Your Time to Shine

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By Bob Keaveney [2]

There's a real shift in EHR vendors' attitudes. It seems that the small-sized practice's moment has arrived.

Most years for the last decade, I spend a few days at a large trade show for healthcare technology vendors, chief information officers, and others involved in health IT. I usually return from this event, called HIMSS, disappointed by the lack of attention being paid by the IT community to physicians like you — those working mostly outside of hospitals in community practices, many of them independently owned.

Americans receive most of their healthcare in such practices. Yet for all the talk about the need to get more doctors to adopt EHRs and other technology, vendors have devoted the bulk of their energy to hospitals and health systems because large institutions are the health IT industry's big fish.

That has left you out in the cold. But at this year's event, I sensed a real shift in vendors' attitudes. It seems that the small and midsized practice's moment has arrived.

Don't get me wrong: Most vendors continue to focus more of their attention on hospital systems, who will always be their biggest prospects. But these institutions already have sophisticated IT systems and most are now just shopping for upgrades. Community practices represent the only great untapped market for makers of EHRs and other tech products.

Most important, from the vendors' perspective: You're not window-shoppers anymore. You're shoppers. The burning question at events such as HIMSS used to be: When will independent practices finally get off the sidelines and adopt EHRs in a significant way? And the answer was: When vendors take the market seriously and build products designed specifically for their needs. But now when vendors look at you, they see $40,000 government checks burning holes in your pockets. They realize that if you don't buy an EHR system in the next few years, with the government literally paying you to do it, then you never will.

One sign of your new power is a heightened focus on mobile technology. Hospital CIOs haven't demanded mobile apps, so the vendors haven't bothered to build them. But for community docs, any EHR system that offers access anytime, in-office or out, is going to have a killer advantage. So vendors are now racing to develop applications for mobile devices, especially the iPad.

Don't discount smart phones, despite their small screen size. CSC, a large software development outfit, showed me the Blackberry EHR app it built for docs in the U.K., and I was impressed. But the iPad might just change everything. I'm not saying it's "magical," but the lightweight and portable tablet, with a screen big enough to actually see what you're doing, sure is pretty sweet for use in a medical office. Vendors are breaking their legs building everything from iPad-only EHR systems to office check-in products and much more.

Anyone who says the federal stimulus "didn't work" couldn't have been talking about the healthcare IT sector. I've never seen so many tech vendors touting "EHR for small practice" products. Some vendors have been born purely to serve this market.

Do these products represent something genuinely new in the marketplace? Or is it just hype? Yes and yes, no doubt, depending on the product.

So buyer beware, as always. But now, at least, practices like yours are being taken seriously. Do you think IT vendors are finally ready to take you seriously? Tell me about it in the comment box below. [Unless you say otherwise, we'll assume that we're free to publish your comments in upcoming issues of Physicians Practice, in print and online.]

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