

# Creating efficiencies

Why IT is so important to the evolving health care industry **Interviewed by Dale W. Hlaves**

**A**s companies are constantly looking for ways to cut the cost of health care benefits — without cutting the quality of the services — one ally they have is the ever-expanding role information technology (IT) plays in the health care field.

“Ethernet, electronic medical records and dedicated Internet access, such as a cable modem or fiber, are three examples of IT helping to improve the quality of health care,” says Matthew Carson, enterprise account executive with InsightBusiness.

*Smart Business* spoke to Carson about how IT can help control health care costs and improve the industry overall.

## What are some examples of the importance of IT to health care?

The importance of IT to health care can be found in four different areas and a lot depends on the individual business or company. Improvement to the quality of care, efficiency to prevent or reduce medical errors in the terms of electronic medical records (EMR), and reduction in operating costs, which means you’re being efficient, or green, because you’re decreasing your paperwork. Finally, it helps to make a health care provider expandable. And if you’re saving money, becoming green and improving quality, you should have more capital to expand.

## How has IT improved turnaround time?

Even three years ago, your standard turnaround time for a lab result would be 48 to 72 hours. With the increases in IT, whether it is EMR or dedicated Internet access or point-to-point connectivity, even in critical care, it’s down to six hours or less.

Part of the improvement is that you’ve gone paperless. Before, if you had a chest X-ray done on Monday, that afternoon the doctors would diagnose the film and get it back to your doctor either via courier, which could take another day, or by fax. But faxes don’t always print very clearly. So you basically had a minimum of 48 hours before your doctors had a chance to have it in hand and review it before they could schedule you to come back in. They normally would give you a timeline of seeing you back a week after the exam.

Now, with EMR, the lab can scan that exam, set it up as a PDF, send it to you, and your doctors can look at it that afternoon. Then, if there is something critical in the exam; your doctor can get you back in to the office as soon as possible. It also cuts down



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on ways and places for the documents to get lost. Electronic records save time and make it more efficient for everyone to be involved.

## How affordable is IT when used in health care?

That’s based per market. Every hospital and doctor’s office is going to have a voice cost to be connected, and you can look at adding IT as being an incremental add-on to that. For example, if you are used to paying an average of \$500 for a T1, you could add to that and then be able to use the Ethernet or Internet for your voice and to supply data. It basically comes down to budgetary concerns.

Some clinics and hospitals have the resources to pay construction costs upfront, so they’ll have a lower monthly recurring cost. On the other hand, some organizations may not have that money upfront and may be willing to go for a higher monthly recurring cost. All that is capped in there so that there are zero upfront costs to get started. And it pays for itself because it’s scalable.

So, if it’s a doctor’s office that needs more bandwidth, it’s simply a matter of making a phone call and having it done within 72 hours, versus having to order brand-new equipment, wait for it to arrive and then go through a whole new process. These are en-

hanced savings that you’ll see even after you make the upgrade.

## How has IT affected the consistency between health care networks?

Because of the advent of IT and its importance to health care it’s become a race to see who can keep up with the Joneses. Every four years, the President’s Technology Advisory Committee reviews contemporary issues in technology and one of the items they talked about this last time was making IT scalable and having a national vision so companies would be able to take advantage of the new technology.

As new technology has come up, it’s become more affordable. Take the television, for example. We went from basic LED screens to HD, and when the HD televisions came out, they cost thousands of dollars. Now, you can find them for around \$500. Availability drives the price down, making it affordable for everybody.

## How important is having a redundant file storage system for medical offices?

It is very important for medical offices to have a redundant file storage system. It provides insurance that a file is kept in the event of an emergency (fire, electrical outage, natural disaster, etc.). Most insurance providers require that an office have a disaster recovery plan, which this will complement.

## Are physicians utilizing IT at home as well as at the office to improve efficiencies?

We are beginning to see more physicians utilizing IT at home and their respective offices. With the change in the economy, physicians are looking for ways to cut costs. So, if he or she has an empty room or space, he or she can create a virtual office for access to the company’s server. A simple VPN link through their existing Internet provider makes ‘working from home’ a productive and efficient reality. It cuts down on gas mileage, and usually the doctor can work with little to no distractions. <<

*Information in this article is general in nature. The requirements of each business will vary according to its specific needs.*

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