the initially intended 15 million of the country's most vulnerable.

13% did not come forward for their COVID-19 vaccine

These nearly 2 million people likely did not come forward because of a lack of communication, or because of the wrong communication. Some will not have come forward because the message did not reach them; they may simply not know how to get their vaccine or that they can have it all.

It may not have reached them because the message wasn't delivered in the right way, or it may not have reached them in their language or in a format that they can understand. Some may have fallen foul of misinformation surrounding the vaccine, which demonstrates the triumph of mistruths over the truth and the need for stronger communication once again.

What this collectively illustrates is a failure of effective communication, in one way or another, and when the end goal is quite literally a question of life or death at the moment, it shows just how important the right communication is.

Speaking to everyone means considering the communication needs of all in question, and is the only way to ensure that the pandemic is overcome. This same principle will also prove vital in prevention



TACKLING INEQUALITIES

“Health inequalities are unfair and avoidable differences in health across the population, and between different groups within society. Health inequalities arise because of the conditions in which we are born, grow, live, work and age. These conditions influence our opportunities for good health, and how we think, feel and act, and this shapes our mental health, physical health and wellbeing.” – [NHS Definitions for Health Inequalities](#).

Data from the ONS suggests that Black people in the UK are 4 times more likely to die from COVID than white people. In fact, it was found that the health impact of belonging to some ethnic minority groups in the UK is equivalent to being 20 years older than your actual age.

Researchers found that many in these affected groups were often discouraged from engaging with health services because of poor experiences. In an article on the study, The Guardian spoke to Dr. Arif Dasu, who works at a GP surgery in Preston, and he noted that these poor experiences were, at their core, due to “a lack of funding, engagement and insight on the part of government and services.”

“Previous and older generations, in particular, suffered with having to overcome racial, communal, social and language barriers. I have seen and heard some patients report feeling that they are less likely to be taken seriously than a Caucasian or white British person. This has led to a lack of trust in the services and government,” he said.

These studies and the words of Dr. Dasu serve to reinforce the need for effective healthcare communication, and the pandemic has highlighted the dangers of not investing.

Data shows that the uptake of the COVID-19 vaccines has been much lower among ethnic minorities aged 80 and above than among their white counterparts, which arguably shows most clearly how underlying issues of deprivation and poor communication can rear their head in times of crisis.

Reaching these communities is not only a matter of tackling glaring inequalities, it’s an issue of public health. Vaccination programmes require enough people to accept the vaccine to create widespread immunity, without it, contagious diseases will always have a pathway through our communities

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Impact of belonging to
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THE ONLY SOLUTION IS A GLOBAL ONE

There are currently 3 vaccines approved for use in the UK by the MHRA, only one of which was developed in the UK. The first vaccine to be used in the UK, for instance, was developed in the US by Pfizer/BioNech. There are 4 other vaccines pending MHRA approval, all of which were developed internationally.

Without international cooperation, we would not have been able to start our vaccination programme as early as we did, with the UK-developed Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine only being approved at the end of December 2020.

Throughout the pandemic, the World Health Organisation has been a bastion of progress, research and life-saving information. This global project of communication and understanding has epitomised the benefits of working across barriers to develop solutions that benefit everyone.

For the most part, it's clear to see that efforts to combat COVID-19 have transcended physical barriers, but language barriers remain. Whether this is with how vaccinations are rolled out, or how they are labelled.

Overcoming these obstinate barriers is a challenge which requires commitment, awareness and an arsenal of dedicated language services, from rapid, precise machine translation for vaccine labelling, healthcare collateral, and NHS web copy, to specialised remote interpreting, providing interpersonal communications in healthcare settings.



3. UPSKILLING STAFF

The pandemic has granted us a couple of lessons about the need to upskill staff. Arguably the most immediate is the ability of upskilling to deliver maximum efficiencies, especially crucial in a time of increased pressure. Secondly, the ability to access services digitally and on-demand is a need that requires anticipating, and fast.

COMMUNICATION EFFICIENCY

As a language services agency which puts digital technology at the forefront of what we do, we invest considerable amounts of our time in demonstrating to clients, existing and potential, how digitally-orientated language services can drive efficiencies. How machine translation allows you to translate huge volumes of information quickly and accurately, and how remote interpreting means you can communicate with patients safely and efficiently.

