

Wellingborough Medical Centre is a well established, privately owned practice and is part of the Northamptonshire Heartlands PCT.

Having expanded steadily over almost thirty years, including taking over a single-handed practice in 1996, it has grown to support today's patient list of almost 14,000 local residents.

For some time the Wellingborough premises supported these two primary practices; each sharing all of the services and supporting infrastructure of a modern medical centre. When one of the practices split to create two separate working units, a third, separate practice evolved at Gold Street. The new practice would provide healthcare services to the same patients but with different hours of opening and with its own staff and support team.



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Wellingborough Medical Centre

Case Study

The Challenge

It became apparent that the technology, used since day one to adequately support two individual groups of doctors and nurses, would not be able to cater for three separate practices with their different working methods. Over the years the practice had invested in technology which had enabled them to become officially 'paperless' when consulting. This computing technology was not where the main problems arose. Difficulties existed at the very start of the patient doctor relationship – the telephone.

Mel Smith, Practice Manager for Wellingborough Medical Centre explained; "We had an old Meridian Norstar telephone system which was fine for our initial requirements. It provided a voicemail service for each of the two practices and they shared the telephone system like they shared the use of electricity. We then had to support three practices and, unless we invested heavily, we recognised that we would be unable to pass calls from the public to their 'new' practice at the times when it was open."

GPs in all three practices have to be available at defined times throughout the day. Two of the practices are open for telephone calls for 10 hours each day, with calls routed directly to the receptionists. The third practice chose to handle phone calls only during three distinct times of the working day and to provide automated means to the caller to route calls to the most suitable member of staff.

It was the complex nature of these criteria which led Mel Smith to investigate a replacement telephone system. The new switch would need to support the three practices, with VoiceMail for each and Autoattendant for only one. Following rigorous and demanding demonstrations of various vendors' telephone switches, the Practice Manager eventually selected Avaya's IP Office switch. The main reason that this particular solution was chosen was its ease of configuration and flexibility in how calls can be routed, by the Avaya IP Office VoiceMail Pro application.

IP Office was recommended by Excell who were chosen to deliver and configure the final solution. As an Avaya Platinum SMB Partner, Excell were perfectly placed to help the Medical Centre achieve the required results. With project management and engineering skills in abundance, Mel Smith was convinced that Excell were the right supplier and that they had the best solution to his problems.

The Solution

Excell's offering of the Avaya IP Office 406 with standard digital handsets formed the foundation of the solution to the practice's problems. With its ability to perform as three virtual PBX switches in one unit, the immediate answer to Mel Smith's issues started to develop. His business requirements were clear and unambiguous but technically they were quite complex.

They defined how calls into the practice would be passed to their required end point with no manual intervention, with time of day of the call being key decision criteria.

Call Handling

Developed from a well structured spreadsheet, the call flow process had to be meticulously translated into a series of sophisticated call flows using the IP Office VoiceMail Pro application. This was a situation that would tax even the most conversant in IP Office but Excell rose to the challenge and, through characteristic dedication and persistence, the final configuration precisely met Mel Smith's requirements.

"I knew that the configuration would be a significant project and was delighted how well the engineering team from Excell responded. Their co-operation with me and their determination to succeed was really impressive"

“Anyone who intends to use an IP Office, or any PBX for that matter, should have a very clear idea of what they want to do with it, before the installation and commissioning starts.

I knew that the configuration would be a significant project and was delighted how well the engineering team from Excell responded. Their co-operation with me and their determination to succeed was really impressive.” reported Mel Smith.

A number of unusual requirements came to light, each a direct result of how the ‘business’ of a well organised medical practice was run. Each had to be considered in its own light but with equal consideration that changing the configuration for one practice would not affect the others.

Examples of these challenges included; provision of the engaged tone for the seventh caller for only one practice; a need to pre-record practice messages up to 12 months in advance and single button selection to close the switchboard for staff training for one practice. Mel Smith commented “every medical practice in the UK works differently to the next, I had to confront the issue that I had three such practices in one building and without Excell and IP Office, I think we would have struggled to manage.”

Call Recording

Creating a working environment that is safe for patients and staff alike is of high importance to every medical practice today. It is a sad fact of life however that not all members of the public respond politely when they call in to make appointments to see their doctor.

Abusive and aggressive conduct from patients, both on the premises and on the phone cannot be tolerated and it is the Practice Manager’s role to ensure no members of staff have to endure such behaviour.



Collaboration: Do something amazing

One way that Mel Smith has been able to exploit IP Office has been to enable call recording. On ringing into the practice, all callers are advised that their call may be recorded. If a caller becomes offensive during a call, at the press of a single button on the handset, the receptionist can record the rest of the call.

This recording is then transferred automatically as a standard audio file onto the Practice Manager’s hard drive. By assessing the nature of the sound file, Mel Smith can now conduct an investigation and can decide what action to take, including the possibility of removing the patient from the practice list. Statistical Evidence Practice Managers have to provide the best possible response to patients and using technology to help do that is a great advantage. When patients ring the practice, they might complain about how long they have had to wait for a reply if they are held in a queue to talk to the receptionist. This may be justified a complaint, however Mel Smith is able, using IP Office, to accurately identify the waiting time for any call and help address such complaints before they become serious.

“We always get complaints from patients who are on hold – it’s inevitable. Thankfully, IP Office helps me to investigate and answer these criticisms with accurate and timely information. Again Excell were able to point me in the right direction to establish how to achieve that” added Mel Smith.

Return on Investment

Practices such as Wellingborough Medical Centre keep a careful eye on spending. With no exceptions, the Practice Manager has to check any expenditure is justified and that it will be a wise investment. Mel Smith assessed his previous quarterly phone bills, the number of lines coming into the practice and rental and lease costs to see where savings might be made. He was pleased to see that, after commissioning, with no additional expenditure, he had a far superior system and service.

In fact, because Excell recommended the use of Least Cost Routing and Carrier Pre Selection, it soon became clear that ongoing costs would actually be lower. In the long run, Mel Smith feels that the Avaya IP Office essentially “paid for itself with the savings made on call and line cost alone.”

The Future

The whole solution is working flawlessly yet there is one aspect that will make the Practice Manager’s life even easier. “I am often asked if I can assess which of the three Practices is responsible for the most telephone spend. Trying to break this down with spreadsheets is not that simple so I feel it would be ideal to be able to report on call spend per Practice directly from IP Office.”

Adding third party applications for call logging is easy with IP Office where a number of vendors have already developed first class tools to do exactly what Mel Smith wants.

“Right now we use a simple calculation to assess spend per Practice. IP Office is doing a great job for us and I’m really looking forward to seeing what Excell have to offer to eliminate my billing work load and to give me accurate data that is easy to explain to our doctors!” Mel Smith



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