

The Easiest Path to EMR: Healthcare Document Management for Provider Organizations

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Table of Contents

The Easiest Path to EMR:	i
Table of Contents	2
EHR vs. EMR.....	3
EMR vs. Document Management.....	4
Document Imaging vs. Document Management	5
Overcoming the Adoption Hurdle.....	6
Conclusion.....	8

The healthcare industry is under intense pressure to move beyond paper. The President's 10-year Electronic Health Record (EHR) initiative, post-Katrina disaster awareness and public concern have focused attention on electronic patient record solutions. Vendors of Electronic Medical Record (EMR) systems have benefited most from the attention, and EMR adoption among providers has become the measuring stick for progress toward electronic patient records.

But EMR adoption remains low among a significant portion of healthcare provider organizations. This paper discusses ways to overcome the factors that make it difficult to get the full benefits from EMR, defines key terms and covers the importance of healthcare document management, both as a critical component of EMR and as a cost-effective transition tool for practitioners and group practices. Indeed, for many healthcare providers, healthcare document management is the easiest path to EMR.

EHR vs. EMR

As originally defined, EHR was the Holy Grail, the as-yet-undefined data set that would constitute the core patient health record and eventually be accessible to any practitioner via the proposed National Health Information Network (NHIN). In contrast, EMR is the digital equivalent of the paper patient chart within a specific provider organization. It is a comprehensive record of tests, prescriptions, diagnostic images and the entire patient history. Because the first step toward shareable national EHR data is having electronic records at the provider level from which the data can be extracted, EMR applications have been presented by vendors as the only way to achieve EHR. Not surprisingly, the terms EMR and EHR are often used interchangeably.

But EMR is neither the only nor the most desirable way to electronic records for every provider. Some healthcare organizations do not require all of the functionality of a typical EMR system, the price tag remains prohibitive and a high implementation failure rate persists. A best-of-class healthcare document management system can be a cost-effective and technologically viable alternative to EMR for many providers and smaller group practices. And for those considering EMR but not ready to make the commitment, a healthcare document management system is not only a simple way to convert to electronic records immediately, but it also will complement and integrate with an eventual EMR solution.

EMR vs. Document Management

An EMR system manages patient medical information **created within an individual provider organization**, yet a significant portion of the information in traditional paper patient charts originates outside of the individual healthcare provider. This externally generated information may be received in hard-copy paper format or as electronic Word or PDF documents, and must be somehow incorporated into the patient record.

As a result, it is essential to be able to process paper and pre-existing electronic documents, extract information to enable search and retrieval and link these records with the in-house patient record. A best-of-class healthcare document management system offers significant advantages over the document management components of EMR systems. For example, it processes and stores both internally and externally created patient records while facilitating secure access for authorized staff in multiple departments and offices. Data extracted during processing can be exported to EMR and eventually to EHR, once the appropriate data set is defined.

Document management systems also solve the archived-records dilemma. EMR systems are typically implemented on a day-forward basis, meaning that years of historical records (potentially 21 years, in the case of infants) remain in paper form. A healthcare document management solution creates the electronic record for both archived and active patient records. In fact, document management smoothes the transition to electronic records by emulating the traditional paper chart file structure, if desired.

EMR systems are by definition focused exclusively on patient records. By contrast, healthcare document management solutions provide benefits across the entire organization, creating efficiencies and dramatically streamlining processes in departments like Admissions, Billing, Accounting, Human Resources, Legal, and Facilities Management. Selecting a system with comprehensive security measures and a configurable repository structure allows providers to protect patient records while improving information access for authorized users organization-wide.

Healthcare document management systems cost a fraction of EMR, and they are implemented in days or weeks, versus months or years. A system properly designed for scalability can be deployed in a workgroup or departmental setting and then easily rolled out to other departments as appropriate.

Document Imaging vs. Document Management

Document imaging is the process of creating an electronic image from a paper document using a scanner. Some scanners offer simple indexing software for manual inputting of limited field information, or metadata, but it is left to the user to organize and store the records. As images accumulate, the challenge for the users is to find specific documents, pages and words quickly and easily. Most EMR and practice management applications offer limited document management functionality for linking patient records and retrieving legacy or paper-based, historical records.

A best-of-class healthcare document management solution encompasses data capture, workflow, data storage, data retrieval, electronic distribution, and security over the entire system. The significance of each essential component is described below:

Data capture: Data capture is the process of extracting specific pieces of information that facilitate subsequent search and retrieval. This is accomplished via full-text Optical Character Recognition (OCR) and through population of index fields with specific metadata. A comprehensive document management system automates the data extraction and field population process with capabilities like zone OCR, pattern recognition, bar code recognition and database look-ups.

Workflow: A complete solution for eliminating paper must offer an electronic replacement for paper-pushing manual processes. Automated workflow moves, copies or deletes documents based on user-defined rules. Worklists, e-mail notifications and timed alerts are also necessities for maximum efficiency.

