Five ways to improve the healthcare user experience

Why managing unstructured content makes life easier for end users

Unstructured content – the information that resides outside of your organisation's core systems and processes – plagues nearly every healthcare organisation. For patient care, it's been estimated that up to 75 percent of patient information – in paper or electronic form – exists outside of your clinical information system (CIS) and/or electronic health record (EHR). In finance and accounting, it lives beyond the reach of your enterprise resource planning (ERP) system.

But why is unstructured information an issue, and how does effectively managing it improve the end user experience? By its very nature, unstructured content annoys clinicians and staff. They have to find it. They have to wait for it. They have to worry about whether it's been lost or misplaced. Put simply, unstructured information impedes their ability to do their jobs effectively.

Manage your unstructured content with these five steps to make life easier for the people who rely on your CIS and ERP systems.

Step 1: Identify it

Before you can better manage your unstructured content, you first need to understand what it is. For each organisation, this content can be a wide assortment of documents and information in differenct departments across the enterprise.

For example, in care delivery, unstructured content can be everything from faxed orders and diagnostic images to the actual paper chart. In accounting departments, invoices and the information surrounding specific financial transactions often exist as unstructured content.

The key to understanding each department's various types of unstructured content is to talk to the people who work with it every day. Only then will you truly be able to identify the sources and get it under control.

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Step 2: Get it out of the way

Odds are pretty good that paper and other physical content like faxes, ECGs, clinical images, photocopies and patient charts are in someone's way. Sifting through a stack of paper for one specific record creates frustration. It reduces the time spent caring for patients, finalising documentation, onboarding employees, etc. It also increases the likelihood that another piece of information may be lost or misfiled. Even if your organisation's paper content is safely stored in a central filing location, storage costs money and the space might be better allocated to patient care.

This is where enterprise content management (ECM) can help. An ECM solution captures the diverse range of information and content within your organisation – the paper, faxes, diagnostic and digital images, DICOM content, AP invoices, employee records and more. By electronically capturing this type of content, you eliminate the need for its physical storage and management. You also reduce frustrations of staff who no longer have to navigate a sea of paper to find what they need. And, improving productivity while saving on storage and filing costs demonstrates a true return on investment sure to please the more financially minded in your organisation.

Step 3: Put it somewhere safe

Capturing that unstructured content is only the beginning. You'll need somewhere safe to store it. An ideal ECM solution provides you with a single, secure repository to store your unstructured content electronically, reducing complexity in your IT environment by eliminating disparate, disconnected content silos.

Unstructured information poses a security risk. An ECM solution securely stores and structures your patient information, minimising the risk of violating patient privacy regulations while comprehensive audit trails prove compliance. This makes life easier for users and demonstrates the true value of your department and its portfolio of solutions.

Step 4: Make it easy to find

For this content to be useful, the people who need it should be able to find it easily and quickly. Integrated with your organisation's core applications, an ECM solution provides instant access to content from within those systems, often with a click of the mouse.

For clinicians, that means finding information once stored in paper charts within the CIS. For staff in accounting and financial services, it means finding transactional billing data within the billing system and invoice information within the ERP system.

Ideally, the end users of a well-integrated ECM solution don't even know they are in a different system. They simply find what they need within the applications they know and use every day, which extends the value of those existing applications.

Step 5: Send it where it needs to go

You've identified unstructured content, captured it, safely stored it and integrated it with your core systems. Now what? It's time to take the content that once frustrated staff and impeded efficient processes and use it to help gain efficiencies.

Using electronic workflows, an ECM solution directs content to the appropriate staff based on rules you define. For example, coders and analysts in health records receive electronic charts based on admit encounter type, complexity, facility or any other criteria uniquely suited to that department. In accounting and finance, invoices automatically route to the appropriate approval channels based on an amount or invoice type. In each case, workflows provide increased visibility to help departmental managers ensure an even distribution of workload among staff. These predictable parameters help users work more productively and remove bottlenecks so that processes run more smoothly.

Conclusion

Unstructured content, regardless of its form, leads to user frustration. It makes sense, really. Any time staff has difficulty finding what they need to work effectively, frustration is a natural consequence. ECM technology turns that source of annoyance into a point of efficiency. This creates happier end users who, in turn, develop a greater appreciation for the systems and services your IT department delivers and supports.

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