



6 Personal productivity

Touch typing & speed reading

Free up time & concentration

The computer keyboard is GPs' most-used tool, being used in almost every consultation in every practice. It therefore features much more prominently than the stethoscope. Yet doctors spend months learning to use a stethoscope well, and many have never learned to touch type. This wastes time and creates a source of continual distraction.

Touch typing

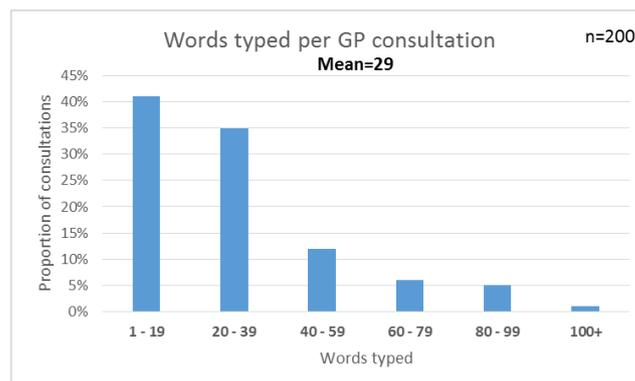
Most professionals are competent in typing, albeit using the so-called 'two-finger' or 'hunt and peck' method. This has three drawbacks for the busy GP:

- It is relatively slow (average 30 words per minute)
- It is more error-prone than touch-typing
- It requires the typist to look at the keyboard more than the screen or the patient.

Learning to touch type generally requires a few minutes' practice each day for two to four weeks. At this stage, most people have managed to increase their typing speed by around 15-20%, and the improvement continues over several weeks. A proficient touch typist almost never needs to look at the keyboard and can achieve an average of 65 words per minute, at least twice as fast.

An audit of consultations at one Manchester practice showed the potential time-saving benefit of learning to touch type. 200 consultations were audited, to measure the number of words typed by the GP in the medical record. This did not take account of any tasks they recorded, or searches conducted during the session.

The number of words typed in the medical record per consultation is shown below.



Averaged across a 40 consultation day, a typical 'hunt and peck' typist (30 wpm) would spend an estimated 29 minutes typing in the record, according to this data. A proficient touch typist (65 wpm) would save an average of 10 minutes per day, with a fast typist (95 wpm) saving 17 minutes.

Speed reading

The average GP is presented with hundreds of pages of information to read each day. Reading quickly and accurately is important for patient safety, clinical effectiveness and personal productivity. However, even professional people vary widely in the speed and accuracy of their reading. Suboptimal practices such as subvocalisation (reading out loud in one's head), regression (re-reading some words or portions of text before moving on), word-by-word reading and word reversal (reading words in the wrong order, often because of regression) are very common, yet significantly slow the reader. Relatively few people have trained themselves to read to the best of their ability.

Slow reading will add time to almost every task in a clinician's day. This will create additional pressure, but may also

impact on patient safety and the effectiveness of consultations. In particular, the amount of information which a GP absorbs from the history prior to a consultation and their ability to quickly check additional details during a consultation may significantly influence their ability to make the best decisions.

Reading speed and accuracy can be increased. Skills for speed reading can be learned. Typically, trainers recommend developing skills which overcome the suboptimal practices above. For certain tasks a focus is also recommended on improving concentration and taking a target approach to selecting portions of text. In clinical work, reading skills are likely to be the most impactful.

Most estimates of average reading speed place it at 250-300 wpm. With training and practice, this can be increased to over 1,000 wpm, and many training programmes aim to get the user up to 1,500 wpm. While it is unlikely that many clinical documents can be read at this speed, owing to the importance of some small details in the text, unlearning bad habits and practising reading skills could be expected to double reading speed for most people without prior training.

Implementation tips

There is a large number of apps available to teach touch-typing and speed reading. Many are free and will run on any device using a web browser. Search “free online touch typing training” or “speed reading” to begin. It is recommended to spend a concentrated period learning the basic techniques and then ten minutes once or twice a day practising.

Having a team focus on this can be helpful. If you choose to have a period improving typing speeds, consider inviting practice secretaries to encourage and support clinicians as they learn.