Data storage: To ensure portability and long-term preservation, converted records must be stored in a non-proprietary format. A central repository allows multiple users and simultaneous access, but the solution must also support distributed capture. Open architecture and standard database platforms ensure system compatibility, and an *n*-tier architecture optimizes system performance and should be selected over a file-sharing application.

Data retrieval: Effective search capabilities include folder structure navigation, full-text search, field (metadata) searches and searches based on records properties. Standard functionality in a high-end document management system includes fuzzy logic, wildcards, Boolean operators, proximity searches and searches that combine these criteria. Ideally, the search results interface provides a preview of lines of context and highlights search terms on the document. In addition, record access should be available via the Web.

Data distribution: Printing, faxing and e-mailing should be standard distribution capabilities for a document management solution and should be governed by security measures. In addition, the system should permit copying of records, files, volumes or entire repositories to CDs, DVDs and flash drives. To facilitate remote access and disaster recovery, it must provide a built-in search-and-viewer interface for immediate access from any PC whether or not it is connected to the network—even if it does not have the document management software installed.

Security: A document management system must protect patient information and other sensitive records on multiple levels and allow the provider organization to use the method that best fits its security needs. System security should parallel network security and be simple to administer for high volumes of users. It also should facilitate compliance with HIPAA and any other regulatory requirements.

Overcoming the Adoption Hurdle

The challenges involved in implementing electronic records vary dramatically between hospitals and group practices, and between large and small group practices. Hospitals are accustomed to enterprise systems and the related costs of implementation and ownership. Many have been early adopters of EMR and are also leading the efforts to create Regional Health Information Organizations, widely viewed as the building blocks of the National Health Information Network.

Two separate studies provide the contrasting EMR/EHR adoption rates for hospitals and group practices. The most current statistics on hospitals come

from a survey of 205 healthcare IT executives, 91% of whom worked in a hospital or healthcare system. The 17th Annual HIMSS Leadership Survey, sponsored by ACS Healthcare Solutions, was conducted by the Health Information Management Systems Society in December 2005 and January 2006, and was published in February 2006.

According to the HIMSS study, 24% of respondents indicated that their organization had a fully operational EMR system in place. An additional 36% of respondents indicated that their organization was presently installing EMR hardware and software, and 4% noted that they had already signed a contract for an EMR system, but had not yet begun the installation process. However, 23% of respondents were still in the planning stages for implementing EMR and 12% had not even begun to plan for EMR.

The picture is quite different with group practices, however. The most current statistics on EMR adoption among medical groups come from a comprehensive survey of 3,300 group practices conducted by the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA) Center for Research at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. The study was conducted in early 2005 and published in September 2005.

According to the MGMA study, only 24.2% of practices surveyed had implemented EHRs (the term used in the study) or were in mid-implementation. Another 24% planned to implement within 2 years, but 41.8% had no plans to implement within 2 years. And the smaller the practice, the lower the adoption rate.

The study cited two primary obstacles to EHR adoption in group practices: “Lack of capital resources for EHR,” and “Concern about the physician’s ability to use an EHR.” Both of these issues are addressed easily with a healthcare document management solution. Document management systems do not require a large initial capital expenditure and generate a faster return on investment thanks to faster deployment. Savings generated with a document management-based electronic record system help offset the cost of an eventual move to EMR. The ability to maintain the look and feel of a traditional paper chart file and sub-file structure makes transitioning to electronic record keeping easier for physicians resistant to dramatic change.

Conclusion

There is no question that transitioning from paper to electronic record keeping in the medical records environment is highly desirable, but “electronic records” do not necessarily mean EMR for all healthcare providers. A healthcare document management solution that offers comprehensive functionality, ease-of-use and an attractive price-point allows individual practitioners and group practices to realize substantial information management and cost-saving benefits significantly faster than full-scale EMR implementation. Benefits to other departments, like accelerated collections in the billing department and cost reductions in HR and legal departments, underscore the importance of healthcare document management solutions and increase the overall ROI. And if and when an EMR system is acquired, the document management system can be integrated easily to preserve the value of the initial investment.

For larger hospitals and healthcare providers, the specific functionality of an EMR may be absolutely necessary. Document management is an equally essential component of EMR and practice management systems and, frankly, any system in the organization that must incorporate the complete range of medical records, whether they originate from paper documentation or other healthcare providers. An EMR system integrated with an enterprise-class document management system offers providers a truly comprehensive solution, not to mention a competitive advantage. EMR systems that lack the essential document management functionality described above leave out solutions for a significant portion of the business problems healthcare provider organizations face on a daily basis.



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Author: Mauricio Pinto

Compulink Management Center, Inc.
Global Headquarters
3545 Long Beach Blvd.
Long Beach, CA 90807
U.S.A

Phone: +1.562.988.1688
www.laserfiche.com

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