

Technology Support is Critical for Practices and Clinics: *How to Choose Wisely*

By: Van Pilkinton, VP of Business Development for RealTime, LLC, of Alabama.



The Coexistence of Healthcare and Technology...

Healthcare today is delivered using a complex web of systems requiring linked-together levels of technology that facilitate the critical flow of information necessary for medical professionals to provide services and care for patients. These technology miracles are tools built by humans to serve humans and even as wonderful as they can sometimes be, when they fail, they cause havoc, disrupt the processes and interdependent information flows that help us stay healthy... physically, mentally and financially.

Bottom-line: The delivery of excellent healthcare services, the business of healthcare, and the governance/compliance of these systems make it impossible to function without the use of communication and information technology. Thus these critical machines must be *serviced* to remain fully functional and efficient in their daily operation.

As recently as the 1970's only large metropolitan healthcare facilities with hundreds of employees and hundreds of beds had the resources, spacious facilities, and budgets to have mainframe computers and PBX phone systems. It took scores of personnel to operate and service these huge technological machines that operated as isolated islands of information. Their applications were relatively simple when it came to functions relating to patient care. Business accounting and billing systems comprised the majority of their programs. It cost millions of dollars a year for basic computer and communications services and only the largest organizations were adequately funded to take advantage of the technology of the day.

Fast forward to 2014. Today we have powerful technologies that perform operations and communicate millions of times faster than the technical dinosaurs of 40 years ago. However,

healthcare systems of today, with all their advances, still require the services of humans to keep them operational and efficient. This service is typically offered within two major categories and a hybrid model. (1) In-house technology support, (2) Out-sourced technology support and (3) A hybrid mixture of the two. The latter two models involve the introduction and use of "Managed Services" for the support of computer and communications systems.

Managed services allow a business owner the opportunity to contract specific IT and communications operations to a professional service provider, known as a Managed Services Provider or MSP, and that MSP, in effect, becomes the Technology Services Department. As the name implies, the MSP provides a largely behind the scenes, proactive, managed approach to maintaining systems and assumes ongoing responsibility for monitoring, managing and problem resolution for selected IT systems, communications systems, and networked business systems.

Managed Services Providers can offer services such as problem notification alerts, security services, software patch management, data backup, disaster recovery for client devices including desktops, notebooks, tablets, EHR application servers, storage systems, networks and applications. Outsourcing routine infrastructure management to experienced managed services professionals enables the practice or clinical administrator to focus on running their practices and clinics, while minimizing interruptions due to technology issues. Many of these services are designed specifically to help a practice become compliant with HIPAA guidelines and to protect the security and integrity of patient records.

Managed Services Providers usually price their services on a subscription basis. Depending on the services provided, pricing can be based on the number of IT users or the number

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continued...

of devices, with different packages offered for different levels of service. Pricing models offer flexibility to a practice enabling them to choose the best fit for their organization. Customer support is routinely provided by remote access to systems but includes onsite support when needed.

Basic services for larger organizations often begin with monitoring services which only notify onsite staff of problems that can be addressed by their in-house support team. Premium levels of support provide fully managed IT and communications support services covering everything from monitoring to problem resolution.

Typically the MSP performs an initial assessment of the current IT and communications environment to determine which managed services best fit the business needs of the healthcare practice or clinic. The findings are then presented along with descriptions of the services and service levels offered by the MSP that fit those needs.

Differences between Large and Small Healthcare Technology Requirements

Just like larger healthcare organizations, small and medium sized practices and clinics need technology to operate efficiently and to function effectively. Technology also plays an important part in maintaining HIPAA compliance. However, as reliance on IT grows, resources to support an increasingly complex technology environment may not. In most small and medium sized practices and clinics, IT resources are minimal at best and can be quickly overwhelmed by the day-to-day responsibilities of keeping the IT infrastructure that is critical to the medical business up and running.

If a practice falls behind in keeping up with things such as data backups, patches and security, odds are they will face a systems outage or other problem down the road that will negatively impact the business. For instance, if the e-mail server, customer relationship management system, financial application, EHR application, or network goes down unexpectedly, substantial productivity and revenue losses can result.

In larger healthcare environments that employ a dedicated staff of IT support personnel, the Managed Services Provider acts as an extension of the IT department, taking care of routine IT infrastructure monitoring, alerting and management around the clock, freeing up the IT staff to focus on other critical projects. By proactively monitoring and maintaining systems, an MSP can prevent many technology problems. Should an issue occur, an experienced MSP can troubleshoot and resolve it efficiently and cost effectively.

