JUST-IN-TIME
APPOINTMENT SCHEDULING

Your guide to maximising patient flow during social distancing

ACF | TECHNOLOGIES

Appointment solutions for continued care during social distancing – and beyond

ACF | TECHNOLOGIES

These are unprecedented times of pressure

for the NHS, which demand new approaches such as shifting to remote consulting where possible and meeting the physical demands of social distancing within hospitals and clinics. In the return to a 'new normal' where Covid-19 may be present for an extended period, the priority must be to protect patients and staff from avoidable risks of infection while continuing to give much-needed care.

We believe that if more sophisticated appointment scheduling is adopted, it can play a significant role in managing appointments to maximise patient flow. This, in turn, will ensure excellence in health service delivery, both during this crisis and into the future.

What is just-in-time appointment scheduling?

'Just-in-time' is a method widely used in industries and retail to manage workflow and streamline deliveries. Our appointment scheduling solution – called Q-Flow – now brings that concept to the healthcare industry. By delivering more timely, flexible, and precise scheduling, it can ensure that processes run like clockwork and that patients arrive safely for their appointments.

Specifically, just-in-time appointment scheduling can be easily flexed to manage patient arrivals. It's another way you can do everything possible to avoid crowded waiting rooms with sick and potentially infectious patients.

Towards an omnichannel appointment solution

Restricting the number of face-to-face meetings with patients is not easy, but it can be achieved by following the 'digital-first' model, which is being rapidly adopted in primary care.

This uses integrated communications – including telephone and video consultations, SMS and emails – to triage patients and offer care by alternative means where possible. This, in turn, helps to control the number of people presenting at the hospital or clinic. A fully-featured, automated appointment scheduling system is fundamental to the success of this approach and can be implemented using a phased approach, for speed and cost-effectiveness.

Scenarios using just-in-time appointment scheduling

ACF | TECHNOLOGIES

Maintaining social distancing

Adopt appointment scheduling to minimise time spent in contact ares

The number one requirement, and challenge, during the pandemic is to maintain social distancing in our hospitals and clinics. Rather than relying solely on physical queuing systems and one-way flows, using just-in-time appointment scheduling to manage bookings and reminders can ensure better control of the arrival of patients, and reduce distance and contact between them.

Q-Flow is advanced yet easy to configure, and includes the ability – for example – to manage a mix of walk-ins, appointments and urgent cases; to give precise directions for an appointment; predict delays in a consultant's schedule; text patients to let them know when an appointment will begin; and call patients forward for their appointment by SMS.

Many of these features have critical new applications during social distancing. For example, to reduce the risk of crowded waiting areas, patients could wait in dedicated internal spaces or hospital grounds until receiving an SMS notification that their appointment is about to begin. This allows others without mobile phones to occupy waiting rooms.

Intelligent flexing of appointments

Use just-in-time appointments to adapt to procedures during Covid-19

Hospital processes have changed due to Covid-19, and appointment scheduling must be smart enough to keep pace. Cleaning processes between patients during Covid-19 takes time; the walk from a car park to the hospital takes time; presenting at reception takes time. To streamline patient arrivals, it's more important than ever that these intervals are calculated and taken into account.

Q-Flow can incorporate and manage these details automatically, by flexing and continuously adapting your schedules to fit, on a daily, hourly, and by-the-minute basis. By using a 'virtual queue', the software can also allow for walk-in appointments where capacity is deemed available over any given period (for example, due-to-cancellations,) which helps you to maximise patient flow.

Streamlining patient flow according to need

Reduce time spent in hospitals

03

Triaging can reduce the number of patients presenting at a hospital or clinic. Still, just-in-time appointment scheduling can go further, incorporating existing medical information within the appointment system to prioritise patient appointments according to need.

A typical example is a patient requiring longer, or multiple, appointments on the same day versus a patient who needs a short consultation. Typically, these patient appointments are arranged with an element of chance; however, now it's more essential to reduce delays and aid social distancing. With smarter scheduling, the total time that all patients spend in hospital can be streamlined and better managed.

Just-in-time appointment scheduling is not limited to patient scheduling alone. It can also be used to make specific hospital rooms available at designated times, and make specified equipment available at the same time, once again speeding the flow of patients through the appointment system and minimising the potential contact between individuals.

Reducing the backlog of appointments

Prioritise appointments and hit targets

It's vital that public confidence in the NHS is maintained, and that services remain 'open for business'. With NHS England reporting that new RTT pathways (referrals) fell to the lowest level ever recorded in March 2020 (down from 1,603,378 in February 2020 to 1,220,636 in March), there are clear indications of a waiting list backlog.

With pent-up demand and a return to normal (or new normal), there is likely to be a surge in demand, which will require a new approach to meeting outpatient targets.

