White paper

Paperless clinic:

5 reasons to take the next step toward digital transformation

IRON MOUNTAIN®

Contents

Summary

Most healthcare clinics have taken the first step toward becoming paperless by adopting electronic medical records (EMRs). But many still have a long way to go before they are completely digital. They still require patients to fill out paper intake forms, and they often fail to fully integrate paper or faxed records from other providers into their digital systems. In addition, most still have stacks of paper records stored in filing cabinets.

Becoming more paperless offers benefits for patients, employees, and healthcare organizations. And it can help clinics deal with some of their most pressing challenges, including staff shortages and financial pressures.

Why is it so hard to get rid of paper?

If you have walked into a US healthcare clinic as a new patient anytime in the last 15 years, you've probably had the experience of being handed a clipboard with a stack of paper forms. You then spend the next 15 minutes or more answering questions about your address, medical insurance, demographic details, symptoms, and emergency contacts. And of course, you also sign your name at least half a dozen times on various notices.

When you hand the clipboard back, the person behind the desk asks for your ID and insurance card, which they scan into the system. Then the harried office workers spend another 15 minutes or more retyping the information you just provided on paper so that it is in the electronic records. If they can't read any part of it, they'll call you up with questions. They'll also confirm your insurance information and, depending on the clinic's policies, either take payment upfront or prepare to take payment when you leave.

By now, you've waited at least a half an hour before seeing any kind of healthcare provider. And you know that when you do finally go back to a room, the providers will ask you some of the same questions that you've already answered.

And if you're like many patients, you'll probably start to wonder, "Why did I have to complete so much paperwork?"

So much of the work that takes place in clinic waiting rooms and front desks seems to duplicate work that has been done elsewhere. The most pertinent information is probably on your driver's license and insurance card that they are scanning anyway.

Couldn't the clinic just get the important data from there? Wouldn't it be more helpful to enter the information digitally the first time, instead of having to write it longhand and then retype it?

Clinic managers are well aware of these inefficiencies. Many have taken some steps to digitize their processes. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 88.2% are using electronic medical record (EMR) or electronic health record (EHR) systems. Some have improved the signature process so that patients can view all the notices at once and sign digitally. Some have even replaced the familiar clipboard with tablets or applications that allow patients to sign in digitally.

But many continue to rely heavily on paper. Why?

Old habits are hard to break. Clinics have years of paper files stored in cabinets, and they've worked hard to develop and implement paper-based processes that comply with regulations. Those processes are now ingrained.

In addition, switching to electronic processes requires some upfront investment in equipment, training, and staff time. During the pandemic, clinics were overwhelmed by the number of patients coming through their doors. They were rushing to enable telehealth visits and struggling to keep up with the ever-changing protocol recommendations. Migrating away from paper processes just wasn't a priority.

Today, however, clinics are facing a new set of challenges that makes digital transformation critical.

Today's clinic challenges

Most healthcare clinics are now part of large corporations that own healthcare facilities in many different areas. While this trend has been ongoing for decades, it accelerated in recent years.

An study sponsored by the Physicians Advocacy Institute (PAI) found that in 2022, 74% of US physicians were employed by hospitals, health systems, or corporate entities. That was a noteworthy increase from 69% in 2021. "COVID-19 drove physicians to leave private practice for employment at an even more rapid pace than we've seen in recent years, and these trends continued to accelerate," says Kelly Kenney, chief executive officer of PAI. "This study underscores the fact that physicians across the nation are facing severe burnout and strain. The pressures of the pandemic forced many independent physicians to make difficult decisions to sell their practices to hospitals, health insurers or other corporate entities."

These large healthcare organizations are facing significant financial challenges. Prolonged high inflation has left consumers with less money in their pockets. A Deloitte survey found that 28% of Americans say they are less able to pay for unexpected medical costs than they were a year ago. As a result, some are choosing to forgo some recommended care, which affects clinic revenue streams.

In addition, the prices that clinics can charge for services isn't keeping up with inflation. A study from the Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Health Policy finds that drug expenses per patient have increased 37% since before the pandemic, and supply costs per patient are up 20%. At the same time, record numbers of healthcare workers have resigned, many of them too exhausted to continue after the constant intensity they faced during the pandemic. Hospital employment alone has declined by 40,000 since March of 2020. Those workers that remain are demanding higher wages, such as the high salaries paid to travel nurses, which increases the financial pressure on organizations.

"As a result, many hospitals, health systems, and physician offices are struggling to make ends meet," says Deloitte.

