Why you need to invest in electronic faxing for your practice

As technology continues to advance, healthcare professionals are making significant strides in medicine, and expanding the scope of studies related to human health and lifespan. Yet, among physicians and administrators – the fax machine – a decades-old dinosaur, remains a primary means of communication.

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Introduction

Make no mistake: When it comes to using the traditional fax machine, an abundance of obstacles exist, ranging from inconvenient to possibly illegal.

Beyond requiring periodic maintenance, the fax machine can test patience, disrupt the steady stream of workflow and, certainly, leave a practice susceptible to a security breach.

For both physicians and practice administrators, one critical aspect of patient care is protecting confidential health information. Failing to comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) and the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH) can prove particularly devastating for small and medium-size practices and clinics that can ill-afford to incur harsh fines and penalties.

Individuals run the risk of facing fines up to $50,000 per HIPAA violation, with an annual maximum penalty of $1.5 million based on the severity of the violation(s). Even imprisonment is possible.

The threat of violating HIPAA and HITECH regulations alone serves as an incentive for physicians to find a better solution for faxing. But that solution needs to enable the continued fast transmission of information that is secure and cost-effective.

Electronic faxing meets those needs – and others – by improving employee efficiency and limiting the dependency on paper records.

'Time … is not enough'

According to the 2012 National Physicians Survey (NPS) of 1,190 U.S. practitioners representing more than 75 medical specialties[1], nearly 800 respondents "feel pain" from the integration of Electronic Medical Records (EMR), while acknowledging they impact patient care in a positive or neutral manner.

Sixty-three percent also said faxing remains a popular method of peer-to-peer communication, second only to the telephone (95 percent).

Yet neither one of these preferred methods are secure.

Furthermore, 34 percent of physicians use email – considered a non-secure channel – to communicate with colleagues. Twenty percent of physicians use the same method to communicate with patients.

Considering the consequences if your practice is found in violation of federal regulations, intentional or otherwise, why take the risk?

As one family medicine practitioner noted in the survey, "Time is the only thing I have to give my patients that I can bill for, and it is not enough."

Fifty-five percent of survey respondents fear they aren't spending adequate time with each patient. Thirty-eight percent expressed concern that they aren't meeting with enough patients in a day.

Additionally, a staggering 81 percent of physicians feel administrative duties are overwhelming clinical interactions.

"I think a lot of physicians in a smaller practice realized they were becoming both the clerk and the (human resources) and the accounts payable and the accounts receivable and the office manager – things which they may not have an interest in or had certainly no training for," San Francisco-based physician Larry Shore told Northern California's KQED-Radio.[2]

Patients' time is equally valuable. A 2012 joint poll conducted by National Public Radio, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health reinforces the fact that the time crunch physicians feel is real.

"Sick in America"[3] randomly surveyed 1,508 individuals age 18 or older.

Seventy-two percent of respondents expressed a desire for their doctor to spend time discussing long-term health issues versus focusing solely on the specific medical condition.

Thirty percent said they did not feel adequate time was granted to them by the physician, nurse or health professional.

Twenty-five percent said they were not provided all the necessary information about their treatment or prescriptions.

The common denominator: physicians lack time to give patients.

Offices that rely on the time-consuming fax machine wrestle with these issues.

Faxing frustrations

Without any hang-ups, a traditional fax machine typically transmits at the rate of one minute per page. Based on the information the machine must condense – a document consisting of words, images or both – the process may take even longer.

And this says nothing of the various faxing-related issues that can interfere with daily responsibilities – none greater than treating patients.

Dealing with a paper jam, for instance, is undoubtedly frustrating. It takes time to pinpoint the cause of the backup, clean out and reset the machine and restock the paper.

It always seems that the ink cartridge needs to be replaced at the most inconvenient time.

Furthermore, small practices often have just one fax machine and that slows everything down even more. Contending with coworkers who must transmit a physician's referral, patient's chart or test result or the prescription for a refill are commonly cited challenges.

A busy telephone line – the lifeline of a fax machine – can slow down or even prevent communication. Hitting "send" does not guarantee documents reach their intended destination in a timely manner.

Even if the transmission is successful, additional faxes, by nature, bury others in the inbound basket. Some faxes float to the floor, a haven that all but ensures delivery to the wastebasket and of course, privacy issues.

These common day-to-day occurrences do not address the potential security dangers that accompany the transmission of every health document, many of them confidential.

Consider the layout of a small office. Space is limited. From a practical standpoint, the fax machine is routinely located in a common area for accessibility. If an individual retrieving a fax is not waiting for the document to arrive, confidential information is left in plain sight, perhaps for hours, for anyone to view.

The same scenario applies on the sender's end. A shortage of staff, phones ringing feverishly, an emergency visit from a patient – any number of office demands may pull a clinician away from the fax machine, which increases the chances for a potential HIPAA violation.

It's not just about compliance

Remaining in compliance with federal regulations is not the only reason to seek a better solution for faxing.