Unlike traditional outsourcing situations where an organization gives up complete control of its IT assets, employing an MSP affords the practice the opportunity to decide which services should be handled by the service provider and which services

they want to control themselves. The practice retains full visibility into all processes and management of systems but enjoys the freedom of relying on an efficient, flexible team of technology professionals who address the ever changing needs of the organization at a fraction of the cost of expanding in-house resources. In addition, the MSP subscription model gives a practice more expense predictability.

Summary: What to Consider When Looking for a Managed Service Provider

MSP's can offer a wide range of different services and can focus on managing specific areas and operations such as management services for servers, storage, networks, desktop management and help desk services. Some provide hardware hosting services and support for various applications such as practice management, EHR and e-mail. Over the last few years some MSP's have developed services packages that can support practices and clinics that use cloud based applications.

The top professional managed service firms provide more comprehensive services, including alerting, monitoring, and customized management services for a wide range of client, network, servers and applications. Having this range of service offerings gives businesses a choice of service levels that best fit individual needs according to the size of the practice or clinic. Services are provided remotely and onsite as needed or required for projects.

There are various types of MSPs and different levels of offerings so choosing an MSP can sometimes be difficult. When considering managed services, define your specific requirements carefully. Review the past year of service and do a checklist showing how satisfied you are with the level and quality of support that you have today. Determine the pain points, inefficiencies and recurring problems in the current IT infrastructure management. Evaluate the professionalism of the technical support team and the involvement and expertise of the MSP management team. Record downtime, outages and other problems that impact your practice or clinic. Does the MSP have the expertise and consulting capabilities to help guide you as technology changes and evolves and to protect you from the financial "gotcha's" of the industry?

These are just a few pointers on service requirements that can be used as basic criteria for evaluating an MSP and choosing the one that maps best to your practice or clinic technologies and budget requirements. Finally, before you make your decision, always talk to the MSP's references who are specifically healthcare users.

About the Author: *Van Pilkinton is the VP of Business Development for RealTime, LLC, of Alabama. Beginning in 2000, RealTime was one of the first true IT Managed Service Providers in the country and serves clients across the Southeastern U.S. For questions and advisory on the topics of supporting the technology and business of medicine, contact Van at vpilkinton@realtime-it.com or call at (205) 999-9915.*

Do You Know Kid One Transport?

Kid One Transport has been serving Alabama residents since 1997 with a mission to provide free or at low cost transportation services to medical appointments for children under the age of nineteen and expectant mothers. Transportation is provided in SUVs, vans, and large-capacity

handicapped accessible vehicles, and allows for children and mothers to access care that they would otherwise not be able to reach if they did not use Kid One services. Over 97% of the clients served by Kid One do not own a vehicle or cannot afford to operate the one they do own due to financial restraints. Over 70% of Kid One clients do not have access to public transportation. A study published by the Transportation Research Board of the National Academies found that more than 70,000 Alabama residents miss or delay non-emergency health care each year due to transportation issues.

Kid One provides transportation to medical appointments including routine doctor visits, dental and vision check-ups, prenatal visits, mental health appointments, as well as lifesaving chemotherapy, radiation, surgeries, dialysis, and many others which require regular and often frequent visits to medical facilities. Kid One operates in a 39 county service area transporting clients, bringing many clients back into Jefferson County for their necessary medical appointments. In 2013,



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Kid One's ability to provide access to preventative care is particularly important in reducing unnecessary emergency room or hospitalization confinement costs to the patient,

the health care provider and the health care facility. Many rural areas and counties do not have the services necessary to assist patients and they must travel into the Jefferson County for care. Kid One helps to decrease the number of missed appointments in your facilities. Lack of transportation is not only a barrier to seeking care but it is also a barrier to reaching care. The primary goal of Kid One is to ensure that no child or expectant mother in our service area will ever have to skip medical care because of a lack of transportation to their appointment. If you have a patient who could use the assistance of Kid One, they can obtain more information at 1-800-543-7143 or can complete an application on-line at www.kidone.org. If you would like posters or pamphlets about the program for your office, contact Carolyn Neiswender at cneiswender@kidone.org.

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Upcoming Events

- Nov. 6 JCMS Annual Social Event – The Club from 6:00p.m. to 8:00 p.m.
- Nov. 17 Executive Committee Meeting – 5:30 p.m.
Board of Directors Meeting – 6:30 p.m.
- Nov. 18 The Wayne Finley 811 Breakfast Meeting – Dr. Ed Partridge will speak at 8:30 a.m. in the JCMS Board Room
- Dec. 16 The Wayne Finley 811 Breakfast Meeting – Jane Brown, a Licensed Professional Counselor, will speak at 8:30 a.m. in the JCMS Board Room

Contact Juanita Pruitt at 933-8601 or jpruitt@jcmsalabama.org for more information regarding any of the above events.



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