

Why a PACS Purchase without Great Support, is a Wasted Investment!



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INTRODUCTION

According to a recent issue of Health Management Technology, many health care executives and providers have bought into the idea the “PACS is a hardware-based technology”. Industry experts see this as a fundamental fallacy when choosing a PACS solution.

The truth is that PACS is a practice-based business tool that uses a “solutions based” management approach rather than a piece of hardware or software.

Sure, there are minimal standards of features, functionality, and performance. But, focusing merely on these attributes rather than on the way a given PACS solves operational needs, particularly after the purchase, is one of the primary reasons for radiologist and administration dissatisfaction with a given PACS. Once minimum standards for PACS business performance have been established, it is important to realize these are only potential standards.

Translating the performance potential of a PACS depends upon the infrastructure in which it is housed, as well as the training and support in which the PACS is implemented and used. Only then can the facility’s staff unlock the true potential of the hardware and software translates that into a meaningful business solution that increases operational performance and practice or department profitability.

SYSTEMIC DRIFT: PACS AND RADIOLOGY IN MOTION

Features and functions, hanging protocol definitions, and workflow through-put, these are all important aspects of distinguishing one PACS system from another. But, regardless of which PACS is selected, the value of these “hardware software based” factors is a fixed variable in time. PACS performance is initially about learning everything a given PACS system can do for you and your department and then having a facility’s staff or department achieve a comfort zone with the PACS model and how it will help them achieve their investment objectives.

The PACS itself is not fixed in time. Neither are radiology facilitates or department operational procedures. Nor is the community or market that the facility or department serves. Everything in a healthcare environment is in flux. Systems change, they are upgraded, and new features must be assimilated and used appropriately. Through time a facility or department adds new modalities, operational policies and incorporates new staff. In growing communities, more competition enters into the business equation of profitable radiology imaging. We call this phenomenon systemic drift. The original comfort zone has to be refreshed with additional training and support, and with regular communication conduits between the radiologist, the tech and the PACS vendor.

SUPPORT IS THE KEY TO MANAGING SYSTEMIC DRIFT

So, in selecting a PACS vendor, look at service and support as much as any other aspect of the PACS. Questions to ask regarding service and support include: What percentage of support calls are answered in the first day? What is the percentage of calls

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are answered in the first day? What is the percentage of calls answered per day that are answered the same day? How often are the PACS updated or upgraded? Is there downtime involved with upgrades? Are user groups available? Is there any on-going training available as the product changes and evolves? Does the provider guarantee to have a support staff member on-site if necessary?

Promptness of answering PACS support calls, quality of support answers, availability of support 24/7, whether the support is outsourced overseas or available within the US, professionalism of the support staff, etc. are all important considerations. More than just being a technology support issue, poor support in itself is a quality of care and practice operation concern.

Ideally, choose a PACS provider that will be able to adequately address all kinds of post-implementation questions that will inevitably arise.

Beyond the usual support issues and capabilities, a provider's commitment to customer support can be gauged by the other communications options they make available. Ideally, invest in a PACS that offers not only the usual telephone support, but also useful ancillary venues of communication such as: customer web portals that allow for direct access to the support services, or internet forums where customers and support team members can read threads of topics of interest and thereby learn from the inquires and experiences of others.

WHAT IS STANDARD VS. SUPERIOR SUPPORT?

Support is the key multiplier which creates a genuine "solution" and practice tool out of the hardware-software features of a given PACS. Return on investment and efficiency rises exponentially the better the support infrastructure into which a given PACS is housed. Standard support likely results in a standard PACS. Superior support results in superior PACS results. This is part of the solution based mentality that should be adopted when selecting the PACS.

For many customers, industry standard PACS results might seem just good enough. They are certainly better than results that are sub-par due to equipment downtime; software upgrades that cause system glitches, or staff not taking full advantage of the given PACS due to poor training.

But, in today's competitive health care market, being "standard" might not be good enough if a facility or department wants a competitive edge or to establish itself as a community center of excellence that will help ensure profitability and future growth.

With imaging centers, hospitals, radiology groups, and clinics all competing for a health image market that is coming under assault by the government regulations, and possible future rationing of reimbursable radiology studies it is clear that not only are the pieces of the image market pie growing smaller but the entire pie may begin to shrink as well.

BEING STANDARD IS NO LONGER GOOD ENOUGH

Future success in the business of radiology demands that facilities and departments distinguish themselves as "superior" rather than "standard". It just makes better business sense. The superior PACS is the one that is adopted within solution-based model, rather than a hardware-based model. The support component is vital to avoiding the pitfalls of a purely hardware-based approach.

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HOW DOES NOVARAD SUPPORT MEASURE UP?

Here are some basic percentages of how new and existing NOVARAD customers rate NovaPACS and NOVARAD training and support.

- 86% of new NOVARAD Customers state that they either Strongly Agree or Agree with the statement “The overall Installation and Training of NovaPACS met or exceeded my expectations.”
- 96% of existing NOVARAD Customers say their support calls are answered promptly.
- 90% find their PACS support issue are answered to their satisfaction.
- 86% of NOVARAD Customers are satisfied with the knowledge of the support staff about their particular issue.
- 82% of all operational/training related calls are resolved within the first day, usually within 3 hours.

We track our support calls by three categories: calls regarding to how the system operates, calls related to training issues, and calls concerning how the solution fits into a radiologist’s preferred workflow. The first two are considered within the “direct control” of our support staff. The last one is typically something that has to be elevated to a future enhancement request.

Two things are worth mentioning about the above statistics. First of all, NOVARAD feels it is important to monitor new system installation and training as well as on-going customer satisfaction. Most PACS providers either don’t do this at all or do so haphazardly.

Secondly, the percentages don’t lie. Customer satisfaction with the PACS is one of the critical areas for consideration in the process of acquiring a PACS. The “industry standard” for satisfaction with all PACS vendors according to independent industry analysts is about 75%. Ideally, seek customer satisfaction levels above that level.

Satisfaction with support and training is at least as important as the various features and functions of a given PACS. What a PACS is designed to accomplish is only as important as the ability of a given radiology facility to understand the design, maximize workflow efficiencies, and receive constant dialog with the PACS vendor as the product changes or as staffing at the facility changes.

Choosing a provider that proves its concern about what its customer-base thinks through regular surveys and other forms of communication is taking a step toward investing in a PACS solution not just PACS hardware.