

Outsourcing MT Services

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Cost is an important consideration for hospitals looking to outsource their transcription services or change their current transcription vendor. To that end, they increasingly are investigating the advantages -- and risks -- associated with using vendors that offer overseas services.

While international resources are generally accepted as more cost-effective, hospitals have grown justifiably concerned about how those services are monitored for quality, security, turnaround time and customer service. In particular, recent reports of two India-based transcription center employees selling patient data in the U.K. have raised warning flags and prompted hospitals to reconsider whether or not the benefits of international services truly outweigh potential downsides.

But hospitals should not automatically dismiss opportunities to contract with medical transcription service organizations (MTSO) that rely upon international resources. Instead, they should work closely with these transcription vendors to develop enforceable service level agreements (SLAs) to ensure delivery of the results hospitals seek: reduced costs, improved productivity and increased capacity for workload fluctuations. Even better, SLAs can be constructed to virtually eliminate the potential for security breaches or lapses in quality.

Security and Privacy Concerns

Perhaps the most important issues to address are security and quality. When working with an MTSO that relies -- either in full or in part -- upon international resources, hospitals should specify that the transcription provider and its offshore resources are compliant with HIPAA and other U.S. privacy laws and regulations, even though they are outside of U.S. legal jurisdiction. The agreements should clearly stipulate that all international medical transcriptionists and quality assurance staff members sign the same confidentiality documents and agree to adhere to the same standards as their U.S.-based colleagues.

Beyond privacy, data security is an equally serious concern. Hospitals must perform due diligence and ask potential transcription partners to explain how dictation and transcription are shared between U.S. and international centers. Best-of-class vendors have developed singular, secure platforms from which all employees, no matter where they are based, access files. This Web-based model ensures that all voice and text files remain on the company platform, not on an MT's local hardware. Platforms of this nature likewise provide hospitals the opportunity to handle some or all of their dictation in-house rather than relying upon outsourcing.

Quality and Turnaround Time

SLAs must likewise include specific measures to assure the quality of the transcription services. It is important for the agreement to specify how accuracy of offshore work is monitored. In addition, the most successful SLAs outline multiple layers of quality assurance checks, perhaps

one performed by a supervisor or the most highly trained personnel at the international site and a second one conducted by domestic quality assurance (QA) professionals.

Turnaround time is another valid area of concern. In most cases, turnaround is faster because MTSOs using international resources can make efficient use of the third or overnight shift -- which translates to prime time in other time zones. On the other hand, turnaround may take a bit longer because additional quality "touch points" are needed. Candid discussion with the MTSO during SLA negotiations can produce reasonable expectations that ensure timeliness and accuracy.

Transparent Process Required

Hospitals also need to ensure their outsourced vendor has a transparent process to identify the use of international transcription services. Some hospitals may want to ensure work is done only in the U.S., while others may opt for the lower price and increased productivity from a mix of domestic and international resources. Either way, hospitals do not want to discover their outsourced vendor is using international resources only after work comes back with blanks and unusual errors.

First and foremost, hospitals must insist they be allowed to give the green light before an MTSO sends their transcription work abroad. Likewise, hospitals should look for a vendor with a policy of complete transparency and a system that identifies when and how much international MTs are used. Vendors may, for example, color code international services to break them out in the hospital's overall MT services invoice.

Finally, hospitals need to consider how customer relations may be affected when international MTs are used. If the hospital is unhappy with the international service, will the vendor move the work to U.S.-based MTs? If yes, will there be an additional charge? If no (because the MTSO is heavily reliant on offshore transcription services), will you be forced to change partners?

While developing specific international SLAs requires extra attention when MTSO agreements are put into place, hospitals are wise to make the effort. This degree of forethought and focus on the detail means the hospital is much more likely to realize not only cost savings and improved productivity, but also equal or improved work quality, with little fear regarding security and privacy of medical data.