Large healthcare corporations are hoping that economies of scale will allow them to reduce expenses while providing a high level of care. In order for that to happen, they need to standardize operations and rely more heavily on automation. For many, that means going paperless.

Reasons to become more paperless

Becoming a paperless clinic isn't a one-time event – it's a journey. In fact, most clinics have already started this journey by migrating to EMRs/EHRs. Some have taken additional steps by scanning paper documents and using optical character recognition (OCR) to capture data from paper forms instead of retyping everything. Some have digitized the signature process, allowing patients to sign all their legal notices and agreements at once.

But most have many steps to go before they become completely paperless. Many have not yet fully digitized their new patient and sign-in processes, and most still have tens or hundreds of thousands of pages of paper records that they are retaining for compliance purposes.

Wherever you are on this journey, taking another step towards becoming more paperless offers numerous benefits for your patients, providers, and the organization.

1. Improved patient experience

For patients, the biggest benefit of a paperless clinic is the streamlined processes. Instead of filling out a paper form with data that will then need to be typed into a computer, they can enter the information digitally themselves. Depending on the process you choose, they might even be able to complete this process before arriving at the clinic. That means shorter wait times, needing to take less time off work, and less time managing the waiting room.

Case study: How Iron Mountain helped Lahey Clinic streamline patient visits and generate an additional $1 million in revenue.

Located in Massachusetts, _____ has more than 70 primary care offices with more than 5,000 providers. The clinic wanted to accelerate its transition to a paperless environment by bridging the gap between historical paper records and its EMR system.

It turned to Iron Mountain, which helped it digitize its vast stores of paper files and implement new digital processes for storing patient data. Iron Mountain's Scanning Service allowed the organization to move paper records offsite and image patient records on demand – putting the right information into clinicians' hands at the right time.

As a result of going paperless, Lahey was able to convert storage space into a new laboratory which _____ in revenue. It eliminated 2 hours of administrative time per patient visit. That allowed it to reallocate 4 full-time employees to other tasks, helping improve patient and employee satisfaction. For more information on how Iron Mountain has helped other clinics go paperless, visit _____ .

In addition, paperless processes are more accurate than paper-based processes. Office staff no longer need to decipher patient or provider handwriting. Digital systems also provide the opportunity to double-check data like addresses and zip codes to make sure that patients are entering them accurately, reducing the chance of errors.

Storing records digitally also makes it easier for staff to find them when necessary. If a patient calls with a question, staff members can find the answer in the file with a couple of keystrokes instead of having to go sort through paper files. Ideally, clinics can also give patients access to their own digital files through a secure patient portal. That saves patients more time and helps ensure that they get accurate information whenever they need it without needing to wait for office hours.

When implemented well, paperless processes can also help standardize the patient experience. Organizations that own many different clinics can implement best practices at all of them. And they can use feedback from patient surveys to improve processes across the organization, helping improve the experience for everyone. And if a patient goes to a different clinic than usual, they will still have a familiar, reassuring experience that helps them feel cared for.

In short, paperless processes save patients time and give them a better overall experience. That, in turn, can help the clinic retain and grow its patient base, putting it on a more solid financial footing.

2. Reduced burden on staff

The impact of paperless processes is even more significant for staff than for patients. Retyping data that has already been written on paper forms and/or scanned into the system isn't the best use of office workers' time. It's also not a lot of fun. Most healthcare staffers choose to work in this field because they want to help people, not because they are drawn to the data entry.

Filing paper records or finding old files isn't any more interesting than data entry. And if a piece of paper has been accidentally placed in the wrong place, workers can waste hours or even days tracking down the information.

These inefficiencies might seem like small things, but they place additional stress on workers who are already at, or near, their breaking point.

A 2023 study found that 4 out of 10 healthcare workers are considering leaving the industry. In addition, healthcare workers had the lowest job satisfaction of any of the 27 industries studied. Nearly half (48%) said that they weren't paid fairly for what they do, again the lowest of any industry. And only a third said their work experience lived up to their expectations.

The report found that one of the reasons for this dissatisfaction was the process inefficiencies in clinics. Compared to the cross-industry average,

> 6% fewer healthcare workers say work processes allow employees to be as productive as possible.

> 4% fewer healthcare workers say their manager helps remove barriers to getting work done.

> 5% fewer healthcare workers say that the company continually improves how work gets done.

Becoming more paperless can improve some of these inefficiencies. While it may not be enough to solve the morale problems plaguing clinics, it's a step in the right direction. And it gives staff more time to have the type of patient interactions that increase satisfaction for both patients and employees.

