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Your Server or Mine

by Roberta Domos, RRT

Replacing your in-house server with an online HME systems software provider could benefit your bottom line.



As I travel across the country to work with HME businesses, I cannot help but notice that high-speed Internet access is everywhere and that everyone is getting connected. Gone are the days of waiting 20 minutes to download the latest updates to a payor manual over a slow modem connection, getting disconnected, and then deciding maybe it is not worth it after all—you will just wait for the quarterly update to come in the mail.

With fast and reliable high-speed Internet access, you can now complete the same download in less than a minute.

As is customary in the computer industry, advances in hardware technology are often followed by advances in software technology. Judging by the online options available to the HME industry, it appears that companies that offer products and services to medical equipment providers are determined not to be left out when it comes to capitalizing on the potential of the Internet.

If you have yearned for Internet conveniences—such as online banking, payroll, and other accounting functions—to help you accomplish the daily tasks involved in operating your HME business, your day may finally be drawing near.

Endless Possibilities

Many product vendors offer online catalogs and ordering; some even provide tools to track your company's order history, and let you create a list of frequently ordered products that can reduce the time it takes to place re-orders. The electronic certificate of medical necessity (eCMN) initiative is still gaining steam, and at least one vendor plans to extend its product to provide an online means of obtaining digitally signed detailed written orders as well.

If your staff is tired of copying and blacking out names on explanation of benefits (EOBs) to send with secondary claims, there is a vendor that can solve your problem by using your company's electronic remittance notice (ERN) files to download and print individual EOBs specific to the patient that can be used instead. You can even train your employees online, and keep track of their progress.

The possibilities seem endless, but until recently, a total online HME systems software solution had not been one of the options available to providers. However, all that has changed. Several software vendors now offer products that use the Internet, ranging from remote desktop solutions that employ a "thin client" to access billing software through the Internet anywhere the client software is installed, to a product that is entirely Web-based and can be accessed by any computer with an Internet connection and a secure Web browser.

A "thin client" is a small software program that provides the functionality of a remote desktop as well as high-level encryption features that keep your data secure as it travels across the Internet. The client software quickly installs on any computer that you want to use to access the HME software system, and then uses the computer's Internet connection to network you into the software vendor's servers, where your data is ultimately located. What users see on their screens is nearly identical to software that is typically located on an HME provider's internal network. The users can input data, transmit claims electronically to payors, and print reports to the printers on their desks, just as if the program was located on an in-house server.

Another online option for providers is a Web-based software solution that can be accessed without client software through any computer with an Internet connection and a secure Web browser. (A secure Web browser is one that includes 128-bit encryption technology. This browser feature can be downloaded at no cost as an update to most of the browser products currently available.)

Rather than appearing to the user as a duplicate of the more traditional software product screen, the online service displays a Web-page-style interface complete with hyperlinks, and Web-page-style drop-down lists and buttons for moving around the system and generating reports.

Online Advantages

So why might a provider opt for an online software solution as opposed to software installed on an in-house network? First and foremost is the "pay as you go" nature of the online software business. Typically, a setup fee is charged and a monthly usage rate is determined based on the number of users. Fees range from \$350 per month to \$750 per month for the minimum number of licenses, but support fees and updates to the system are included in the price.

This "pay as you go" philosophy should hold great appeal to providers just starting out, for whom cash flow

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is often most critical. Providers that want to dip their toe into the world of online billing before making a huge financial commitment to a new software program should also find these software-rental or lease-style options attractive.

A provider I recently worked with has made the most of this option. His company subscribed to a Web-based billing system for use at a new office, at the same time evaluating the service for use throughout all the company's locations in the future. Satisfied with the service after several months of use at the new store, the provider plans to roll it out to all branches of the company within the next few months. When he does, his staff will be ahead of the learning curve, having become familiar with the product as it was evaluated at a lower volume location over a relatively long period of time.

Simple is Better

Using an online HME system also offers some long-term rewards. There is no software to buy or keep updated, and no complicated hardware specifications to conform to—all you need is a basic computer and a fairly speedy connection to the Internet.

You will still need a local network of some sort if all of your staff members are to share an Internet connection, but by employing an online service you will essentially be outsourcing most of your HME system network maintenance. Updates to the software simply appear when you log on, and backups are completed at the end of business each day—all courtesy of your online software provider.

Web-based programs offer even greater flexibility. Perhaps you are a manager who would like to get home for dinner on time and look at the reports you need to assess after the kids have gone to bed instead of staying late at the office. No problem, with a Web-based program you can view and print the reports online from your home office.

If your company employs consultants and outsource billing companies to assist with claims reimbursement, the same capabilities will allow you to communicate with them more effectively.

Web-based programs built on the ubiquitous Microsoft.Net platform are designed to offer interoperability and integration with other Web-based applications and may allow streamlining of data not even thought of today. Imagine one software solution that in addition to the typical billing and accounting tasks allows users to automatically update inventory counts when an order to a vendor is placed; send, receive, and log CMNs electronically; produce reports that detail denials and pull up; and print EOBs for old claims on demand.

All of those products and more are available separately today, and it is a good bet that some will be integrated into Web-based HME software of the future.

What About Data Safety?

Because so much of the data handled by the HME industry concerns confidential medical information, providers understandably might have concerns about the security features of online products. But like typical HME systems software, log-in security can be set at a user-specific level, restricting access to certain areas and features of the system. In addition, high-level encryption technology protects data as it is being transmitted across the network.

Making sure the online software provider's servers are available whenever you want to access your data is an important consideration as well. When considering use of an online service provider, ask about server redundancy and how the provider handles outages when a server goes down. Also ask how often backups are run, and who ultimately owns your data if you decide to switch to another provider at some point in the future.

The world of online HME software, and Web-based services in particular, is still fairly new and will no doubt evolve over time. Most exciting, though, are the possibilities for integration with other online products that will improve the efficiency of operations for providers. It is definitely something for providers to keep their eye on.

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