Integrating faxes into today's world of healthcare e-records

This white paper examines the obstacles preventing the move away from fax machines, and the benefits of having a communications system that integrates faxed documents into healthcare systems and solutions.

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Introduction

Government regulations are driving healthcare organizations to adopt electronic health records (EHR) systems. But one area in particular is causing some challenges in the push to e-records: faxing. Many labs, pharmacies, doctors' practices and insurance companies still rely on faxed documents. How can healthcare organizations break the fax machine tether?

This white paper examines the obstacles preventing the move away from fax machines and the benefits of having a communications system that integrates faxed documents into healthcare systems and solutions.

The push toward e-records

Most healthcare organizations are being driven by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) to adopt EHR and electronic medical records (EMR) systems, which requires them to store and transmit health information electronically.

Another push is resulting from the Meaningful Use provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which offers financial incentives to healthcare providers that not only implement EHR technology, but also demonstrate the use of EHR technology in quantifiable or qualitative ways.

Behind both these initiatives is the goal of reducing errors, making data and records more readily available, providing improved doctor-specialist-patient collaboration, and automating processes such as e-prescribing to reduce costs and time.

These legislative and financial benefits are encouraging many facilities, practices and companies in the healthcare industry to implement EHR/EMR applications – either off-the-shelf or customized versions – to electronically transfer health data. Doctors' practices are now moving away from their wall of paper charts, for example. And diagnostics labs are transmitting images directly from medical equipment to doctors' offices via email, rather than shipping printed documents via courier or post.

There is also a strong desire among many healthcare organizations to go paperless – not just for environmentally friendly reasons, but also to address cost concerns. For example, printed documents are often stored in filing cabinets or boxes, incurring the need for extra real estate or storage fees – both of which are significant expenses for any organization, but are perhaps more acute for small clinical practices or labs.

In addition, printing paper documents incurs paper, toner and machine maintenance costs. While these expenses may seem like short change, extended contracts and heavy use can be financially painful.

The challenge remains: what to do about faxes?

Despite the financial and legislative benefits of moving to e-records, some healthcare organizations, whether due to size or cost and resource limitations, have implemented e-documentation in some areas of the business, but not others. For example, a general practitioner's office may be able to electronically send patient data from their office to a specialist doctor's practice, but their software does not enable them to transmit a patient's prescription to the pharmacy except via printing and faxing.

In addition, some organizations believe it is too costly to integrate fax capabilities into their office processes and systems. The perception is that they lack not only the financial resources but also the IT staff to implement this technology.

The reverse holds true as well; many organizations have gone paperless, but they deal with other medical providers who still require faxed documents. For example, some small pharmacies require a faxed copy of medical prescriptions. Or an insurance billing department may request that a doctor fax data for reimbursement purposes.

No matter where your healthcare organization is in terms of moving away from paper documents, it's important to address these challenges. As the push to e-records continues, how will your organization collaborate with other health providers without a flexible, integrated, electronic system? The challenge of having to manually fax documents will only become magnified as more applications become e-fax friendly. Why should some applications be formatted for electronic submission of records, but not others?

And consider this: Sticking with a manual fax option poses security risks for healthcare organizations. For example, someone sending a fax may walk away and forget about it, leaving potentially sensitive information sitting on the machine for hours, if not days. Alternatively, incoming faxes may inadvertently be picked up and delivered to the wrong person, delaying action on a timely matter, or again, exposing potentially patient-sensitive information. In this age of HIPAA requirements for patient privacy, manual faxes are a risky proposition.

The benefits of an integrated fax server solution

The most significant benefit of a fax solution is the ready ability to electronically transmit documents, and hence comply with HIPAA and qualify for incentives stipulated under the Recovery Act.

And with the right solution, healthcare organizations can finally, and truly, go paperless – cost-effectively and effortlessly. An integrated fax server will enable your organization to send faxes from any application that has a print function, without any customization necessary. For example, instead of physically printing a prescription for a patient, a doctor can click print-to-fax and have the Rx transmitted through their fax server.

