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The role of the IT vendor in outpatient imaging

By Steven R. Renard

Outpatient imaging centers have long been in hot pursuit of emerging technology. What separates information technology from imaging technology in this environment is the relative experience that outpatient imaging centers have garnered with the tools of these disciplines. Whereas radiologists and center staff typically have expertise in MR and CT, they seldom understand IT, let alone have the ability to anticipate IT needs that may arise in the future, particularly as they apply to RIS/PACS.

Complicating matters, RIS/PACS can be very expensive. Centers can spend over a million dollars in total ownership over a five-year period. Bad purchasing decisions can double the capital investment in these technologies as mistaken purchases have to be fixed with replacement products.

Outpatient imaging centers need special assistance to meet their IT needs. Not only do they require help understanding the basic daily upkeep of a network, they need help understanding how IT can improve their competitiveness and the quality of patient care. Vendors seeking customers in this marketplace are well advised to understand the special requirements of their prospective customers.

Imaging centers need help:

- assessing and subsequently managing the purchase of systems such as RIS and PACS
- developing a comprehensive strategy for supporting these systems
- working with the center's clients, including patients and referring physicians, to ensure that IT systems ultimately improve the services offered by the center
- enhancing efficiencies through the establishment and implementation of appropriate IT protocols

To compete successfully, outpatient imaging centers can no longer simply employ a PC whiz who occasionally stops by to check up on the computers and servers. Rather they must incorporate IT support into their business plans and operational models. Only someone with an intimate understanding of a center's inner workings and needs can navigate the myriad choices of RIS and PACS. Vendors who recognize this need and can direct customers to the means for satisfying it have a leg up on their competition.

RIS and PACS capabilities include many features that enhance efficiency across centers, including Web-based scheduling, electronic patient reminders and notifications of patient status, Web distribution of images and reports, and the ability to burn CDs/DVDs for patients after completion of their studies. All of these technologies have the potential to

improve experiences for referring physicians as well as patients. Internal to the center's workflow, RIS and PACS deployments attempt to make each patient's trip to the center a filmless, paperless event. These technologies lead to more productive employees and a team of radiologists capable of faster, timelier diagnoses.

Of course, this is the ideal application of IT for an outpatient imaging center. In practice, the technologies that should foster significant gains in productivity and enhancements to the patient experience can become a costly distraction from the center's core mission if not properly managed.

Successful deployment of outpatient IT begins with the purchase of appropriate systems. Many vendors develop RIS and PACS for specific segments of the market. Centers are coming to recognize that higher cost does not necessarily equate to a better system. The vendor that can provide IT products suited to the special needs of imaging centers at a lower cost will thrive.

When this challenge is met, the next is coming up with a means for measuring success. There are certain benchmarks to review when evaluating IT benefits, such as the timeliness of patient scheduling or frequency of patients and referring offices hanging up the phone because of a cumbersome scheduling process.

Deploying appropriate IT solutions at outpatient imaging centers can improve productivity, reduce report turnaround times, and save on film, courier, and paper costs. But IT may not make everything digital.

In some cases, despite a center's best attempts to forge ahead with cutting-edge IT systems, referring physicians and patients continue to demand certain traditional technologies, such as films or printed reports. This serves as a reminder that while appropriately applied IT solutions can improve the operation of the center, IT advancements should not distract the center from its core mission of providing quality diagnostic services to physicians and patients.

The key to developing a successful, efficient, and beneficial IT-based imaging center solution lies in IT's ability to continuously meet the needs of a particular center's operations. Today, with customized RIS and PACS programs, the technology exists to create a system that is dedicated to bolstering operations by increasing scan volume, streamlining workflow, and fostering efficiencies, to say nothing of complying with HIPAA regulations. All these functions will ultimately retain competitive advantages and improve bottom line performance while enhancing a center's capabilities.

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