What often gets left at the wayside, however, is how much upskilling your staff can help make the most of new technologies. Imagine, for example, you've just decided to take advantage of Word360's remote interpreting services. Using our bespoke Wordskii software offering, the staff in your trust are now able to access an interpreter on-demand so they can communicate with any patient, anywhere.

Now imagine that a not particularly tech savvy member of your staff encounters this service, as easy as it is to use, if they're not familiar with the basic underpinnings such as video conferencing software, how much time will they spend trying to figure out the simplest features? Let alone how to make the most of it.

By investing just a little extra time upfront in making sure your staff are able to use the new tools you're providing them with, you stand to reap the full rewards of the efficiencies that they offer. A quality language services provider will likely even offer the training needed to upskill your staff, meaning that implementation is as smooth a process as possible.



ON-DEMAND AS STANDARD

In an [article for Wired](#), Jacky Wright, chief digital officer at Microsoft, pointed out that organisations needed to be leading the way on digital change, and in the past year, 93% of primary care visits in England alone took place remotely with use of digital services.

93% of primary care visits in the last year took place remotely

“Aside from unlocking new business models, telehealth has tremendous potential to address health disparities in rural and underserved communities by promoting preventive medicine and reducing the reliance on emergency and urgent care. Telehealth delivered in this way, and balanced with equitable broadband access, is the essence of a purpose-driven digital strategy”, she said.

Organisations, including healthcare, need to promote a digital approach to services, and by the same token recognise the behavioural changes that are not only causes of this need but also consequences of the shift.

Digital services are often so effective because of their ability to provide on-demand solutions, and digital language services are no exception. Using remote interpreting via telephone and video, healthcare organisations allow their staff to communicate seamlessly and organically with patients and service users.

The adoption of these services has been driven by the need for increased efficiency, and in its wake is coming a change in behaviour and expectations on the part of both patients and staff. It will be increasingly expected to be able to operate using digital technology, and feeding this need is not only paramount to achieving greater efficiencies in costs and time, but also vital to satisfying changing behaviour.



SO, WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

As we race unrelentingly toward digitisation, the need for a strong IT infrastructure cannot be overstated. It's analogous to laying the foundations before building a skyscraper; it'll be damn hard to go back to fix it later on if you get it wrong, with the weight of a tower on top. Think of Naypitaw with its 10-lane highways, ready for anything.

It's important, however, not to lose what makes us human in the midst of the digital revolution, and remember that some situations call for a dose of the personal. This is something that will never change, and finding the right balance between the options available to you is a skill that needs to be learned.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of communicating with everyone in a way they can understand. Without this inclusive, accessible communication, crises like the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overcome.

It's also shone an uncomfortable light on the healthcare inequalities in the UK, and brought into sharp focus how deeply these inequalities affect disadvantaged communities when the going gets rough.

Global cooperation on healthcare has been invaluable throughout the pandemic, and with COVID-19 set to linger like the common flu, it'll likely be the case for some time to come. Without reaching outside our own borders, we would have had much slower access to vaccines and to life-saving advice. This global teamwork, however, requires the tools necessary to breach language barriers, even if physical ones have been overcome.

The need for upskilling to allow staff to make the most of new advances is crucial. Without it, much of the efficiency that digital solutions offer can be lost in time spent fumbling with new tools.

A side effect of offering services digitally and on-demand, is that it becomes the norm, which is positive but also means that everyone will expect it as standard. Providing on-demand, digital services then becomes the base expectation for both staff and patients.

Overall, COVID-19 has taught us a number of important lessons about the way that we communicate healthcare, from taking a digital-first approach to the life and death importance of equitable access through communication.

THE WORD360 SOLUTION

At Word360, we provide turnkey digital language solutions to the healthcare industry using our bespoke software platform, Wordskii. We specialise in applying our services to lessons learned and anticipating new needs to help drive efficiencies and provide equitable access for all.

Fundamentally, we offer choice: choice to make informed decisions on the right interpreting service for your patients at every appointment. Whether you need a quick call to discuss test results or a sensitive appointment to share difficult news, our suite of interpreting and language services allows staff to opt for digital or in-person services from our unified service delivery platform.

Want to know more? [Book a call](#) with a representative today.

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Celebrating 30 years in business, Word360 is the Midlands' leading translations and interpreting agency, working with major global clients to help remove language barriers where it matters most. Operational in over 55 countries through a network of more than 9,800 specialised linguists, they enable global conversations and provide award-winning support across multiple industries and sectors.