Auto-scheduling of appointments based on waiting list usage and patient priority will ensure that more patients can complete appointments. Moving to a fully automated solution also speeds up internal scheduling of ongoing appointments, which in many cases still rely on slow-moving paperwork processes.

Handling very high volumes

Deploy proven and robust technology

While other appointment scheduling systems are available, few can deliver at scale for the most demanding, secure, and confidential environments.

At ACF Technologies, that's a key strength of our solution. We currently help 20,000 staff at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) manage more than two million appointments per month. We also provide appointment scheduling to assist the UK Government in meeting their target of delivering 100,000+ Covid-19 testing appointments per day.

These solutions are based on robust technology, proven cloud hosting, dedicated servers, and a great deal of know-how. Ensuring high patient flows within the NHS during social distancing will only be achieved if just-in-time appointment scheduling is delivered to the same high scale.

Reducing pressure caused by Covid-19 hospital admissions

Use appointment scheduling to manage A&E better

As NHS services return to normal, A&E departments will also reach high capacity again, bringing with them social distancing risks. While it is hard to mitigate regular walk-ins to A&E – which can obviously be of urgent medical need – there are alternative ways to ensure A&E departments are not overrun.

One solution could be to add more sophisticated support to the NHS 111 telephone helpline. Triaged calls or online recommendations to attend A&E, which are generated through NHS 111, could be linked with just-in-time appointment scheduling. This immediately allows the type of appointment scheduling control – that the rest of the hospital can benefit from – to be applied to emergency departments.

06

Extending Covid-19 testing

Increase test centre visits regionally or nationally

ACF Technologies, working in conjunction with Deloitte and the UK Government, is providing demand management and appointment bookings for Covid-19 test centres. Expansion of these centres across the UK continues, and we have a fully hosted Q-Flow environment ready for testing that could be leveraged in different ways by Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) or other interested parties to deliver high volumes of tests.

Preparing for further testing or vaccine distribution

Meet the next challenge of maximum patient flow

Like Covid-19 testing plans, the future of antibody testing or vaccine distribution (if and when available) is unclear at present. However, it is easy to predict that demand for either of these breakthroughs would be high and immediate amongst the population. Planning ahead for these eventualities makes sense now.

For example, in the event that vaccines were to be administered in clinic groups run by General Practitioners, the huge demand for appointments could be ably met by just-in-time appointment scheduling on a large scale. If this is where the future lies, then the technology exists right now to streamline patient flows and achieve the best outcomes.

ACF | TECHNOLOGIES

Our solution at work in the DWP and DHSC

Department for Work and Pensions

We provide the booking engine for the Universal Credit system, which handles more than two million appointment bookings per month. It's used by over 20,000 staff and includes advanced features to manage staff rotas within the DWP and skills match, which means that members of the public are automatically connected with the right member of staff.
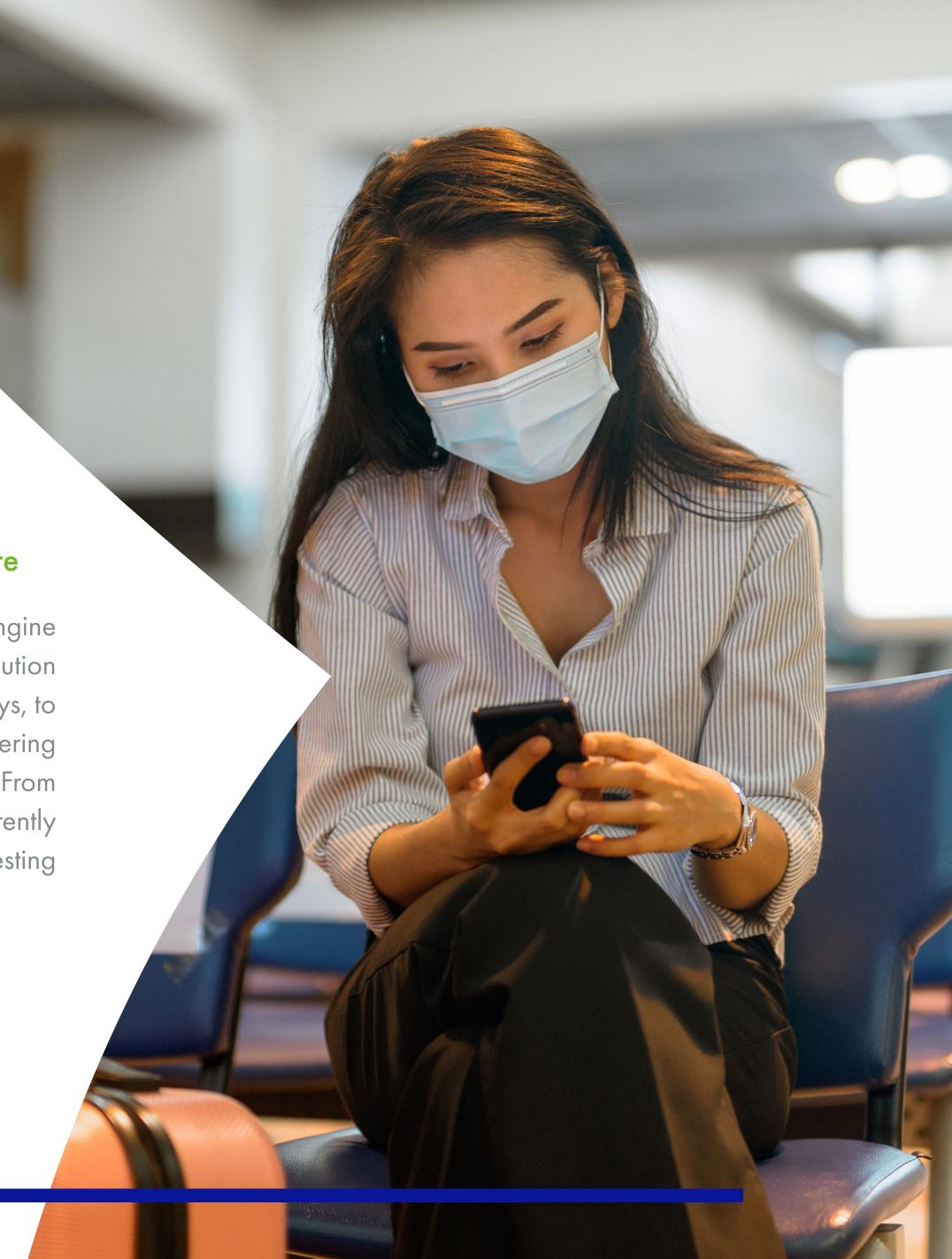
This API-driven enterprise-grade solution runs on cloud hosting with Azure and is the perfect example of an extremely high performance, fully GDPR-compliant appointment scheduling system.

