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Healthcare IT Support: Recommendations for a Critical Need

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With the rapid deployment of complex IT implementations in healthcare, the need for enhanced IT support services has never been higher – and will only increase in the near future. It has never been truer that “meaningful use requires meaningful support.” In addition, the sophistication of current IT systems is increasing at an exponential rate. The need for an equally sophisticated support network is critical in the most literal sense.

Consider a physician who, while attending to a patient following surgery, encounters difficulty accessing the patient’s electronic medical records; or a radiologist who is unable to view images for a patient in the ER, where speed can be essential. The business of a hospital goes on all day and night, every day of the week, every week of the year. When a physician can’t enter an order or print a patient list at 2 a.m. on a weekend ... who is available to help?

The Traditional Help Desk Model

Traditionally, hospitals have employed either an internal help desk strategy or, more recently, an external service provider not specializing in healthcare. Some have tried to capitalize on the cost savings of off-shore outsourcing. In both cases a simple call management and triage help desk typically is established to provide support, which often lacks the bandwidth to manage multiple cases simultaneously. During off-peak hours and weekends, calls are either fielded by the operations staff or, more than likely, sent to voicemail or to the hospital switchboard operator.

“The level of service required to support the 24x7x365 IT needs of clinical staff is irrefutably greater than in almost any other IT environment.”

Traditional call-center models, while able to manage higher call volumes, typically employ IT generalists who lack the healthcare specific expertise needed to support the electronic clinical systems and therefore are unable to achieve first-call resolution of problems on a consistent basis. While they may be able to address minor support calls, such as password resets, serious problems are often passed to a single on-call person, or worse yet, the problems end up unresolved.

Improvisation as a Solution

Frustrated by the inability of the traditional help desk to deal with sophisticated clinical applications, many hospitals put together their own ad-hoc support system. As described in a January 2009 publication by the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, Saving Lives, Saving Money in Practice, hospitals participating in a study of support for computerized physician order entry (CPOE) employed a combination of support methods:

Physicians can call local nurses either directly or referred from the hospital help desk. There are also designated “super users,” both among experienced physicians and trained assistants. Back-up staff are also reachable on off-hours via mobile phone and remote observation of the user’s computer screen.

Internal arrangements like this can work, but also draw nurses and physicians away from their primary responsibility, patient care. It seems far from the ideal of a single, integrated support system that can be relied upon to function consistently, with the near-100% reliability that is crucial to the function of the modern, well-wired hospital. What’s needed is an application that does all this and more: an enhanced help desk that is really more of a “service desk.”

Recommendations: The Top Five

1. Staff or agents who respond to calls must learn the clinical process. This is really “support transformation.” Because of the blurring of the lines between IT and clinical processes, service desk personnel can no longer confine themselves to handling technical questions while referring clinical questions to subject matter experts. They must become experts themselves in the clinical processes so that they understand and can prioritize urgent incidents. If a new IT system is being put into place in the hospital, the service desk support staff should attend the same training sessions as the clinical staff. Although they’re not practicing medicine, they need the same in-depth knowledge of the system and how it relates to clinical procedures.
2. The service desk system must employ a good remote control tool that enables an agent to take over the caller’s computer screen in order to better diagnose the problem then resolve it. This “global support approach ” follows the physician or clinician anywhere – hospital, office, or home. Since the caller is already in an urgent situation, almost by definition, the agent can’t spend the time explaining over the phone; he or she has to be able to take over and walk the caller through the actual fix. If there is time, the agent can describe how to avoid the problem again – but the primary goal is to let the physician get on with the clinical work.
3. Have the entire spectrum of IT tools integrated into the front-line service. Besides the remote-control capability, staff analysts who man the desk themselves and respond to the calls, should be able to pro-actively monitor the hospital systems. When a call comes in, the agent should know immediately what area of the hospital it’s coming from and if all their systems are functioning – before even dealing with the specific problem. Just as a physician must have all possible information in front of him or her to diagnose a problem, so must a service desk agent have instant access to the total picture.
4. A complete clinical and technical “support knowledge base” must be available to agents to access real time The knowledge base should be feature- and content-rich.
5. Explore a “shared cost” solution in order to spread the investment of the enhanced service desk across multiple hospital system. While improvisation, off-shoring, or simply employing a bare-bones help desk may seem to work in the short term, it is not cost-effective in the long term. Less support means that clinical professionals are not spending their valuable time doing what they are trained to do – and patient care can suffer for it.

“When the technology, organizational structure, processes and customer focus of the help desk are well-defined, everyone who interacts with the hospital benefits.”

"In the healthcare environment, the help desk must dramatically exceed the expectations of a traditional support service designed for the general business environment."



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Cross-Platform Expertise

In addition, today's advanced service desk professional must be able to provide assistance between the major IT platforms, such as Epic, Cerner, McKesson, etc., besides dealing with the usual clinical processes. It is not sufficient to pass a question or problem off to the Cerner group or the Epic group or the GE group because of lack of familiarity. To complicate the situation, hospitals are often in transition between platforms, so they need support between the legacy applications and the new – simultaneously. It is simply not an efficient option to rely on two help desk support systems. The service desk must be able to do it all.

The Total Solution

Ultimately the service desk support model is one that hospital staff can call upon for a wide range of support issues. If the infrastructure is available and performing optimally, doctors and nurses can spend more time at the bedside and less time on the phone trying to understand and resolve system issues.

Clinical IT support has often been thought of as a commodity that could be outsourced to the lowest bidder. But forward-looking CIOs and hospital leadership now are recognizing that the effort required to support today's users, with increasingly complex systems and applications, is growing exponentially – and that a truly thoughtful, advanced "service desk" strategy, keyed to the clinical process, can improve quality and reduce costs.

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