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Beyond EMR: Digitizing Your Other Paper Records

Converting paper files to digital offers many benefits

By *Carrie Rossenfeld*

Whether or not you've made the transition to electronic medical records (EMR), you should consider going digital with your other paper records. Electronic record-keeping not only frees up office space for other uses, but also adds layers of security to your files, makes them more easily accessible to you and your staff, and reduces the risk of filing errors.

Digitizing saves time and helps your practice run more efficiently because you can easily locate information rather than rummaging through paper files, some of which could be incomplete or illegible.

What's more, going digital can save you money. You're no longer paying for shredding, disposal or file storage, and you can use former file room space for revenue-generating services. You may even be able to lease a smaller office since you won't need file space, which could dramatically decrease your rent.

And of course, digitizing helps you go "green" as it dramatically reduces paper usage in your office.

What can you make paperless?

In addition to billing, digital files can be kept for prescriptions, notes, appointment scheduling, employee records, legal documentation, insurance, purchase orders, bank statements – just about anything for which you normally keep paper files or put on paper.

"If I am prescribing a medication that might interact with another medication a patient is taking, the e-prescribing system immediately alerts me," says S. Mike Neskovic, M.D., a family medicine and geriatrics practitioner in Glendale, Calif. "By going completely paperless, I also have more time to spend with my patients."

Converting all your paper files to electronic records can be time-consuming and expensive, especially if your practice has been around for a long time, so it's best to choose which paper makes the most sense to convert. With the advances in electronic record-keeping, there are quite a few systems available, allowing you to choose the one that works best for what you want to digitize.

For example, document management companies like Cintas offer document storage and imaging capabilities that help your practice operate digitally moving forward while making your paper records available in an "on demand" electronic format, explains Jim Johnson, director of document management for Cintas in Mason, Ohio.

Choosing the right system

To choose the right system, you should examine your current situation, the types of documents you have and your workflow requirements. Then, work within your existing processes to assess where you need digitized documents. For example, you may discover that insurance creates the most paper in your office, or billing records, or invoices.

Once you've figured out what you want to digitize, explore your technology options. Automatic data-capturing and imaging systems tend to be the most efficient, and web-based systems ensure easy access and portability.

"Look for document capture and management software solutions that are scalable and promote growth and flexibility," suggests Brian Bagan, director of business development for the document imaging division of Kodak's Business Solutions and Services Group.

Choose technology that will strengthen your existing office processes and situations, eliminate costs and drive efficiency. Then, work with your technology providers to monitor your results and assess adjustments, changes or the need for additional software.

Tackling the challenges

Experts say one of the biggest challenges to electronic documentation of paper files is the time it takes to convert paper files to digital.

"One of the biggest obstacles the practices we serve encounter is the time required for scanning and indexing the documents into the system," says Betty Otter-Nickerson, president of Sage Healthcare Division in Tampa, Fla. "While someone must be assigned this role, it is typically the same person who would have file clerk duties."

You can hire a company to come in and digitize everything over a finite period or time, or use your existing resources and slowly digitize the information on nights and weekends – there are always solutions.

Price is another daunting factor, as initial upfront costs can be expensive.

"But once everything is set up and running, the return on investment is usually achieved within a year," says Carmela Wong, vice president of marketing for data technology company ABBYY USA in Milpitas, Calif.

Plus you'll see reduced spending in other areas of running your business, as mentioned above. And, while you will be paying for the technology and services fees, there are ways to increase your return on investment.

If you're already transitioning patient medical records to EMR, in some cases you can use the same technology system you're currently using for digitizing other files, according to Richard Lopez del Rincon, executive vice president of Miami-based CareCloud, which offers physicians web-based back-office solutions for billing and collections.

However, most EMR systems require you to adapt to a different method of working and recording information, which may be burdensome to do with all of your paper files, warns Jon Langdon, director of professional services for Westbrook Technologies in Branford, Conn.

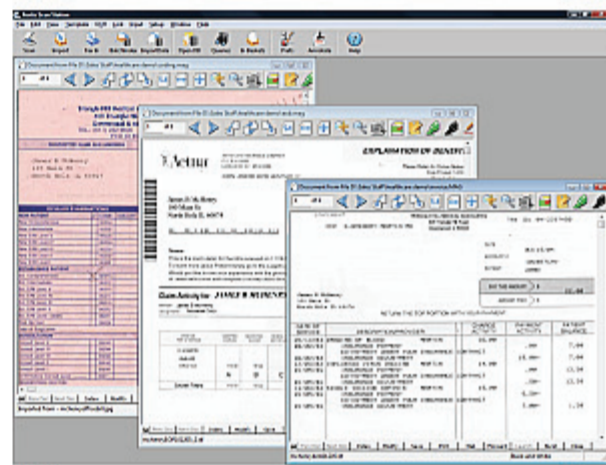
If you haven't yet made the transition to digital medical records, consider a document management system that captures information in its existing form, which can be used for all your documents in addition to patient medical records to maximize your technology dollars. Some EMR systems can be used successfully in conjunction with document management software; assess your needs, your investment in existing IT and your budget to determine what will work best for you.

To be safe

Be sure to digitize your records to more than one medium, which can include hard drives, optical discs, off-site servers and secure Internet repositories.

"Doing so will better insure that medical practices won't lose their data if one medium becomes corrupted," says Steve Olson, CEO of Olson DataMax in Bountiful, Utah. "Most importantly, whatever they store needs to be indexed and easily retrievable."

And don't forget to do your due diligence to make sure you're dealing with a reputable vendor and getting the best value.



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