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TECHNOLOGY AND BUYER'S GUIDE

contributors

The RBMA thanks the following authors whose work appears in this issue of the *RBMA Bulletin*. It is through their efforts that the RBMA achieves its motto, Progress Through Sharing.



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Build Profitability into Your Imaging Center: Technology is Important, But Efficient Processes are Essential

BY JOSEPH MAUNE



In today's environment of decreased reimbursement, imaging centers need to focus on technologies and processes that will achieve greater efficiency and drive higher revenues.

In the imaging business, there are four primary ways to enhance profitability:

- 1) Boost revenue
- 2) Maximize staff productivity
- 3) Increase equipment utilization and
- 4) Improve the accuracy of the billing process.

Given that most sources of reimbursement are fixed, the only way to boost revenue is to build volume and that involves enhancing relationships with referring physicians. Identify your top referral sources and find out what earns their loyalty. There may be services your imaging center could offer that would cement your relationship and drive even greater

volumes from these doctors. Providing web-based access to reports and imaging exams is one example.

You might also consider offering your top referrers online access to your exam ordering and patient scheduling system. This valuable incentive delivers mutual benefits: it reduces time-consuming phone calls that tie up your referring physicians' office staff and your own. You could also offer personalized exam preparation instructions and maps to your locations. Anything you can do to save time for referrers' staffs is a strong competitive advantage for your facility.

Patient satisfaction is also an important consideration. Imaging centers have come up with creative ways to woo patients that range from providing free soft drinks and cookies in the waiting area to heated bathrobes for mammography exams.

Smarter Use of Staff Resources

An important aspect of profitability involves smarter use of staff resources to maximize productivity and decrease the average labor cost per exam. Many imaging centers waste hours each day with redundant data entry, cumbersome paper processes, and an inefficient workflow.

A radiology information system (RIS) can drive efficiency by eliminating steps and multiple data entry points and by reducing errors. Exam work lists furnished by the RIS eliminate data entry for patient identification and exam information. In addition to scheduling exams, front office staff members can use the RIS to verify medical necessity and assign appropriate ICD-9 codes. Transferring more tasks to the front office not only decreases the overall labor cost per exam; it also equips technologists to spend more time imaging patients.

Detailed RIS reporting has shown that technologist productivity may vary greatly, which has a direct impact on revenue. Reviewing these reports and providing additional training where needed can often resolve workflow bottlenecks, thus creating a better patient experience while simultaneously enhancing revenue.

Utilization Data Drives Decision-Making

Achieving full utilization of resources requires maintaining full capacity for your facility and extending hours or expanding facilities to take advantage of excess demand.

Appropriately managing imaging modalities and other equipment requires accurate utilization data. Modern RIS systems expedite access to this information by creating utilization reports for each exam room and for each technologist. These reports identify areas where added capability is needed and uncover holes in the schedule. For example, if your CT or MR rooms are not be fully booked on Tuesday mornings and Wednesday afternoons, you need to find ways to promote these time slots to referring physicians. You might even allow your top referrers for these modalities access to your scheduling system so they could book patients during these times to help fill capacity.

It's also important to evaluate and satisfy areas of peak demand. This may require adding evening or weekend hours for specific exams or adding a new location. Again, accurate data is critical to ensure that your additional investment generates added revenue.

As you work toward filling 100 percent of capacity, it's important to ensure that each exam will be reimbursed. Insurance eligibility and co-payment amounts need to be validated before the exam is scheduled. Modern RIS

systems automate these functions to help guarantee payment and to eliminate inaccurate patient co-payments, which are time-consuming and therefore expensive to resolve.

Workflow Improvements Drive Significant Benefits

Technology is important but efficient processes are essential. One imaging center installed RIS and PACS (picture archiving and communications system) but achieved only half of the anticipated productivity gains. A third-party workflow assessment revealed that the center was hampered by the continued use of inefficient paper-based processes in the new digital workflow. Correcting these process problems improved the efficiency of office and billing staff by an additional 20 percent each.

Workflow analysis and redesign can drive significant benefits for imaging centers either in conjunction with installation of RIS or PACS, or separate from any technology investment. It may be time to retain imaging consulting services to map out your current process, identify improvements, and estimate the benefits.

Workflow studies can identify wasted steps and inefficient processes in a facility's existing workflow. Scheduling, for example, can be fine tuned to determine how much time is required to address the needs of each patient, based on whether it's a new or follow-up patient and the type of exam. Then the appropriate time for each category can be built into the scheduling process. One imaging center tracks the age of patients scheduled for mammography screening, and builds extra minutes into the schedule for those over 65 who normally take longer to dress and undress.

Workflow processes can also be adjusted to take into account load balancing for staff activities. For example, staggering patient appointments by 2-3 minute increments allows the front desk staff to promptly attend to each patient and reduces patient waiting.

Decreased reimbursement rates may act as a catalyst for enhanced efficiency among imaging centers. An investment in process improvements and digital technologies can boost productivity by 30-40 percent. These productivity gains, in addition to enhanced revenue, increased equipment utilization, and improved billing can equip imaging center managers to achieve continued profitability in the coming years. **]]**

To learn more about author Joseph Maune, see our Contributors section on page 5.