

Hospitals  
outsource  
help desks  
to improve  
clinician  
satisfaction

# Helping your help desk

**B**arnabas Health in West Orange, N.J., used to run its own help desk for employees' routine IT problems, but help desk staff required additional training and experience to manage the calls on clinical applications that are a key part of the support clinicians require in today's EHR environment.

"Clinicians were requesting a higher level of clinical support," recalls Matthew B. Peddie, system director for customer relationship management at Barnabas Health, which has six acute-care hospitals and hundreds of employed physician practices.

Last year, Barnabas Health switched to an outsourced service with Troy, Mich.-based CareTech Solutions. Customer satisfaction has improved and is now in the 90th percentile. CareTech's Service Desk operation handles 17,000 contacts per month for Barnabas Health.

More hospitals are opting to outsource their help desks at a time when the volume of clinical system questions is rising and the need to get them answered as fast as possible is becoming more crucial. Old in-house operations are struggling as hospitals build and refine their EHR systems, enhance security features and cope with regulatory changes like quality reporting and ICD-10.

To be effective, hospital help desks need to be open all the time. But a 24/7 operation can be prohibitively expensive for a hospital or even a hospital system. Also, it is difficult to find qualified staff: Nearly one-third of healthcare providers have delayed IT projects because they couldn't find the staff to support them, according to the 2013 Workforce Survey of the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS).

## Concerns about outsourcing

**E**ven as many hospitals are unhappy with their in-house help desks, they are also wary of outsourcing. The quality of such operations varies widely. Many vendors depend on poorly trained representatives based at offshore locations, or use the same analysts to service clients across



many different industries. Recent studies have shown that more than 75% of businesses were dissatisfied with outsourcing help desks.

Peddie confesses that initially, he was a little concerned about handing over Barnabas Health's IT help desk operations to an outside company. Even though he was impressed with CareTech, he wasn't sure about losing control. According to a 2010 survey by HDI, a professional association and certification body, fear of losing control of services was the top reason that organizations were not outsourcing, even ahead of service quality, customer acceptance and cost.

So Barnabas Health initially opted for a hybrid approach with CareTech. "Our in-house call team was the first level of response, with CareTech handling the overflow, off-hours and all clinical questions, because our team was not clinical," Peddie says. When customer satisfaction surveys showed greater satisfaction with the outsourced team, it helped Barnabas Health make its decision to fully outsource its Enterprise Service Desk to CareTech.

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## How outsourcing works

CareTech Solutions was formed in 1998 as a joint venture among the Detroit Medical Center, Oakwood Healthcare and Compuware Corp. It has grown considerably since then, with a 75% increase in new Service Desk clients in 2012 alone. Today, its Service Desk serves more than 200 hospitals.

“To be effective, outsourced help desks should be based in the United States and involve highly trained analysts who have great customer service skills,” says Karl Graham, senior director of Service Desk at CareTech. “Hospital help desks should be focused exclusively on the industry and have a firm footing in clinical matters. They should be available 24/7 and be backed up with an adequate knowledge base.”

Part of CareTech’s philosophy is that the first level of service should be able to resolve almost all issues, even clinical calls, without having to be transferred. To reach this goal, CareTech has mastered all major EHR systems and learns each hospital’s customizations. When Barnabas Health moved to a new clinical information system, for instance, CareTech experts sat in with staff on new system classes. “They made notes on all the little tweaks in the software system,” Peddie recalls.

The information is part of CareTech’s knowledge base, which its service analysts can consult when fielding calls. CareTech also covers a hospital’s business applications and clinical software. The company covers 132 software applications at Barnabas Health.

Training is a key part of CareTech’s success. According to the HDI survey, lack of sufficient training is the most important factor in customer dissatisfaction with help desks. Graham says CareTech hires analysts who see their work as a career, not just a job. “We choose newly graduated college students with backgrounds in clinical, IT or customer service,” he says, “then we train them in the other two types of expertise.”

Each analyst trains in a specific EHR system, which takes about six weeks, and also receives certification, where applicable. Not only are analysts available round the clock, but when a hospital adds a software patch or makes some other change, CareTech increases the number of available analysts to meet a higher call volume.

CareTech also designates “incident managers” to handle higher-urgency tickets, either onsite or from the company headquarters. The incident manager meets regularly with hospital staff to discuss issues. The company monitors end-user satisfaction monthly and regularly performs trend analysis to understand common problems among callers so that they can be proactively addressed to keep call volumes down.

When a help desk is unable to quickly answer a physician’s question, the entire care process can be slowed. That is why the company pays particular attention to physicians’ needs and offers a physicians-only hotline. With more



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physicians serving more than one hospital – all of which likely use different EHR systems – their learning curve is a little steeper.

### Impact on hospitals

Customers are seeing a payoff from CareTech’s approach. According to industry data, the cost per call ranges from \$15 to \$30 when an issue is handled on the first call, \$50 to \$75 when it is escalated to an IT expert and \$100-plus on third tier-calls that would normally require contacting the vendor. Because CareTech’s approach means that most issues can be handled by help desk analysts on the first call, the cost per call is kept lower and the hospital’s highly skilled IT resources can be allocated more appropriately.

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Graham says CareTech performs well on all key measurements, including the time it takes to reach an analyst, time spent with the analyst and resolution on the first call. The company resolves 90% of issues on the first call, including clinical issues. He adds that CareTech’s ultimate goal is helping end-users focus on patient care. “Instead of spending lots of time on the phone,” he says, “caregivers can spend more time with their patients.”

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### **About CareTech Solutions**

CareTech Solutions is an information technology (IT) and Web products and services provider for U.S. hospitals and health systems, creating value for clients through customized IT solutions that contribute to improving patient care while lowering healthcare costs. From implementing emerging technologies to supporting day-to-day IT operations, CareTech offers clients expert health information technology services earning it the 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011 Best in KLAS award for IT Outsourcing (Extensive), and the 2012 IT Partial Outsourcing as ranked by healthcare executives and professionals in the respective annual “Best in KLAS Awards: Software & Services” report. For more information, please visit [www.caretech.com](http://www.caretech.com).



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