



## Tech-Savvy Communication

By Kim Norton  
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**From simple to sophisticated, practical tips for using technology to optimize patient outcomes and expand the virtual footprint of your practice.**



We are creatures of habit. We gravitate toward what is known, what is comfortable, and what works, but stepping outside the box can open up new possibilities and opportunities. For O&P practitioners and business owners, venturing beyond the tried and true may not only help to increase patient satisfaction and accessibility, it may also help to streamline business operations.

The O&P EDGE spoke with individuals at two patient care providers who are using some of the latest communication technology tools to serve their patients: Advanced Arm Dynamics (AAD), headquartered in Redondo Beach, California, and biodesigns, Santa Monica, California. Though both of these practices serve upper-limb patients, experts from each practice agree that the technology applications they are taking advantage of are not exclusive to niche practices. With an open mind and a little bit of patience, any practice can use these tools to maximum benefit.



Conyers

## The Intimidation Factor

“The key to embracing technology is to not be afraid of it and not to be intimidated by what you don’t know,” advises Dan Conyers, CPO, national clinical director at AAD. “There is nothing in our practice that cannot be recreated in another practice, regardless of size or scope.” He recommends that practice managers spend some time getting to know the technological comfort levels of their staff and patient population. “By taking a proactive approach and educating everyone involved, these techniques can help your practice be more efficient,” he says.

However, Conyers points out, “Just because you own [a technology] does not mean it is being utilized. Learn how to effectively apply the technology to your practice and make it second nature.” If, for example, a video conference takes 20 minutes to set up while a patient is waiting, it can be counter-productive to the intentions of that video conference, he says.

AAD uses Sharepoint in its research and development programs. Sharepoint is a collaboration software platform that simplifies how information is organized and accessed. “With five, ten, or 20 people working on a topic, it is easy to be overwhelmed with e-mails and updates...[on] project content,” Conyers says. “With Sharepoint, our contributions and communications are...filed systematically, and [it allows] users to access information or input information more effectively.”

## Smartphones, Smart Communication

“Within our clinical group, we rely on smartphone technology for instant, efficient communication such as text messaging, instant e-mail management, and video and picture sharing,” Conyers says. Other communication tools used at AAD include Apple’s instant messaging platform, iChat; web conferencing; and Skype.

Peripheral technology management allows AAD to reach out to patients in a way that is comfortable for them, best meets their specific communication needs, and allows the most avenues for patient/prosthetist interaction. “We discuss what the best communication mode for our individual patients might be and make the most of those interactions,” Conyers explains.

AAD's primary patient demographic is young, active, technology-savvy individuals who demand effective rehabilitation interactions. To streamline clinical interactions, the clinicians use Bluetooth® technology whenever possible to remotely access a patient's prosthesis and subtly tweak it during his or her occupational therapy (OT) sessions.



"It is exciting to have a group of patients interacting in our occupational therapy departments without our interference while our Bluetooth enabled computers can pick up an elbow or terminal device and make minor adjustments to enhance the function. It is not until the patient feels a slight difference in their prosthesis that they know we have even done anything," Conyers says.

Social media is another vital part of AAD's technological toolkit, especially for patients who use it to connect with other amputees. "Our website, Facebook, Vimeo, and YouTube channel allow us to upload a patient's story very quickly. We are seeing patients making connections with their peers while finding confidence and reassurance from a low-key, non-pressured interaction mechanism," he adds.

However, Conyers cautions that when considering using social media marketing—or any new technology—in your practice, "It is vital to understand how to integrate these technologies in keeping with HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996] compliance requirements. Your patients deserve...privacy and to know that your communications with them are confidential and protected."



Alley

## Remote Consulting

Randall Alley, BSc, CP, LP, FAAOP, CEO and chief prosthetist of biodesigns, is a pioneer of remote consulting in O&P. He says that when it comes to adopting new communication technology tools, "Habit is the strongest deterrent from keeping technology from being introduced," he says. Overcoming that mindset can help to make your practice more accessible to patients whose functional limitations make travel difficult for them, and to clinicians who require consultations from a specialist.

“Being diligent with your patients and making communication convenient are the basics of telemedicine,” he says.

As an upper-limb and high-performance prosthetics specialist, Alley does a lot of direct consulting. He also has added remote consulting to his slate of services, which he says not only offers a more economical solution, it also facilitates a team approach to patient care. “Having an entire rehab team conferring with a patient in real time offers a more unified approach to patient care,” Alley explains. By using high-resolution, pan-tilt, two-way interactive cameras he can “look over a clinician’s shoulder” and offer expertise that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. “On my end, I am able to zoom in on the patient’s residual limb or prosthesis while the prosthetist and patient see exactly where I am looking. The patient is able to interact with all members of the team both in the physical office and in the virtual evaluation,” he adds.

Remote consulting is just one of the ways that biodesigns interacts with patients in the virtual world. Like AAD, biodesigns also uses Skype to get a jump on the initial assessment and to get a better sense of the individual in his or her home or work environment. While Skype’s visual capabilities are not equivalent to that of the higher-resolution cameras, it is an effective means of beginning the patient-intake process. Alley says he also uses Skype during the design, delivery, and follow-up phases of patient care.

“This virtual meeting gives patients a certain level of comfort and also allows them to benefit from the use of higher technology,” Alley explains. However, as efficient as a Skype session is for evaluation and patient follow-up, it is intended to complement rather than replace in-office care, he adds.

These applications are not without pitfalls, Alley cautions. “You must know your local laws and understand HIPAA to ensure their regulations are met. Patient consent should be obtained because we can never be too careful in the medical field,” he says

In the end, the effectiveness of any technology depends on the user’s ability to adopt it and integrate it into their daily workflow. Knowing your comfort level with communication technology tools is just as important as knowing your patients’ comfort levels. “Your culture and mindset must be in line with the technology to treat your patients well,” Alley concludes.

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