Department of Health and Social Care

We also created the appointment booking engine for COVID-19 testing across the UK. This solution was delivered to the DHSC in a matter of days, to support the UK Government's target of delivering 100,000+ testing appointments per day. From the original 100+ locations, we are currently supporting a phased roll-out of more testing locations across the UK.

Department for Work & Pensions

Department of Health & Social Care

ACF | TECHNOLOGIES

About ACF Technologies

ACF Technologies are a global leader in advanced patient flow management. Through a consultancy-led approach, we help you to streamline interactions from appointment scheduling to on-site arrival of patients and post-treatment feedback. Our solutions improve operational efficiencies, create better and safer patient experiences and, in the current climate, help to take the pressure off vastly stretched resources within the NHS and deliver solutions for social distancing.

What you can do next

The scenarios we propose here are real, achievable, and of great importance to patients and frontline staff who must cope with the risks of Covid-19 while seeking and giving care. Therefore, we are available to immediately discuss options to improve your appointment scheduling systems and maximise patient flow. In the first instance, please email **acfinfo@acftechnologies.com** or call **0333 600 8090** to request an appointment and discuss your requirements or our capabilities.

FAQs

What governmental or Covid-19 work have you been involved in?

From a central government perspective we currently help **The Department for Work and Pensions** to manage citizens on Universal Credit with a large scale appointment and staff scheduling engine.

We are also supporting appointment scheduling for **Covid-19 testing centres across the UK.**

Why is this different from my current appointment scheduling system?

Not all appointment scheduling systems have sophisticated functionality or are suited to large-scale deployment. Q-Flow is a fully scalable and comprehensive platform which will support all of your future requirements, as well as adapting quickly to emergency scenarios such as Covid-19.

How fast could a solution be up and running?

A fully functional solution, tailored for all of your existing processes and security requirements, can be live within weeks to quickly begin maximising patient flow.

Is this an alternative solution or an integrated solution?

Both. Q-Flow is designed to deliver many business improvements in a healthcare environment, and to replace old legacy or entry-level systems. It can also be integrated with existing systems to take advantage of the data you already own.

Does this work with telemedicine solutions like AccuRx and eConsult?

Yes, as the UK turns to online consultation services to stay in touch with patients, it's good to know that Q-Flow will work with all of your existing systems, and third-party systems.

Are ACF qualified to safely manage our data?

Q-Flow is built on industry-leading technologies, with all of the required security layers to safeguard your sensitive data. We also continuously monitor the systems we create, to protect your data using best industry practices.

Can I trial a solution as an NHS professional?

Yes, we offer proof of concept trials as well as access to hands-on demonstration systems. We want you to have all the information you need, so that implementing Q-Flow will deliver the KPI's you expect.

To discuss a trial or schedule a demo please contact us here.

ACF Technologies (UK) Ltd

Technology House, 48-54 Goldsworth Rd, Woking GU21 6LE

acfinfo@acftechnologies.com

0333 600 8090