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### Selecting Remote Coding Technology

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**Leslie:** Having just returned from the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) National Convention, I am energized by the number of health information management (HIM) directors and coders I spoke with who are exploring the benefits of remote coding using Internet-based technologies. Just one year ago, the concept of remote coding was a dramatic new idea. Now it is becoming recognized as a strategy to retain and recruit coding staff.

**Patty:** I agree Leslie. Many people were curious and genuinely more interested in how remote coding technology works. There is a higher level of understanding regarding how remote coding technology enables coders and coding supervisors to work from home.

**Leslie:** Yes, and an increased understanding that you can't simply implement technology and expect to send coders home. People are aware of the importance of developing a comprehensive remote coding implementation plan that defines critical activities such as developing a telecommuting policy, identifying the technologies to be used and most importantly, how they will re-design their processes to support a remote coding program. Our colleagues recognize that technology is just an enabler. It's how you manage change and roll out your program that impacts the ultimate success of remote coding.

**Patty:** That's true Leslie, however, there are significant differences in remote coding technology that impact the design of remote coding processes. When re-designing the coding workflow, HIM professionals will need to understand how the technology works. The differences in technology determine how processes are re-designed. For example, because most products include a scanning component, products that index and scan only one record at a time vs. those that auto index and scan in batch will require more prepping and scanning resources.

**Leslie:** HIM directors face a big challenge in selecting the best possible remote coding technology. Selecting and implementing remote coding will require the same due diligence as selecting and implementing a dictation system or abstracting system. The good news is that the technology is easier to implement and requires less information technology (IT) resources than other HIM products. In the end, it's still about implementing technology to gain efficiencies in an HIM function.

**Patty:** As HIM professionals become familiar with remote coding technology, they will be better equipped to understand the significant differences among remote coding products. You have to first understand the features and functionality of different applications and the technology platform and then look at your business processes and IT infrastructure to determine which product fits best.

**Leslie:** I think it's important for our readers to know that there are several remote coding technology vendors and that unlike in previous years, people now have choices. But if you are just learning the technology, how

do you know what questions to ask?

**Patty:** The best place to start is to talk to a number of vendors and learn what each vendor has to offer. After meeting with vendor representatives and seeing several products, contact individuals who have implemented remote coding technology and obtain product feedback from at least one client per product. This informal approach will assist you in the development of a formal process such as a request for proposal (RFP). The only way to know if you are making the best decision for your organization is to learn about each product's unique features, get to know the people behind the product, have a vision of your remote coding program and involve key people who will be responsible for implementing the enormous change in coding processes.

**Leslie:** That makes sense Patty, but isn't there a core set of questions that one should ask even during the informal process?

**Patty:** Let me take a stab at defining a "core set" of functionality questions, but it's important that our readers realize that this core set is just a brief subset of questions that only they can develop based on their unique circumstances. My top 20 questions are highlighted in the accompanying box.

**Leslie:** Wow! There really are a lot of detailed questions to ask. I often hear the terms Web-based or Web-browser based used interchangeably with Web-enabled. They are very different and I noticed in question #16 that you suggest asking the vendor to provide this information. What is the difference and why is this important to know?

**Patty:** Web browser-based products will be more flexible and are written in the newer programming languages. The future is moving toward the use of the Web browser and away from GUI (graphical user interface). Products that are Web-based use a Web browser and products that are Web-enabled use a browser looking interface but the product behind the look is still a Windows product. Another differentiating feature is that a Web-based system will work with any operating system.

**Leslie:** Last year at the AHIMA convention most people were asking detailed questions relating to security and this year there were few if any. It seems that it has become an expectation for remote coding vendors to take the appropriate security precautions.

I noticed that one of your questions asks vendors to describe their security features. It seems that all vendors follow the proposed Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) security regulations but some systems are more secure than others.

**Patty:** That's right Leslie. For example, Web browser-based systems can be accessed via a hospital's VPN or remote access infrastructure. Because Web browser-based systems simply require a Web browser, the coder remotely connects to their hospital and opens the Web browser behind the hospital's own firewall. If this is not an option, personal firewalls in combination with other security methods provide protection.

**Leslie:** There is one other important difference between vendors. Some vendor's access images that reside on a secure server while others download images to the coder's home.

**Patty:** Yes, this is a controversial difference. The previous example demonstrates accessing images located on a secure server, which, with proper safeguards appears more secure and is the direction personal health records are moving toward. The hospital IT department will be a great resource for the HIM director in evaluating the differences in security. Not only does IT have the technical expertise to help assess the product, the hospital's own security standards and capabilities will be factored into the decision.

**Leslie:** Well it sounds like many obstacles to implementing remote coding technology have been overcome. Now HIM directors can focus on how they will manage the change, which is another important part of the challenge to solving the coding staffing problem.

**Patty:** We'll talk more about that next month

### **Remote Coding Technology - Functionality Questions**

1. What data is indexed and how is it indexed? (Is this a manual process or automated?)
2. How are records scanned? (One record at a time, batch, what about double sided, odd forms, loose sheets)
3. How long does it take to index and scan 100 ED records? (Use hospital specific number of pages/patient type and volumes when possible)
4. Once records are scanned, where are images sent and how are they sent?
5. Describe the overall structure of how images are stored and accessed (this is particularly important to understand especially if you are coding several patient types across several facilities within a healthcare system)
6. Where are images stored and who owns them?
7. Once data is stored, how is it accessed and for how long can it be accessed?
8. Describe how images are viewed and the supporting functionality (zoom, bookmarks, thumbnails, rotate etc)
9. How are records assigned, reassigned and unassigned?
10. Describe your workflow functionality.
11. Describe the methods for returning coded data back to our facility.
12. What types of reporting tools do you provide?
13. Describe your implementation and training process.
14. Describe the hardware and software we will need to use your product.
15. How often are enhancements made and how are they communicated to users? What is your vision for future product development?
16. Is your product Web browser-based or web-enabled? If web-enabled, what is your plan to re-write your code in the new web-based programming languages?
17. Describe your security features. (use the proposed HIPAA security regulations and your specific IT security requirements are your guide for questioning)
18. Do you have the ability to provide images in archival formats or to integrate with our clinical information systems?
19. Describe your interface capabilities. (encoder, abstracting, ADT)
20. Describe your pricing plan.

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