Based on the need for patient documentation, an entirely paper-free existence for any medical practice may be difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, the push to go paperless is taking place.

The integration of EMRs in many practices is under way. Electronic faxing facilitates the transition given its ability to easily auto-file faxes as well as search and locate them. Beyond serving as a safety net, should paper records be misplaced or lost entirely, a fax server eliminates the practice of printing thousands of pages each week.

In addition, the use of less paper directly benefits the environment – and your practice's expense account.

Create an evaluation checklist

Many electronic faxing solutions are available on the market. As you research software that best meets your practice's needs, it helps to create an evaluation checklist.

GFI FaxMaker® fax server software allows users to send and receive faxes directly from their email. It is compatible with Exchange Server, Lotus Domino and SMTP/POP3.

Faxes can be sent from any application in a simple three-step process:

» Print from the computer's word processor or EHR application to a GFI FaxMaker printer or create a message through email

» Identify the fax recipient using the email contact list or by entering a specific fax number

» Hit "send." (A transmission report is sent to the user's inbox or where GFI FaxMaker has been integrated directly into the EHR application.)

» Consider these additional items when creating your checklist:

» Multiple-format delivery – Faxes arriving in the user's inbox can be viewed as TIF (fax) or PDF files, providing viewing flexibility for users. Access faxes from any location through a desktop email client such as Microsoft® Outlook® or web-based email. For communication and organization purposes, files received in PDF format are easy to forward and archive.

» Automated routing – Directly send incoming faxes to a number of locations, including specific user mailboxes or printers based on a Direct Inward Dial (DID) number. Users can purchase virtual fax numbers. GFI FaxMaker identifies the number and forwards the fax to its intended destination.

» Fax over IP (FoIP) support – Without the need for additional hardware, GFI FaxMaker assimilates with the Internet Protocol (IP) infrastructure already in place. For physicians seeking to cut costs on international calls, FoIP makes it possible to use Least Cost Routing (LCR) and translate long-distance calls into local ones at the recipient's country.

» Easy storage, search and retrieval – Eliminate email management hassles and ensure a more productive workforce. Archive all emails and documents securely and easily in a manner that complies with HIPAA regulations and also results in a higher-functioning server.

» Mobile compatibility – Send and receive faxes with any cell phone that has email-viewing capability. Likewise, use SMS/text messaging to communicate from a desktop computer or mobile device to send a high-priority administrative alert. This is an invaluable tool for both patients and physicians, specifically those who rely on text messages because they often can't answer the phone. Set and receive appointment reminders via text – certainly a useful feature for on-the-go physicians who are balancing time extended to existing patients with the need to meet other obligations, including revenue generation.

GFI FaxMaker also:

» Attaches Microsoft Office, PDF, HTML and other files to a fax by delivering the document in fax format on the server

» Automatically expunges spam faxes – think "junk email" – based on the originating number of the sender's fax

» Supports Microsoft Outlook contacts, making it unnecessary to recreate a contact list consisting of fax numbers

» Embeds a link within an email that directs the recipient to a fax saved to a folder or network share (rather than sending a fax via email, which can strain an email server)

» Sends and receives faxes for users relying on different mail servers

Conclusion

Striking a balance between cost reduction and increased productivity is often difficult for any business, in any industry.

Physicians and administrators of small and medium-sized healthcare practices are no exception. They're also forced to do more with less – while facing the additional pressure to meet stringent laws designed to protect patient health records.

The transition to EHR and EMR solutions for many practices is a cost-effective and environmentally-friendly start. But choosing a method of communication that complies with federal regulations is critical and cannot be overlooked.

Upgrading to electronic faxing is easy, and it requires only a short-term investment in time, resources and finances. The long-term dividends, however, benefit your bottom line, your staff's effectiveness, and, as a result, your patients' health and happiness.

About GFI

GFI Software provides web and mail security, archiving and fax, networking and security software and hosted IT solutions for small to medium-sized businesses (SMB) via an extensive global partner community. GFI products are available either as on-premise solutions, in the cloud or as a hybrid of both delivery models. With award-winning technology, a competitive pricing strategy, and a strong focus on the unique requirements of SMBs, GFI satisfies the IT needs of organizations on a global scale. The company has offices in the United States, UK, Austria, Australia, Malta, Hong Kong, Philippines and Romania, which together support hundreds of thousands of installations worldwide. GFI is a channel-focused company with thousands of partners throughout the world and is also a Microsoft Gold ISV Partner.

1. *2012 National Physicians Survey, Sharecare and the little blue book, July 2012. [http://www.sharecare.com/static/national_physicians_survey]*
2. *What's Up, Doc? When Your Doctor Rushes Like The Road Runner, NPR, All Things Considered, May 2012.*
   http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2012/05/24/153583423/whats-up-doc-when-your-doctor-rushes-like-the-road-runner
3. *Poll: Sick In America, National Public Radio, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health, May 2012.*
   http://www.npr.org/documents/2012/may/poll/summary.pdf

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