Optimizing the Handling of Faxes

By Steve Bainnson

Still an everyday reality of healthcare, facsmiles can be mishandled by even the most efficient provider. How can efaxing help fix the problem?

Faxing is one of the most common forms of communication in healthcare. It's considered a point-to-point solution, where there is little-to-no opportunity for the message to be intercepted between machines. So, it is often thought of as the most secure way to transmit personal health information and share documents across locations. This is why faxing endures in the healthcare industry, even though most other industries view it as antiquated.

But does that mean you have to accept the standard, inefficient faxing model? There hasn't been much innovation in faxing since electronic fax servers were introduced, and issues and problems persist that hold back companies like yours from being as efficient and productive as possible.

Current Technology Is Insufficient

It might be surprising for those who use electronic faxing, but a large percentage of HME companies still rely on physical fax machines, which waste a lot of time. The process of walking to/from the fax machine is a "non-value-added activity." It is not bringing in more money or cutting costs or building customer loyalty. It is simply making a daily process take longer than it should. There is no notification of when a fax arrives which may result in swinging by "just to check," which is more of a waste because nothing is accomplished.

But simply going electronic is not enough. Fax server transmission can have its own problems — primarily that it is not necessarily HIPAA compliant. Most electronic fax solutions were built for a general business audience, not for companies handling PHI. The most common setup includes two steps. The first, having the document received by a FTP server, is usually secure. But the vast majority of efaxing customers then choose to have their faxes forwarded to them in email, and this step is not guaranteed to be compliant. For many providers, making the transfer from the fax server to the email server a secure transaction requires the purchase of an additional product. But even just having PHI in employees' inboxes poses a potential risk — it can be too easy to forward it along, creating a compliance risk.

Decentralization of Faxing Is a Big Risk

Email was simply not designed for fax management. It was developed as a personal communication tool, which means the responsibility for fax management rests solely on the individual. There is no managerial oversight or control over fax assignment with a traditional set up. If the fax goes to a group email, there is a danger of duplication of effort or additional effort required to notify everyone that you are working the fax.

Fax solutions usually have a time limit on how long they store documents. Depending on your service, it can range from 90 to 365 days and usually culminates in deletion. But auditors can request documentation up to seven-years-old for adults and 21 years for pediatrics. Faxes stored in an email program can be difficult to find months or years down the road, especially if that person leaves the company, leaving you without the documentation you need to back up your claims.

It only takes one broken link to have a fax fall completely through the cracks because there are no backup systems, putting your filing deadlines in danger. But the scary thing is: without a centralized resource to track your faxes, there is no way of knowing what has fallen through the cracks and mistakes could take years to surface and cause problems.

Lack of Automation

Even though faxing requires some technology, most fax setups rarely takes advantage of automation. In a traditional system, all faxes must still be read by human eyes to be routed, worked and filed. It all comes down to the heavily reliance on manual processes, which generate a lot of opportunities for mistakes. There is no guarantee a fax is being worked according to protocol. Manual processes are more susceptible to whims and variations and even slight variations across employees can cost time and money. It becomes easy for faxes to be overlooked completely, not addressed in a timely manner, misrouted, passed by because you thought someone else was handling it or simply neglected.

While it's impossible to cut out human intervention completely, you can trim some of it using automation and technology. For example, the Medforce Fax Management App uses OCR to assist in the routing and filing of faxes, and it allows you to set up alerts if a document languishes without being addressed in a specified time period. Cutting a few minutes out of each fax handling process really adds up over your total monthly fax volume. It adds up to hours of saved time that you can redirect to more strategic activities.

It's Time to Rethink Faxing

With traditional faxing systems, there is a lack of visibility and control. Even though faxing is a primary communication channel, most providers we talk to don't assess their current faxing often — if at all. They don't know how many faxes they receive, who works them, or how accurately they've been worked. Traditional systems don't provide reports that track progress of individual faxes or give insight into your overall volume.

If you use efaxing, there might be a portal that shows how many faxes came in or went out, and to which fax numbers. But it can't give you any more information than a physical fax machine can. Do you know what happened after that step of sending or receiving? How can you judge if things are going well or if there are bottlenecks or high or low performers? How can you make decisions about improving the quality and quantity of faxes if you don't know? How is faxing tied to your bottom line — for referrals or accounts receivable. And how is inefficiency in faxing affecting your profitability? These are the questions we urge you to ask. Getting rid of your fax machine is not enough, you need to reexamine your entire faxing process to ensure you have the right technology in place for full efficiency and productivity. ∎

Steve Bainnson is the vice president of sales for Medforce Technologies Inc. With more than 20 years in the software industry, he currently helps healthcare companies improve visibility, eliminate operational waste, empower employees, improve the patient experience, and enable growth. He can be reached at sbainnson@medforcetech.com.

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