3. Optimized clinic operations

The organization also stands to gain from going paperless beyond the increases in customer and employee satisfaction that were already mentioned.

Clinics often take in records from other providers, such as hospitals, labs, imaging services, and specialists. In some cases, these records are still faxed from another facility, or delivered as paper copies. Without a system for digitizing this incoming data, clinics experience additional inefficiencies, not to mention the possibility of discrepancies among the various records or duplication.

Many organizations have expanded by purchasing other clinic groups. As a result, they often have clinics with different processes and systems in place, leading to disjointed data in distinct repositories. That poses challenges for governance and compliance.

With standardized, digitized workflows, the organization can begin to unlock one of its most valuable assets — its data. You can analyze operations data across the entire network to find insights that can help better serve patients. It allows the healthcare industry to begin to unlock the benefits of digital transformation that other industries are already enjoying.

Most importantly, this digital transformation doesn't come at the expense of personal interaction. On the contrary, it frees up time for providers and staff members to listen more fully to patients. By becoming more digital, the practice ultimately becomes more human.

4. Opportunities for new revenue

Paper is expensive. Paper purchases might not look like a big chunk of your clinic's budget, but the choice to use paper-based processes can be limiting in terms of opportunity cost.

Many organizations don't consider the expense of the space to store paper files. The average filing cabinet takes up 9 square feet of floor space to store about 11,000 pages of documents. That typically costs about $1,500 per year, just in storage space (though it could be much more if you are in a high-rent location).

By comparison, you can store about 65,000 pages of Microsoft Word files in 1 GB of storage. That means a 500 GB drive could store about 3.25 million pages. If that 500 GB is on a single 2.5-inch SSD, it would occupy approximately 11 square inches or .08 square feet. If you do the calculations, the digital storage is more than 40 times more efficient than filing cabinets in terms of physical space saved.

More importantly, if a clinic reduces the space it dedicates to paper storage, it can reduce its real estate expenses or, more likely, free up space to be used as treatment rooms or to provide new products and services to the people it serves. For example, when Iron Mountain helped Lahey Clinic become paperless, the facility converted the free space into a new laboratory. As a result, the clinic generated $1 million in additional revenue.

If your organization has significant space dedicated to filing cabinets, consider how much income you could generate by putting that space to a more profitable use.

5. Increased compliance

No analysis of health care technology is complete without considering compliance. Healthcare is one of the most highly regulated industries in existence. Failing to comply with privacy, safety, and financial regulations could put clinics at risk for hefty fines.

Going paperless makes it easier for healthcare clinics to comply – and prove their compliance – with relevant laws, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

When records are digital, it is much easier to control who has access to them. It also provides a documented trail of who accessed data when, should it ever be needed for legal proceedings.

Clinics are required to demonstrate "meaningful use" of EHRs to maintain their Medicaid and Medicare funding. Going paperless not only helps ensure that organizations comply with this requirement, it allows them to go further and experience the full benefits intended by the law.

Going paperless allows you to do a better job of safeguarding patient information. It makes it easier to spot fraud and waste. And it helps you improve the quality of care. As a result, clinics comply not only with the letter of the law, but also with the intent of keeping patients safe and healthy.

The future is digital

Today, healthcare norms are changing. Remote care is becoming far more common as remote monitoring, telehealth, and even telesurgery take off. Artificial intelligence is beginning to play a larger role as well, with computer vision systems aiding in diagnostics and machine learning systems providing decision support. Digital technology is transforming the practice of medicine at every level in exciting ways that could allow people to lead longer, healthier lives.

Clinics that want to help bring about this future can prepare today by leaving paper-based processes behind and progressing toward the digital age. That choice will help improve the experience of healthcare for patients and providers, while also enabling cost savings and new revenue opportunities for organizations.

For more information about the benefits of becoming a paperless clinic, visit Iron Mountain healthcare solutions.

Iron Mountain InSight

If your clinic is ready to go paperless, you need an intelligent document processing and workflow automation system designed to help you maximize efficiency and security. Iron Mountain InSight provides a centralized view of your information. It allows secure access and retrieval for your employees in a single cloud repository for enhanced visibility and access.

InSight adds structure to your organization's unstructured content, such as imaging, test results, and documents transferred from other providers. Leveraging intelligent document processing technology, the platform aggregates and connects physical and digital information, extracting key metadata out of documents and automating document-centric workflows to help you get to relevant information faster.

And if you need more assistance in setting up your paperless workflows, Iron Mountain's Professional Services team can work with you to further your digital transformation. To learn more, visit Iron Mountain's Go Paperless guide.

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