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Discover ECM Opportunities In Healthcare

Industry vendors discuss how VARs can capture revenue in the healthcare market by promoting the core ECM (enterprise content management) technologies they already possess.

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Written by: Vicki Amendola

When it comes to exploring potential markets for ECM solutions, a content management VAR's eyes should light up when exceptionally paper-rich environments are identified. However, some VARs continue to overlook one of the most paper-intense markets of all — healthcare. Despite the desire for a paperless patient experience, paper documentation in healthcare isn't anywhere near extinction. If anything, paper documents present a bigger challenge in this vertical than in just about any other. I recently spoke to three industry vendors who all agree that the healthcare market is prime for ECM solutions. They shared with me some insights on how VARs can position core ECM technologies to win more business when targeting the healthcare market.

" The healthcare industry is under intense pressure to move beyond paper," says Chris Wacker, senior VP at Laserfiche. "However, despite the President's [George W. Bush] 10-year EHR initiative and post-Katrina disaster awareness and public concern, only a small percent have converted to electronic documents." Software applications such as EMRs (electronic medical records), EHRs (electronic health records), and practice management have been designed to reduce the amount of paper generated within the healthcare system from the first point of patient contact. For example, hospital registration is increasingly being done via direct entry of patient information into one of these software tools, rather than by filling out information on a paper form for future data entry. However, registration is only one small part of the entire patient encounter.

Regardless of the movement some hospital systems and healthcare providers have made toward EMR and EHR adoption, most information is still collected on paper, and VARs wanting to cash in on the healthcare market shouldn't feel constrained to focus only on mastering these solutions. These options are neither the only, nor the most advantageous, way to transition to electronic records for every provider. "Some healthcare organizations do not require all of the functionality of a typical EMR system," says Wacker. "Also, the price tag for these systems remains prohibitive, and there is a high implementation failure rate." VARs that remain cognizant of these facts will realize that a well-

planned ECM solution can be a cost-effective and technologically viable alternative for many healthcare providers, including the thousands of smaller group practices in existence.

Core Technology #1: Focus On Unstructured Forms Processing

One of the most vital aspects of an ECM solution is the process of capturing data — or content — at the beginning of the process. While this isn't a shocking news update for resellers, it is important for VARs targeting healthcare to capitalize on the wealth of knowledge being built in the field of unstructured forms processing. "Critical healthcare information resides in a combination of structured and unstructured formats," says Samuel Schrage, president of AnyDoc Software. "Many of the documents are structured or predetermined, such as admission, encounter, and claim forms, but many others are unstructured, including EOBs [explanation of benefits], certain patient records, and invoices."

While a template-driven forms processing solution will work great for many repetitive documents within a healthcare environment such as those mentioned by Schrage, VARs must be prepared to address an endless variety of documents that are involved with every patient encounter that don't fit into a predefined template. This includes internally generated documents such as physicians' progress notes and medication orders, as well as a large influx of data that flows into the organization from outside sources. Healthcare providers need to capture information recorded on everything from insurance referral and authorization forms to ambulance transport notes. VARs can be prepared to meet these needs by offering unstructured forms processing solutions that include full-text OCR (optical character recognition) and even text analytics tools.

Core Technology #2: Opt For Advanced Recognition Tools

Taking the process a step further, VARs have the opportunity to build even greater value into a healthcare data capture solution by addressing specific recognition requirements. Much of the content on medical forms, whether structured or unstructured, comes in the form of handwritten text. Traditional OCR and ICR (intelligent character recognition) technologies can capture some of this information during the scanning process; however, handwritten documents can have a major impact on forms processing applications in this market. "Cursive documents are still very much the norm within doctors' offices and within the healthcare industry," says Jean-Louis Fages, president and chairman of the board at A2iA. "Typical OCR/ICR technology cannot access the information stored in these documents because of their type and structure; therefore, they must be manually keyed or processed by a human. This process is costly and not error-proof."

Consider the potential impact handwriting recognition technologies could have on a department such as medical transcription. Data entry in this department is costly to the healthcare provider not only in

terms of manual labor, but also in terms of potential errors. According to a recent study conducted by New York-based health issues researching group The Commonwealth Fund, one in five working-age adults have insurance claims denied, or are charged a more expensive rate, because a preexisting condition was incorrectly noted in their medical history. Solutions that can capture those notes as part of an electronic file can eliminate the majority of manual transcription labor hours, as well as minimize the errors that can unnecessarily impact patient care. As a result, VARs can increase their revenue potential by building solutions that incorporate recognition technologies to enable the capture and extraction of handwritten or otherwise challenging data from unstructured documents.

Core Technology #3: Add Value With Document Classification

Combining the ability to process unstructured forms with the ability to capture handwritten data leads to opportunities for VARs to streamline processes even further. Once the data is captured, VARs can leverage classification tools to extract relevant metadata and index forms automatically. "Healthcare providers need classification tools that enable them to capture detailed information at the line-item level, as capturing that data manually is too expensive," says AnyDoc's Schrage. "And the indexing of healthcare documents [through automatic classification] into a back end system for easy, accurate document retrieval enables healthcare providers to experience the greater benefits of content management."

Using classification to facilitate integration can maximize sales opportunities for VARs by bringing about the ability to seamlessly feed the captured data into the healthcare provider's back end systems. For example, billing codes from an EOB and a patient file can be automatically delivered to the patient accounting system for balancing and verification, or medication orders could be automatically fed into an inventory control system to monitor pharmaceutical supplies.

Instead of being confined by an EMR that is, by design, focused on only patient records, VARs can concentrate on providing healthcare ECM solutions that produce benefits across the entire organization. These solutions can then be targeted at multiple departments such as billing and finance, admissions, human resources, and legal, just to name a few, exponentially increasing the revenue opportunities that exist within the healthcare market. VARs have an immediate opportunity to use core data capture technologies to improve the bottom line, not only for their healthcare customers, but for themselves, as well.