Exploring the Remote Release of Information

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By Bonnie Coffey and Justine Paulson

Release of Information (ROI) continues to be an integral component of the health information management (HIM) department. Before copiers and fax machines, medical record librarians would create a handwritten abstract of a patient's medical history and then mail it to the requestor through the US Postal Service. Today the convergence of electronic health records (EHRs) and the Internet has created the opportunity to pull, organize, redact, and send records without ever stepping into the medical facility. Remote ROI is becoming an attractive option for some healthcare facilities, though moving ROI off-site comes with both benefits and challenges for HIM.

Remote ROI Defined

The opportunities to work away from the HIM office and the ability to centralize ROI functions are two key reasons healthcare facilities implement remote ROI functions. Because of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' "meaningful use" EHR Incentive Program, more provider offices and hospitals have selected and installed an EHR. The ability to access the EHR from another location is what enables remote ROI. "This remote access is accomplished via locked down site-to-site VPNs, locked down client-to-site VPNs or a secured gateway," says Marlin Anderson, president of Acme Lan Consulting in Minneapolis, MN.

With remote ROI, a center or office is established whereby the requests for medical records are completed in a centralized fashion. This center or office could be miles away from the HIM department or in the next room. Requests from multiple medical offices can all be processed at one location, no matter where the remote center or medical facilities are located.

Benefits of Remote ROI

Working remotely can aid in the efficient processing of a request for records. Requests are generally scanned into a secure folder and viewable only through secure access. An employee can see the request, verify the patient's identity, process the request, and document the completion of the request. Then the employee can mail, fax, or send the records electronically through ROI modules or another program designed specifically for the remote capture and sending of electronic information.

Healthcare organizations with multiple locations can benefit from the centralization and remote access of the EHR. Physician offices and hospital HIM departments with limited space can have the requests completed at a remote office with a larger work footprint. Facilities that partner with a remote ROI vendor can repurpose the on-site space once used for processing requests for other revenue-producing options, such as exam rooms or other patient services. Real estate that was once an expense to the organization can generate income and reduce an organization's overhead expenses.

When remote access is allowed, work can be transferred to other locations to aid in times of employee absences or turnover, allowing the efficient and consistent completion of work. Work can be transferred to other workers and divided between more employees when there are spikes in the number and type of requests. This helps prevent backlogs from occuring.

Another benefit is the consistent response to requests for records. With remote ROI, multiple facility systems can have one or two employees respond to all requests rather than one person at each location. Consistency in ROI begets execution of the medical provider or hospital ROI policies. By using a phone tree, calls can be routed to the remote ROI office where one or two individuals can answer calls and assist patients with questions about how to get their medical information. This allows employees to provide status check updates to callers rather than having calls segmented to each provider office or hospital with multiple people providing customer service.

Remote ROI gives medical facilities with lower request volumes the option to have requests processed every day. Lower request volume medical facilities typically can only staff employees one or two days a week in the interest of keeping costs

low. Remote ROI employees work with multiple locations, allowing facilities to have their records processed daily with no added charge. Processing requests every day is crucial for medical facilities participating in the meaningful use program and tracking its various requirements.

Technology Challenges and Specifications

While today's technology does allow greater connectivity, efficiency, and quicker processing of record requests, there are some downsides. First, the right bandwidth and connectivity must be in place so that files can be viewed, printed, faxed, or moved efficiently. It is very frustrating for patients and HIM professionals to wait endlessly for a file to download, or for access to the EHR to be granted. If there is not enough bandwidth in the Internet connection, connection speeds suffer.

While the remote ROI location must have above average bandwidth, the hospital, clinic, or other facility housing the EHR must have adequate bandwidth as well. Dependable high speed Internet connections are necessary for sustaining consistent end-to-end connectivity.

"Without these minimum considerations the connections and download times will grind to a crawl, thus erasing any efficiencies one would gain through the remote ROI connections," Anderson says.

Using a virtual private network (VPN) is one way to establish secure connectivity to the EHR. Remote access VPNs allow an individual user to connect to a remote and often geographically separate network through the Internet. Security is provided by tunneling protocols and security procedures using encryption. Site-to-site VPNs allow the networks of multiple users interconnection to the main network. Authentication and encryption are absolute necessities of VPNs to prevent the disclosure of protected health information to others present on the network. VPNs allow users to access files, printers, and databases just as if the user were at a desk at the facililty included in the local area network (LAN). The VPN tunnel is further tightened by allowing specific remote ROI machines and user(s) access to a specific device on the network. This is usually accomplished through some type of remote access that runs through the tunnel.

Some organizations are reluctant to issue VPN access to employees since additional time is needed to monitor and manage the VPN access. The organization's security policies must also be managed, adding additional duties to an already overworked information services (IS) department.

When prioritizing tasks for the IS department, providing VPN access to employees for the convenience of working at another location may not be a top priority. The opportunity to gain better productivity and efficient use of employees may not be realized due to the additional work needed from IS.

Aside from these technology specifications, knowledge of the ROI process is important for efficiency when processing a request remotely. A process map works well to instruct employees how to move through the ROI process to return a request, request a prepayment, or receive payment for records. In the electronic world, the tangible benefits of handling paper and filing a request in the "correspondence" section of the chart are not available, so a visual map of the process is needed for all employees processing requests remotely in order to gain efficiency in the remote ROI process.

Remote ROI and the Hybrid Record

Remote ROI will work in a hybrid record environment. Some efficiency may be lost due to changes in the record request process. Having five years of records available for electronic access is optimal, according to Courtney Rooney, regional manager for release of information service company CM Information Specialists's remote ROI center. Since many requests ask for up to five years of records, the efficiencies gained by using an EHR in a remote office can be maximized, Rooney says.

The ROI process changes with the hybrid record, such as when scanned images from the paper record are needed to complete the request. The remote process map must now involve help from someone who can access the paper record. The paper record must be scanned and the images must be made available to the remote ROI employees either electronically or by fax. Once the paper records are received they can be combined with the electronic records and then mailed or faxed to the requester.

Quality Management a Priority

Successful completion of any request, whether on-site or in a remote location, also involves steps for quality management. Identification of the patient is done on each page prior to mailing or faxing the records. As in the paper environment, electronic records can still be "misfiled."

Once quality management is done, the delivery of the records is completed and the request is updated in an accounting of disclosures or in software that tracks the completion of requests.

With the right technical components and an analysis of the ROI process, HIM departments can leverage remote ROI to utilize the power of the organization's EHR, improve workflows, and maximize the utilization of office space in the department.

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