

Pharmacy's New Frontier

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By Carol Radice

It's a bit ironic, but apparently it took technology to put the old-fashioned ideal of helping people back into the pharmacy. Today's state-of-the-art systems are helping to lower operating costs, reduce dispensing errors, ease work-flow issues and increase customer service, freeing up pharmacists to assume a more active role in health care. However, while technology is clearly making a positive impact, a few significant issues remain to be addressed for wider adoption and acceptance. They include the reliability and availability of systems, protecting consumers' privacy while making essential information available to health care providers, and resistance from some providers to rely on technology. And issues with compatibility and a lack of standardization among hardware, software and health-care data must be added to the costs of developing, implementing, and maintaining technology systems.

That makes it obvious that while the partnership between technology and pharmacy is clearly promising, there is still a ways to go before it can be maximized.

Nonetheless, many agree that without technology the pharmacy industry would not be where it is today. "An investment in the right technology is an absolute necessity in today's business climate to control costs and operational efficiencies," says Mike Coughlin, president and CEO of ScriptPro, based in Mission, Kan. "Retailers increasingly understand today's technology can perform many of the perfunctory tasks, which frees up their staff to perform the more high-value tasks."

In addition to easing staffing shortages, technology is helping pharmacists manage costs. "There are a lot of aspects of the business we can't control, but we can control who we hire and what we have them do," says Coughlin. "However, you can only effectively control a complex environment like pharmacy if you have very good systems in place with barcode scanning, robotics, IVR [integrated voice recognition] and keep your highly paid people from spending their time doing mundane things like counting pills into a vial."

"Technology is the cornerstone to the operating efficiency of the pharmacy and is an essential tool in ensuring a smooth working environment," says Bill Lockwood, executive director of the American Society for Automation in Pharmacy, based in Blue Bell, Pa. And it can help minimize or eliminate patient safety concerns.

"The goal is not to have any errors, period. And while pharmacists are doing a great job manually to ensure there are quality checkpoints, as prescription volumes increase and the number of people behind the counter swells, robotics, which often handle the high-volume drugs, offer peace of mind that the right prescriptions are going out," says Lockwood.

Back office support and data management are two other areas in which technology is making significant inroads. "Today's technology allows the pharmacist to better use their time, makes them more efficient, decreases errors and helps them track information such as financials with ease," says Tim Gregorius, director of retail operations at Latrobe, Pa.- based PRS Pharmacy Services. "Tools that pharmacists have at their disposal today were not available 10 years ago, and as recently as a few years ago were only available in theory. Today, almost every facet of data can be easily managed through technology."

Scott Weaver, director of pharmacy management at PRS, agrees that some of the biggest growth in pharmacy technology is coming from data management. "In effect, the ability to use data warehouses means instead of having to view hundreds or thousands of reports to find a problem, now the problem claims alone—say those in which you were reimbursed below what you submitted—can be pulled aside," says Weaver. "Given that the vast majority of the pharmacist's time is spent dealing with insurance issues, the ability to generate custom business reports represents a huge time savings."

Given the number of pharmacy technicians employed today, experts agree that technology has become instrumental in the ability to track each employee's work flow and see who performed what function. "In the end, this type of technology allows the pharmacist to easily supervise the clinical support staff," says Larry Stephenson, vice president of pharmacy system sales for Health Care Computer Corp. (HCC) in Forth Worth, Texas.

“Every prescription that goes through a work flow process is assigned a barcode, and employees can quickly verify that the product pulled from the shelf matches the product that was dispensed to the customer. Each year medication-dispensing errors cost the companies in the billions. Technology makes it much more likely to catch a dispensing error.”

Companies like HCC are also helping to take some of the human error out of the script-filling process by offering digital technology that can scan original prescriptions. Inventory tracking has been made easier with pharmacy software. Previous systems required supervisors to run reports that they could view only on a store-by-store basis. Stephenson says programs now allow inventory data to be entered on a corporate system. Vendor support is key in a pharmacy operation. Experts say retailers should look for a technology partner with a track record demonstrating that it supports its products and customers, and has the overall vision and financial wherewithal to meet the retailer’s needs long-term. “You want your vendor to have the ability to take you to the next level,” says Coughlin.

Given the importance and expense involved, Lockwood says retailers should study their options before deciding on a vendor. “Pharmacy technology is so broad range today, and because of this it should be viewed as a long-term solution. Due to the increasing number of companies entering the business, retailers should give the decision a good deal of study before jumping into things,” he says.

Besides the pharmacist shortage, retailers face a number of other hurdles when planning new pharmacies. Although crucial, technology can be a daunting proposition for retailers, and demand for experts who can help guide them through the maze of products and services is at an all-time high. “Many retailers are absolutely afraid to get started, partially because of costs and partially because they just don’t understand the business,” says Richard Bradley, director of pharmacy consulting services for QS1, a pharmacy solution management provider based in Spartanburg, S.C.

This is where knowing your market is critical, adds Rich Muller, QS1’s national chain sales manager. “A retailer located in a college town, for example, might have a stronger need for technology that allows students to refill prescriptions online, whereas a store located in a heavily populated senior community wouldn’t necessarily need to invest in that,” says Muller.