



Some healthcare providers have been reluctant to embrace cloud-based technology. Rx Web's **Jennifer Hughes** explains the advantages of cloud computing

IT IS NO secret that the pharmacy sector has undergone dramatic changes over the years. Not long ago, it would have been unheard of for a pharmacist to abandon the traditional form of written docket and convert to a computer system for typing records. But now, to suggest such a retrograde practice would prove not just unconventional but also unfeasible.

The healthcare sector as a whole is ever-changing and, despite the advances in technology today, it is often the shortfalls in day-to-day management that create the greatest challenges and draw the strongest criticisms. Healthcare management is continuously evolving, and pharmacy management is no different. Over time, we see customer needs changing, demands changing, and the role of the pharmacy changing as a result. This can make customer management more complex as a result, more so than it might have been in the time of docket and pen.

In order to keep up with changing trends, pharmacy practices must remain flexible and positioned to assure they are in the best position to adapt to sector changes. With the healthcare sector, pharmacies must remain 'tech forward' and embrace IT developments to maintain a flexible business model.

Embracing the cloud

Being customer-centric, the process of creating, recording and storing customer information has always been an essential practice of pharmacy management and one which cloud computing has been designed to facilitate. In essence, cloud computing means using web-based applications as opposed to locally installed applications on your computer; information and programmes are stored on a remote database accessed via the web rather than your own hard drive. In reality, you have probably been using cloud computing without even realising it through sites such as Google, Facebook and YouTube, accessing information stored in a 'virtual space', ie, the cloud.

The many benefits to web- and cloud-based computing include cost savings. Progressing away from locally installed software systems means that software and hardware updates become a thing of the past, resulting in a significant saving for pharmacies. These cost benefits expand even further across pharmacy groups as well, who often have an application, database and server in each pharmacy under a hosted IT system. Each pharmacy can also differ in itself in having a different hardware model or software versions, as well as differences in pricing, third-party plans and drug files. Web-based servers eliminate such costs and complexities as they are in themselves centralised applications that simplify and streamline pharmacy information with the latest system update.

Healthcare providers can often be reluctant to embrace web-based or cloud technologies due to security concerns and fear of data breaches, resulting in the exposure of confidential information. However, given that the majority

of internet users today access banking, financial and accounting information online through web-based applications, most are already accustomed to it. Furthermore, the majority of data breaches often originate from loss or theft of hardware, hardware failures or human error.

Therefore, by removing the need for a local server system, data security is enhanced through cloud-based software by storing information in a virtual vault within a data centre. To protect users' information further, data back-ups occur automatically in real-time ensuring you will never lose any records, even in the event of a broadband service failure.

Along with the growth in popularity of web-based and cloud computing services, system and infrastructure security is in itself evolving to meet the growing security requirements of heavily regulated industries such as healthcare. Established cloud service providers have strict security protocols designed to comply with different regulatory mandates such as the ISO 27001 information security management – the best practice standard for information security recognised internationally. Although the ISO 27001 certification is applicable for any organisation in any sector, it is particularly vital where the protection of information is a priority, such as in healthcare sectors.

However, the benefits of cloud computing extend beyond simply cost and security advantages in that it can even enhance the efficiency of many in-house pharmacy operations. Another example is integrated electronic MAR charts facilitating the compliance of drug administration. Hand-held mobile devices that link directly to a patient's PMR can support real-time drug requesting, ensuring that a patient is provided with the right drug at the right time and improving communication between pharmacy and care providers.

In addition, it is clear that cloud computing will be an important component in making universally acceptable electronic health records (EHR) a reality. Data generated in one location is easily accessible from anywhere, making data available to outside sources when necessary for patient care and in essence creating a 'closed loop' across all healthcare delivery.

Technology and change

Embracing new IT developments can be an unsettling and daunting concept for some, and understandably so. Why adopt a new form of practice that we are unsure about? Why spend time learning about a new technology? And why abandon our old ways in the first place when they have proven successful up until now?

The cloud has been designed to facilitate everyday practices for everyday users. It has been embraced wholeheartedly by the business



world, which has recognised its true potential in relation to day-to-day management. In essence, it is not replacing any business process or administrative practice but rather offering an enhanced means of performing such tasks for the benefit of all aspects of the business. For those working in healthcare and pharmacy sectors, the cloud has been adopted as a resource of sorts, for pharmacists and consultants to rely on as a support tool in the daily management of their business. Rather than seeing the cloud as a threatening force that will impede the daily management of your pharmacy, it should be embraced as a resource providing enhanced flexibility to your operations.

One cannot deny the impact that technological advances have had on healthcare. By embracing innovations in technology, health and pharmacy sectors have become what they are today. However, what has remained constant over time is the human interaction within the pharmacy. No matter how advanced IT becomes, it can never be a substitute for the invaluable patient-pharmacist relationship. With the cloud, the reverse is true: it tries to enhance that relationship by providing a safe, simple and 'anytime, anywhere' access model to manage customer data. No longer are pharmacists restricted to their pharmacies to look up patient information; now they can access pharmacy PMR systems from anywhere and on any device with an internet connection.

Cloud computing gives pharmacies the ability to share and collaborate among healthcare service providers and patients. Sharing information in real time increases the overall speed and efficiency of care, putting the patient's wellbeing at the core of the pharmacy's focus. As revolutionary as technology can be, it is the pharmacist that will continue to deliver real value through the highest level of patient care and, as a result, will always remain fundamental to pharmacy practice. Combining this expertise in practice with the best innovations available in healthcare technology will position the pharmacy sector at the forefront of modern-day healthcare. ●

Further information

Rx Web is the UK's only web-based Pharmacy PMR system, offering many advantages over traditional, client based Pharmacy Software systems. Accredited by the HSCIC, Rx Web gives you greater flexibility, speed and security while offering substantial financial savings.

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