

Connecting the IT Disconnect

Streamlining operational processes

FIRST IN A SIX-PART SERIES

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The DRA and the current economic downturn are a one-two punch that has left many imaging facilities struggling for solutions to the age-old question of how to control or reduce costs without sacrificing care.

One emerging solution is the achievement of interoperability, or the ability to make formerly incompatible communications systems, such as RIS, PACS and VR, work together in perfect harmony.

Interoperability has moved to the fore of systems upgrades because of its ability to realign people and processes without disrupting current workflow. On the other end, when true interoperability is achieved, improved workflow, and all of its fiscal benefits, is both measurable and sustainable.

Implementing a solution

Annette Simmons is the IT Manager/Systems Administrator for Medical Imaging Northwest (MINW) in Lakewood, Wash. Simmons is overseeing the installation of a single enterprise-wide worklist solution, integrating digital imaging and data management systems at multiple sites in the Tacoma, Wash., area, including diagnostic imaging centers, Good Samaritan Hospital and Allenmore Hospital.

To understand the magnitude of this transition and the efficiencies it will produce, MINW's 24 radiologists currently read approximately 350,000 diagnostic imaging exams across 12 sites in Washington.

With interoperability, MINW expects to provide workflow and data management, workflow viewing, patient ID management, short term archiving requirements and report management to support its service expansion goals of handling more than 550,000 diagnostic imaging exams a year, without adding personnel.

MINW became aware that even within the same vendors, there are interoperability challenges and chose the MEDxConnect™ System from Compressus to resolve them.

"Between the hospitals and the imaging centers, they may have even the same brand of RIS or PACS but there was no guarantee that results would be readable at each location," said Simmons.

Before discovering MEDxConnect, the situation at MINW evolved to the point of having to provide additional manpower to fill in the gaps in their current system. "We turned to hiring a full-time tech aide whose sole job is to gather data for radiologists to read. It was just not an efficient use of a radiologist's time so we hired someone [to assist them]," said Simmons.

Interoperability and the IT connection

The MEDxConnect System acts as a communications hub, enabling various PACS, HIS, RIS and other data information systems to connect and communicate across the enterprise. Utilizing HL7, DICOM, voice recognition systems and other standards, the system helps control the flow of images, reports, messages, standard patient demographics and other important data for diagnosis and treatment planning of a patient between otherwise independent and disparate systems.

The integrated imaging and data management solution from Compressus is designed to support a facility's current and expanded workload and provide an infrastructure for sustained growth. Building the functionality required for remote connectivity, the system enables users to access diagnostic images and reports in the existing data stores at each facility, increasing the level of medical care while reducing the associated costs.

One of the goals for Simmons and MINW is greater ease of subspecialty reads. "We want to push specific studies to specific radiologists. But the radiologist has to sit at certain spot in order to do the read. With the MEDxConnect System he can sit anywhere [and the data will follow the radiologist at log-in]."

In addition, Simmons indicated that the MEDxConnect System may save them the cost of an additional radiologist.

As medical imaging continues to evolve, IT's role in the seamless connection of disparate systems to streamline operational processes will become more important. Across the enterprise, interoperability will help provide maximum care with maximum efficiency and flexibility.

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