Change in Action: Tour Previews HealthEast Document Imaging Project

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by David Sweet, MLS

For the first time, members at this year's National Convention had the opportunity to visit local hospitals to preview emerging technologies in action. Members toured the Woodwinds Health Campus in Woodbury, MN (a part of the HealthEast Care System), to preview its document imaging implementation project.

The tour was led by Therese McCarthy, RHIA, director of health records services, and Kari Karstens, RHIA, system administrator, who described how the HealthEast Care System implemented the first document imaging system in the state of Minnesota. This implementation occurred in several of the system's acute care facilities.

Getting Started

McCarthy and Karstens coordinated a team consisting of both hospital and vendor project managers, a steering council, an operations coordinating team, a physician computer advisory team, and other work groups such as IT, forms redesign, policies and procedures, communication, and training. The project used a phased approach to design and implement the document imaging system. The implementation schedule spanned several months and facilities throughout the system between March 2000 and March 2001.

Before implementation could proceed, one of the first items to consider was a redesign of medical record chart forms. This process, which resulted in better forms control, according to HIM staff, took about a year.

Tackling Staffing, Productivity Issues

As with any new project, staffing was a primary consideration. When determining staffing needs for its document imaging implementation project, HealthEast sampled 10 charts per patient type, which involved measuring annual encounters and the average pages per encounter as well as the percentage of pages sent electronically. Issues such as scanner speed and the need for dual system support led to changes in the HIM department's productivity.

Another important productivity issue was rotating work among cross-trained staff. Staff members also determined that they should develop separate job descriptions for scanning and indexing. Productivity measures were based on:

- Bar-coded document types versus non-bar-coded document types
- No encounter information on bar codes
- Combination of inpatients, outpatients, and ERs
- Number of oversized documents

Productivity measures were derived based on an eight-hour day using equipment scanning 60 to 90 pages per minute. A minimum of 1,000 documents were scanned per day as well as at least 400 documents indexed per day.

An Eye for Design

HealthEast also took department design as well as ergonomic elements into consideration. One important design aspect was the elimination of carpeting in the scanning area of the imaging room to avoid static electricity that could interfere with quality. Extra room was created for scanners so that staff could access them in case of paper jams. HealthEast's design elements also included an L-shaped desk area with plenty of work surface, deep space areas designed for large monitors, and rollaway surfaces to accommodate right- or left-handed staff.

Also on the Agenda

Information technology is, of course, a vital element in any imaging project. Around-the-clock system administration support is a priority at HealthEast because of its overnight scanning time goal. As a result, it was critical for everyone involved in the process (particularly HIM staff) to understand the network capabilities. HealthEast created an HIM liaison to work with the IT department to make sure everyone could understand what the network could do.

Other considerations include documented help desk procedures and comprehensive plans for upgrades. It was also crucial to develop down time or "crash" procedures and test them, as well as to identify and work with on-site "super users" to test and troubleshoot the system.

Ongoing costs also needed to be considered. Optical disks can cost as much as $60 each. Hardware maintenance, upgrades, and replacements must be factored into project costs, as well as off-site storage and destruction of scanned records.

Release of information was also considered. HealthEast had previously outsourced this service, but with the document imaging project, it decided to bring this function back in house to increase revenue and to become HIPAA compliant, HIM staff said.

For HIM professionals considering a project like this, HealthEast staff recommended considering additional issues such as policies and procedures for queue monitoring, down time, printing, access-level efficiency versus confidentiality, corrected documents, security audits, and electronic signatures.

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