Reduce the Pain of Replacing Systems

Over time, most people will change out the systems they use to take advantage of newer technology, features, or because a different vendor seems like a better fit with their financial and operational goals. Most have also experienced replacements that do not go smoothly and have one problem after another. We all would prefer to have an ideal, painless process that goes quickly and smoothly when replacing systems. Planning, staging, and follow up are key ingredients in a pain free process.

When replacing systems, the temptation is to do several at the same time to get all the headaches dealt with at once and be done with it. This could just multiply your worries and stretch them out longer. When you replace one system at a time, you can much more easily test and troubleshoot the new system and any interfaces to quickly resolve any issues. Replacing multiple systems at the same time, especially when they all have to interface, you are far less likely to quickly determine which system is the problem area.

Planning

Do your homework. Prior to selecting any new systems, check with each group in your facility who will be using it as to their needs and preferred workflow. What are the 'must haves' and the items that would be a bonus? What are the 'absolutely not' and the 'don't need it, but it won't hurt' items? What timeframe do you need to switch within? What budget are you working with?

Check out potential new vendors. You can verify if they are authorized to resell any products they don't manufacture. If they are the manufacturer, you can check on how long they have been delivering this type of product, how many installations and of what types, etc. to see if they are a good fit for you. Do their products meet your list of 'must haves'? Do they include features that you know you will use and are there any extra charges for those features? Some features, like mammography or tomosynthesis handling have additional costs with most vendors, but are included in systems like ASPYRA's PACS at no additional fee.

Find out what methods and formats your current vendor has to export the data stored in their system. Some vendors can only export data in one way, others have multiple options. Check on the cost to export the data. This may be a flat fee, a set amount per TB, or it could be a per exam cost. Many hosted systems that have a low, per exam cost for use and storage also charge per exam for you to access those exams to pull them back and insert in your new system. Does the export/import cost include verification that all the data got across to the new system? Also check on the methods and formats the potential new vendor can import data as well as if there would be any charge for the import.

Make sure you know what data will be included and what will not. Will your scanned documents and text reports be transferred over to the new system? Will all your images transfer, or only those that are DICOM? Does one system only have images in a JPEG format? If so, can the other accept those? Do you have HL7 interfaces that will need to be changed to the new vendor? How will your vendors handle the timeframe when you need the old interface running to work while you're testing the new interface? What timeframes are there for implementing those changes? Will you need to change interfaces to your imaging modalities for Modality Work Lists.

Staging

Staging can refer to the location and/or the phases and timing of implementing new systems. Determine the priority for replacing systems. Which is the most in need of replacement and which the least? Do you need new hardware as well as the new system software? Are there any that could be done very quickly and easily? Stagger or stage your purchases and implementations accordingly so you can get the benefits of new system use. Any that improve efficiency and patient turnaround or significantly reduce costs will help to pay for the replacement systems.

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Switching systems in stages also gives you an opportunity to make sure one system is working correctly before putting in the next. You can complete testing, interfaces, and initial training on each system before starting the next. Any issues that come up will be more easily resolved because you can eliminate a wide range of possibilities immediately.

Alternatively, you can have a Test environment if you have the space and equipment. This would give you the opportunity to install the new system(s) and interfaces in an environment where they won't affect your working systems. Everything can be tested to ensure it's all functioning properly, then switched over to a 'Live' status for use once you're sure it's all working. This also helps you check that all the data is transferred to the new system or test out a potentially new work flow.

Dedicate the time to testing – try to test as many scenarios and types of information transfer, mistakes, and functionality as you can. Keep track of any that don't seem to go as expected and report them to your vendor(s). It often helps to have a status call periodically with those who are involved in the implementation to keep everything on track.

Follow Up

Once the new system is in place, tested, and live, do a final check – any lingering issues or questions? Is everyone adequately trained or do they need a refresher scheduled? There is so much going on with a new system implementation and the normal work load that users could often benefit from a refresher training session once the system has been in place for a week or two. At that point, they will be more familiar with it, will have formed several questions from their day to day use, and will be able to get a little more in-depth while retaining the information better.

Success

Have a process in place to make sure you get the best fit in your systems and enjoy a smooth and effective implementation. Also check with your vendors and potential new vendors on the project management they will have with your switch to new systems. Communication between all the parties helps the whole process finish with the least amount of time and headaches for all.