In addition, an integrated solution can route incoming faxes to one or several folders on the organization's network, from which they can be imported into EHR applications. For example, when an orthopedist sends an X-ray image to the patient's primary care physician, it arrives in a network folder or email inbox in electronic format, such as a PDF or TIF. It can then be transferred or appended into the patient's record.

Medical practices, lab offices, and other healthcare organizations can also save costs:

» An integrated solution reduces the need to print on paper, which in turn reduces toner and machine maintenance costs.

» The reduction of paper also can save real-estate space, in terms of the need for stored documents.

A less tangible, yet substantial form of savings is in productivity. There's no more printing, punching in fax numbers, waiting to see if the fax goes through, or walking away from the fax only to find later the document was never sent.

It's time to go paperless

As healthcare organizations continue their push to e-records, one often-overlooked function is faxing. And yet the right fax server solution can help doctors' practices, diagnostic labs and medical offices seamlessly and cost-effectively achieve legislative compliance, as well as a streamlined, cost-effective paperless environment.

It's time to implement an efficient, streamlined solution, and prepare your healthcare organization for today's world of e-records.

Case study

Windsor Health achieves healthy, automated fax environment

Averaging 920 inbound and 720 outbound faxes daily, Windsor Health Group needed a solution that not only streamlined the fax process, but also met important legislative requirements.

The Nashville, Tenn.-based managed healthcare company had to ensure compliance with HIPAA. At the same time, it needed to remove an insecure and bottlenecked network of shared fax machines, while reducing costs.

"Moving from the traditional fax machine to an integrated fax server that used our IT and email infrastructure was an important step for us," says Barry Shermer, vice president of IT, Business Intelligence and Reporting, Windsor Health Group.

Using GFI FaxMaker, the organization securely complies with legislative regulations. "Data is transferred using a HIPAA-accepted protocol, and we now have accountability for both inbound and outbound faxes to medical providers," Shermer says, even those organizations without Internet access.

In addition, Windsor Health has:

> » reduced the costs associated with paper, toner and maintenance of physical machines.

> » improved productivity by enabling employees to send faxes and multitask from their workstations; without multiple trips to a machine to ensure successful document transmission.

> » removed the bottlenecked network of fax machines.

> » increased IT flexibility. Because GFI FaxMaker's backend database is accessible, Windsor can now automatically send email faxes from corporate-built applications.

About GFI FaxMaker

GFI FaxMaker is a leading fax server for small to medium-sized businesses (SMBs), and is an ideal solution for medical practices, lab offices, insurance billing departments, and more. It makes sending and receiving faxes an efficient, simple and cost-effective process and solves the problems with manual faxing: printing out the document, walking to the fax machine, waiting for the fax to go through, not to mention the cost of fax machine supplies and repair.

For more information, visit www.gfi.com/faxmaker.

About GFI

GFI Software provides web and mail security, archiving, backup and fax, networking and security software and hosted IT solutions for small to medium-sized businesses (SMBs) 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 (North Carolina, California and Florida), UK (London and Dundee), 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 Certified Partner.

More information about GFI can be found at http://www.gfi.com.

USA, CANADA AND CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

15300 Weston Parkway, Suite 104, Cary, NC 27513, USA

Telephone: +1 (888) 243-4329

Fax: +1 (919) 379-3402

ussales@gfi.com

UK AND REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Magna House, 18-32 London Road, Staines, Middlesex, TW18 4BP, UK

Telephone: +44 (0) 870 770 5370

Fax: +44 (0) 870 770 5377

sales@gfi.co.uk

EUROPE, MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA

GFI House, San Andrea Street, San Gwann, SGN 1612, Malta

Telephone: +356 2205 2000

Fax: +356 2138 2419

sales@gfi.com

AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

83 King William Road, Unley 5061, South Australia

Telephone: +61 8 8273 3000

Fax: +61 8 8273 3099

sales@gfiap.com

GFI®